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'All your disembodied little heads floating on a screen': Liveness During the Pandemic in Mel Bradley's *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins* (2020)

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The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK and Ireland in 2020 and the subsequent lockdowns caused a radical rupture in the world of live performances. Both theatre and poetry performance events moved online in various formats. One of the central issues that pandemic performance faced was the issue of liveness as audiences and performers could not be in the same space. Drawing on conceptualisations of liveness from theatre and performance studies, as well as the burgeoning field of pandemic performance research, my research asks how poet-performers responded to the lack of traditional liveness in their performances.

This article explores the response to the circumstances of the pandemic by examining a digital performance situated at the intersection of poetry performance and theatre, namely Northern Irish spoken word artist Mel Bradley's show *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins* (2020). I investigate how this show adapted to the circumstances of digital performance using livestreamed and prerecorded material, thereby destabilising boundaries between live and mediatised performance and expanding possibilities for creating a sense of liveness in the digital sphere. Moreover, I argue that the unstable co-presence between performers and spectators enhances the themes of punishment, disconnection, and voyeurism that pervade the show, and resonates with the pandemic context in which it was performed.

Introduction

> Look at this, all your disembodied little heads floating on a screen. The magic in your world is amazing, that you can come all the way down here without leaving the comfort of your own home. (Bradley, 2020: 03:23–03:35)

Theatre and poetry performance have historically been conceived of as *live* art forms, in the sense that the co-presence of the audience and the performers in the same physical space at the same time is considered fundamental to each. This can be seen in myriad definitions of theatre in contrast to other body-based story forms, like cinema. Chiel Kattenbelt defines theatre as 'the art of physical presence (face-to-face communication in a situation of here and now) and expression in words, gestures/movements and sounds' (2006: 32). Cormac Power summarises this conception of liveness as connecting 'to one's being there before actors on the stage and being in "living contact" with the performance' (2008: 147). Similarly, in poetry performance research, the co-presence of audience and poet-performer, and even the direct acknowledgement of the audience, is regularly underscored as fundamental (Novak, 2011: 62; McNamara, 2021: 154). Furthermore, liveness has conventionally been positioned in opposition to recorded or filmed material (Wurtzler, 1992: 89; Power, 2008: 148; Novak, 2011: 49). This binary 'configures the relationship between live and mediatized performance as one of opposition in which the live even precedes, and is necessarily superior to, mediatized performance' (Auslander, 2022: 62). If, as outlined above, liveness is understood as central to both theatre and poetry performance work, what happens when traditional liveness is no longer possible? In her monograph *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic*, Barbara Fuchs (2022), offers one of the earliest extended investigations of digital theatre and liveness during the Covid-19 pandemic. While acknowledging the radical disruption caused by the pandemic, Fuchs (2022) is keenly interested in the new potentials for performance practices that evolved in response to the crisis, including work that used digital technologies to reflect (on) the circumstances of the lockdown itself, whether this was newly developed work or adaptations of pre-pandemic material. In this article, I propose that poet-performers, like theatre-makers, responded quickly and creatively to the strictures of the pandemic and, through their practices, expanded the definition of liveness in poetry performance and used the structures of livestreaming to explore the shared condition of isolation and social distance enforced upon audiences and performers alike.

Closed venues, lockdown restrictions, social distancing, and health regulations led to the almost overnight cessation of in-person performances in March 2020 in many countries. In the UK and Ireland, over the course of the next two years, restrictions

eased and tightened repeatedly in response to waves of Covid-19 infection rates. Throughout this period, the arts sector suffered greatly, with an expected loss of 15,000 performances within 12 weeks from mid-March of 2020 (UK Theatre and SOLT et al., 2020). Artists and cultural workers were deeply financially impacted, even as schemes were introduced to support individuals and organisations across the UK (Arts Council England, n.d.) and the Republic of Ireland (Healy, 2023: 117−118). Poetry performance events were also disrupted as their regular venues closed. However, as Monika Pietrzak-Franger, Heidi Lucja Liedke and Tamara Radak commented, '[t]his moment of crisis was ... approached as an incentive to innovation, as a motor for creativity' (2023: 2). Amidst the devastation and insecurity wrought by the pandemic, artists devised innovative ways to exploit those options available, primarily in online performances, reconceiving of their performance practices in light of these altered circumstances.

In this article, I posit that a more expansive understanding of what constitutes liveness is beneficial to analysing livestreamed poetry performances, building on Philip Auslander's (first edition 1999; 2022) concept of liveness as an historically contingent category—which is a particularly salient point in the context of performance during the pandemic. I contend that performances in this period employed new strategies to signal to audiences what various facets of liveness outside of in-person events could look like using the affordances, or 'possibilities for action', of different digital/social media platforms (Hutchby, 2001: 30; Bucher and Helmond, 2018). This was the case even though traditional forms of co-presence were mourned during the pandemic by performers and audiences alike. I argue that livestreamed performances incorporating prerecorded material called the opposition of liveness and mediatisation into question even more than these categories had already blurred by pre-Covid performance practices. To do this, I expand upon Claudia Georgi's (2014) work on the use medias in theatre and the incorporation of film and video technologies in in-person British theatre events. Georgi's work helpfully separates liveness into five interconnected criteria: 'the **co-presence** of performers and spectators, the **ephemerality** of the live event, the **unpredictability** or **risk of imperfection**, the possibility of **interaction** and, finally, a specific quality of the **representation of reality**' (2014: 5; emphasis in original). She convincingly argues that it is the first three characteristics which define liveness, whereas the latter two are particularly relevant in intermedial performances (2014: 6). In this article, I demonstrate how the categories Georgi identifies as related to liveness can be used to inform critical analyses of livestreamed performances, particularly those performances which combined livestreams with prerecorded components.

To substantiate these arguments, I engage in a case study of Mel Bradley's 2020 poetry show *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins* (*7DS*). Mel Bradley is a 'spoken word artist, writer, playwright/theatre-maker, multimedia artist, designer, actor and activist'

based in Derry, Northern Ireland (Bradley, n.d. b). Bradley, a highly multidisciplinary artist, has been an active part of the poetry performance scene in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland since 2009 and has performed at events including Body & Soul, the Lingo and Stendhal festivals, and the All-Ireland Poetry Slam. Additionally, she has written and performed the longer poetry performance shows *7DS* (2016–2020) and *For the Love of Mary* (2022, 2023), as well as writing for theatre.

7DS is an innovative poetry performance that draws on theatrical practices such as sets, props, costumes, burlesque aesthetics, and digital technologies while foregrounding the voiced poetry. By focusing on a performance that combines these forms, I contribute to a broadening understanding of poetry performance and research thereof, particularly in relation to spoken word theatre. Bearder defines these as 'theatre shows (usually lasting an hour) performed through spoken word poetry … The shows are almost always one-person shows that break the fourth wall to address audiences directly with stories told in the first-person or in character, by the authors themselves' (2019: 56). Additionally, poetry shows – and Northern Irish poetry performances in general – are underrepresented and under researched, despite the vibrant scene that exists in the region. Significantly, *7DS* is a rich text for analysis because it allows for an investigation of co-temporality and co-presence in livestreams and simulated presences within digital performance via its incorporation of prerecorded material and pseudo fourth wall breaking strategies. Moreover, the show's themes of punishment, disconnection, and voyeurism take on new dimensions and immediate relevance given the restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic in place during October 2020.

On 29th October 2020, *7DS* was livestreamed as part of the primarily online version of the Derry Halloween festival, Europe's largest Halloween festival with an annual programme of cultural events spread over multiple days (Derry Halloween, n.d.). The show was reconceived multiple times in 2020 due to changing pandemic restrictions, finally resulting in a livestream with prerecorded elements. The genre-blurring show was marketed as 'a fusion of spoken word, poetry, storytelling, burlesque and theatre' (Bradley, n.d. a). During the 50-minute show, Ms Noir, Bradley's burlesque persona[1] and the 'Keeper of the Keys' in 'Hotel Hell', tells seven tales about people who represent, or have fallen prey to, the biblical seven deadly sins. Bradley's parts were livestreamed, whereas the scenes centred around the Caretaker figure, played by Denzil Browne, were recorded ahead of time. An unpublished recording

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[1] Spoken word poetry is frequently characterised by a perceived overlap between the poet-performer and the persona or voice in the poem (Novak, 2011: 188). Using a named persona, as Bradley does in this show and in other shorter performances, is uncommon. I explore this in more detail in my PhD research.

of the performance was made available to me by Bradley and forms the basis of my analysis. As a poetry performance researcher first and foremost, I combine context-sensitive close viewing techniques for poetry performance analysis (Novak, 2011) with terminology from film analysis (Ryan and Lenos, 2020) to substantiate my arguments in relation to liveness and mediatisation outlined above. My analysis of the show is supplemented by interviews conducted with Bradley in 2022 and 2023 (in person and on Zoom respectively), during which she discussed her craft, her view of the spoken word scene, as well as the *7DS* performance specifically.[2]

Whilst approaching a single case study from an interdisciplinary perspective allows for in-depth analysis of a performance such as *7DS*, it potentially obscures facets of the debate that other examples may demonstrate. I have attempted to mitigate these gaps by historicising and theorising liveness pre- and during the pandemic, in relation to both theatre performance and poetry performance in the first section of this article. Following this, I turn to my case study and investigate how *7DS* relates to different facets of liveness. The section 'Virtually Together: Spatio-Temporal Co-Presence' argues that co-presence took different forms during the pandemic and proposes the idea of spatial tele-presence through conferencing and livestreaming technology. I then question differences between livestreamed and prerecorded material in 'Fleeting Faults: Ephemerality, Uniqueness, Imperfections' and demonstrate the blurred boundaries of these categories. Finally, in the section 'Interaction and Reality: Possibilities, Limitations', I argue that pandemic performance offered alternative forms of audience engagement. Throughout this article, my analysis is concerned with the ways in which these facets of liveness interact with the substance of the poetry show itself and demonstrate how the 'hellish' setting reflects the real-world circumstance of lockdown. I hope that the observations made in this study will expand on-going analyses of other livestreamed spoken word performances that emerged during the pandemic and make a valuable contribution to the critical understanding of intermedial strategies, spatial tele-presence, and audience engagement with livestreamed performance.

Liveness in Theatre and Poetry: Theory and Practice

Even before the pandemic and the unprecedented number of livestreams, scholars had questioned the binary opposition of liveness – the co-presence of audience and performers at the same time and in the same place – and mediatisation in relation

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[2] For a detailed explanation of the interviewing methodology employed, please see my publications on the Poetry Off the Page blog (Palzer, 2025a; Palzer 2025b).

to theatre performances. As Power points out, 'there is an increasing cross-over between the so-called "live" and the "recorded" in performance: the "live" stage is becoming ever more technological' (2008: 148). Theatre is fundamentally multimedial artform, bringing together language, music, dance etc. (Georgi, 2014: 4) as well as video, film, and other computer-related technologies (Dixon, 2007; Georgi, 2014). The incorporation of video technologies in theatrical performances has complicated the fundamental opposition between live performances and recordings. Georgi's work compellingly shows how British productions incorporate film, prerecorded video, simulated live video relays as well as actual live video relays, and thereby 'playfully question the binary opposition and ontological difference of liveness and mediatisation by challenging the actual as well as the presumed characteristics of liveness' (2014: 252). As *7DS* combines livestreamed components with prerecorded components, Georgi's considerations serve as a useful starting point. However, as the examples she interrogates involve co-present audience members who share the same general space as the performers, which was not the case during lockdown, analyses of pandemic performances must be approached somewhat differently.

The phenomenon of theatrical events in which audiences and performers were not co-present preceded the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, digital performances without in-person audiences have been staged by practitioners faced with structural and systemic travel challenges including difficulties crossing political borders (Fuchs, 2022: 5–6). Certain forms of digital theatre, such as livestreamed but traditionally produced theatre shows, gained wider audiences prior to the pandemic. In the UK, this included programmes by the National Theatre (from 2009 onwards), and the Royal Shakespeare Company (from 2013 onwards), as well as one-off events such as the London Globe's livestream of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in September 2016 (Sullivan, 2020: 92). These initiatives streamed theatre shows to cinemas, a format known as live-to-cinema performing arts broadcasting (Sullivan, 2020: 93; Pietrzak-Franger, Liedke and Radak, 2023: 2). As these shows were streamed to cinemas, they provided a form of livestream viewing experience that differed from that which flourished during the pandemic.

These developments functioned as forerunners to the kinds of changes to performance that initiated radical reimaginings of theatre and other performance practices during the pandemic (Fuchs, 2022: 6). As lockdown and social distancing regulations took effect, in-person performances ceased to be possible. Amidst the devastation to the field of cultural production, theatre-makers found ways of bringing performances to audiences in line with the legal restrictions. Some socially distanced in-person productions were put on, such as *The Persians* in Greece (which was also

livestreamed) (Haynes, 2020), but most productions became digital performances because at the very least, their delivery was reliant on computer technologies for distribution and consumption. It is important to note that this shift reproduced inequalities in terms of access for both audiences and artists, as internet access and streaming technologies are affected by various factors such as 'economic class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, nationality, and citizenship status' (Chatzichristodoulou et al., 2022: 2). The turn to digital performance was not a universally equalising experience.

One way of bringing theatre shows to people's homes was making archival recordings of previously produced shows available to the public with certain stipulations. For instance,[3] the National Theatre at Home premiered shows on YouTube which were then available for a period of one week (Byrne, 2021: 60). Audiences could also watch staged productions in which there was no live audience, but in which the performers shared the stage, albeit in a socially distanced fashion with cinematic camera work (Fuchs, 2022: 12), such as the February 2021 production of Lolita Chakrabarti's *Hymn* in the Almeida Theatre, Islington (Akbar, 2021). Small casts or one-person shows such as Shôn Dale-Jones's *Possible* (2021) at National Theatre Wales, were particularly adaptable to this version of pandemic performance. Another format involved self-recorded performances that were subsequently streamed online, such as the *Dear Ireland I* series of monologues produced by the Abbey Theatre in April 2020 (Murphy, 2023: 146–150). Conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, also enabled theatre-makers to reach audiences with their shows. Sometimes, these productions were minimally rehearsed productions of extant plays, such as The Show Must Go Online's weekly productions of Shakespeare plays which ran from 19 March 2020 to 18 November 2020 (Myles, n.d.). Other shows were created for and specifically tailored to the digital platforms, even embracing experimental modes, such as Forced Entertainment's *End Meeting For All* (Fuchs, 2022: 44). Productions such as Dead Centre's *To Be A Machine (Version 1.0)* (2020), which premiered in October 2020 at the Dublin Theatre Festival, drew attention to the disconcerting circumstances of the pandemic both verbally and through the strategies of audience engagement which destabilized the opposition between digital and non-digital (Radak, 2023). In *To Be A Machine (Version 1.0)*, audience members were asked to record videos of themselves ahead of time. These videos were integrated into the performance via tablets located in the auditorium where the solo actor was performing. The chat function was also used

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[3] I have focused on performances from the UK and Ireland in this article, but productions during the pandemic frequently crossed national borders, both in terms of the locations of the actors and producers and on the part of the audience.

to ask the audience questions during the performance (Radak, 2023: 42, 45). As Radak argues, *To Be A Machine (Version 1.0)* created a form of 'post-digital co-presence' which

> Is characterized by, first, a blurring of the lines between embodied and virtual spectatorship as well as between the organic and the virtual more broadly; second, temporal co-presence and real-time interaction with the remote audience; and third, an increased sense of emotional alignment with the remote audience in lieu of physical proximity (2023: 40).

The first and third elements identified by Radak are particularly relevant for my analysis of *7DS.*

Poetry performances also have a long history of incorporating multiple medias, including film and digital technologies. A brief glimpse into the archive of Apples and Snakes, England's foremost spoken word organiser, reveals abundant examples of poetry performances including music (e.g. Mahmood Jamal's performance at the 1988 Jazz Poetry Festival) and the incorporation of videos (e.g. Suzanne Andrade's 2007 performance of '1927'). Poetry performance has also incorporated digital elements, becoming what David Devanny calls 'digital spoken word' and 'digitally augmented spoken word' (2021: 400)—forms of poetry performance in which there is either no hierarchical relationship between the digital and non-digital elements, or in which the digital media is a subordinate addition, respectively. Devanny lists examples of projections in poetry performances (e.g. cris cheek's [sic] 'Backlit' project 2012), the use of digital media to alter the voice in performance (e.g. Mark Leahy's 'Subject to Gesture' 2017), the use of computers in the creation of poetry (e.g. JR Carpenter's 'Along the Briny Beach' 2011), engagement in live coding as performance poetry (e.g. Sean Cotterill's 'To Code a Dadaist Poem' 2015), as well as interactive media use (2021: 401–405). Many more examples of digitally augmented spoken word in the UK can be found, such as work produced by Penned in the Margins (2004–2023). As in theatre, combinations of in-person work with digital or prerecorded material was already common in pre-pandemic times.

The effect of the pandemic on poetry performance was significant. Closed venues meant that recurring event series went on impromptu hiatus, with some not returning when lockdown restrictions loosened. Despite the difficult circumstances, many forms of poetry performance events found a way to move to the digital realm. As poetry performances foreground text and voice—and typically involve less extensive staging—moving poetry performance events into online spaces did not present the same challenges as for other forms of performance art. Different options were used to bring the performances to audiences. As early as April 2020, Apples and Snakes created

the @ Home series which included livestreamed poetry performances, conversations, and commissioned poetry films (Apples and Snakes, 2020). In the Republic of Ireland, Cork's Ó Bhéal series made the switch to online—and later hybrid—events in April of 2020, maintaining the same structure as before, with poetry films, a writing challenge, a guest performance, and an open mic. Newly made poetry films and prerecorded poetry performances were released in abundance by poets on various social media platforms, and poet-performers used livestreaming options on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to perform their work to online audiences. Online performances by individual artists such as poets Stephen James Smith (2020) and FeliSpeaks (2020) were occasionally supported by organisational funding schemes, such as the 'Ireland Performs' project (Culture Ireland 'Ireland Performs' Scheme, 2020). In solo performances, sometimes poets would explicitly talk about or to individual spectators, such as poet Hollie McNish reading out and thanking a commenter during one of her Thursday Poetry Specials (Hollie Poetry, 2020: 06:01–06:06).

Many participatory poetry performance event series, established prior to or during the pandemic, were hosted on conferencing platforms, using the participatory potential of these technologies to allow for audience engagement at, for instance, open mics. These events often attracted global audiences and participants. A list of open mics curated by the literary magazine Here Comes Everyone listed more than 10 virtual open mics in the UK and Ireland happening in August 2020 (Everyone, 2020). Even poetry slams, which traditionally have a high amount of audience engagement, made use of livestreaming technology. The Roundhouse Poetry Slam Final 2020 (Roundhouse, 2020) took place in a hybrid form, in which all but two of the poet-performers performed at the venue, while the audience did not attend in person but was able to vote for their favourite performance via a website. The voting and MC Toby Campion's frequent addresses to the audience attempted to create a sense of interactivity, even as this could not replace the embodied sensing of the other audience members through shared space (see Pfeiler, 2024: 227–228).

Longer poetry performance shows found new modes of existence via conferencing and video-hosting platforms. A notable example is England-based poet Rose Condo's show *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* (2021), which was adapted from her in-person show *The Empathy Experiment* (2019). The online version of the show is substantially changed, reflecting the poet's new relationship with technology and human interaction in a Covid-19 world (Condo, n.d.). Condo asks the audience to contribute to the performance by having them suggest words to replace 'pandemic' during her performance, thereby allowing the audience to contribute directly to the performance.[4]

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[4] I was made aware of this performance and this specific example of audience engagement by spoken word theatre scholar Shefali Banerji, my thanks go to them. Their research on this performance is in preparation.

Disruptive interaction was also possible during livestreamed events; accidentally unmuted microphones interrupted performances, not to mention the 'Zoombombing'[5] that haunted online formats particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. All these examples belie the traditional approach to interaction as a criterion of liveness in which broadcasts and livestreams are complete without the audience's physical presence (Auslander, 2022: 11). Unlike in TV live broadcasts, in which the viewer at home has no real influence over the performance, during internet-based livestreams, the audience can indeed materially contribute to and shape the performance from their homes. However, given the lack of proximity to performers and other spectators (Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger, 2021: 140–141), phenomena such as Zoom fatigue (Webb, 2021) and other environmental factors in the individual viewing spaces, audience members may also exhibit more signs of distraction during online performances.

I have outlined here some of the various ways in which poetry performances during the pandemic simulated different facets of liveness, focusing on co-presence and the possibility of audience interaction. While the circumstances of the lockdowns presented difficult challenges for performers, strategies developed by performers also presented opportunities for different engagement with audiences and other forms of meaning-making. Even as *7DS*'s genesis indicates that the use of recording and streaming tools were a means to an end, the way these technologies shaped the final show cannot be ignored. It is impossible to separate the meaning potentials of the content of the poetry performance from its expression – through voice, body, and screens.

The Genesis of *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*

Welcome, welcome one and all,

Won't you step inside my private lair?

And like the spider told the pretty fly

Some wonderful temptations do I have for you in there.

Won't you take a seat,

Make yourself at home

And let this sybaritic storyteller

Delight you with a poem.

My tales are precautionary

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[5] Zoombombing was a phenomenon that emerged during the beginning of the pandemic and involved 'the unwanted, disruptive intrusion, generally by Internet trolls, into a video-conference call' (Tufts University, n.d).

> A sort of bedtime story reflection
> Filled with villainous vagabonds
> Whose debauchery requires some
> Punitive correction.[6]
> (Bradley, 2020: 05:42–06:15)

With these words, Ms Noir, in revealing receptionist's garb standing behind her desk, greets the audience, or rather, the visitors, of Hotel Hell. Her vocal and physical performance are not only welcoming but seductive, drawing out the first syllable of 'wonderful' with her eyes closed, her hands moving down her body on the word 'sybaritic' as her eyes gaze directly into the camera and at the viewer (**Figure 1**). The visuals evoke both a hotel and a sex club/dungeon, with both a receptionist's bell and a whip hanging on the wall. Behind each metaphorical door of this hotel there is a secret story of sinful behaviour to which the audience is granted exclusive access. In seven scenes, Ms Noir recounts the lives of people who now reside in hell after succumbing to one of the seven deadly sins, such as the prideful politician with a kinky secret, the envious poet who commits murder, or the wrathful wife of the philanderer.

Figure 1: Ms Noir's Welcome, *7DS*, 2020, 05:59.

Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins's origins can be traced to 2013, when Bradley performed some of the individual poetic monologues which she later complied into a single continuous show (Bradley, 2022). The first complete performance, including all seven monologues, occurred in 2016 at a tattoo parlour (Bradley, 2022, n.d. a). The major

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[6] When I cite longer passages of the poetry, I use the line breaks used in the unpublished script Bradley made available to me but refer to the timestamp from the recording.

change from the 2016 version as regards the content was the inclusion of the Caretaker character, played by Denzil Browne. He acts as the groundskeeper of Hotel Hell as well as guide for the visitors. This character interjects prose interludes between Ms Noir's poetry scenes. Moreover, the role was developed in order to provide a new way of interacting with the audience. Bradley describes the intention she and Browne originally had for the Caretaker role: 'Let's bring in another actor to mess with the audience a wee bit, to interact with the audience, separate them out so they are not comfortable in their groups. We can kind of play with people' (Bradley, 2022). In the livestreamed version of the show, the Caretaker still had this function, but the ways of connecting with the audience had to be modified, as physical interaction was not possible.

First intended as an in-person production, Covid-19 restrictions led Bradley and Browne to decide to livestream the show from Browne's house in Donegal, which would provide an assortment of fitting settings for the show. However, in early October of 2020, it became clear that even this version would not be possible, due to restrictions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and health concerns that made the creators unwilling to take unnecessary risks by meeting in person. Therefore, the performance was reconceived as an intermedial performance, incorporating prerecorded video clips from Browne alongside Bradley's livestreamed performance. In the span of three weeks, Bradley created eight different backdrops in her home and Browne prerecorded and sent all his clips to her. The plan was for Bradley to perform her scenes live on Zoom, and to play Browne's clips in-between her scenes. However, on the day of the show, Bradley and her partner John-Anthony Gallagher, who was responsible for the technical set-up, decided to move the show from Zoom to YouTube for stability purposes (Bradley, 2023a).

For 7DS, going online was both more difficult than for a poetry performance with less staging, and yet easier than for other theatrical shows in which staging, props, and movement on stage play a more central role. The small-scale nature of the show made it easier to adapt it to the online format as well as to the more-or-less sudden location change. 7DS provides a further example of what poetry performance scholar Shefali Banerji describes as the 'spatial adaptability' of spoken word theatre (2025: 112), with such shows being able to change to fit different venues with relative ease. Moreover, as spoken word is frequently characterised by a 'do-it-yourself' ethos, poets often have to take charge of the staging and production of their work. While Bradley received support from a set-designer in redecorating her home to suit the needs of the show, and her partner was responsible for the technical set-up, many tasks, including make-up, costuming, and stage directing, were still in her remit. Bradley's experience as a spoken word artist, familiar with running her own one-person shows live, doing

her own costumes and make-up, and performing in a wide variety of venues—such as the tattoo parlour in which this show debuted in 2016—aided her successful navigation of this new situation. As Fuchs notes, manifold challenges and new roles were thrust upon actors and theatre-makers by digital performance (2022: 20–21). The genesis of *7DS* demonstrates the versatility and adaptability that was required of creatives and their performances during the pandemic, including accommodating rapid changes of venues of performance, altering stage designs, adjusting to digital performance in its prerecorded and livestreamed forms, as well as revising distribution strategies.

Virtually Together: Spatio-Temporal Co-Presence

Co-presence, the most fundamental element of live performance, is the feature that most obviously disrupted by the pandemic. This can be clearly evidenced by terms such as 'social distancing', 'isolation', and 'cocooning' etc. which were used to describe the lack of shared spaces during the pandemic. Georgi expands the discussion of co-presence by adding the term 'tele-presence', arguing that there can be a 'mediatised co-presence in time despite the spatial absence of the performers' (Georgi, 2014: 93). This temporal tele-presence was a vital component of what liveness came to mean in pandemic performance. Simultaneity in time gained more importance as co-presence in space became restricted.

In *7DS*, temporal tele-presence exists between Bradley and the audience. Bradley's scenes as Ms Noir occur at the same time as the audience views them. Paradoxically, the temporal tele-presence between the audience and Bradley's performances as Ms Noir are made possible through the prerecorded interludes provided by the Caretaker figure. During the Caretaker's scenes, Bradley changes costumes and moves around the multitude of sets she has constructed in her own home. Each change is precisely timed to the length of the Caretaker's interludes, allowing for almost seamless transitions. It is precisely the prerecorded elements which make the live elements practically possible in this show.

The event description highlights the temporal co-presence between audience and performer: the show is marketed as a 'live-streamed' event (Bradley, n.d. a). It being advertised as a livestreamed event indicates an understanding that co-presence of some form is a valued feature for performer and audience. In Power's terms, '[t]he "liveness" of the performance ... was itself deliberately *signified* to the audience. The audience is encouraged to read the performance "as live"' (2008: 161; emphasis in original). This statement underscores the importance of liveness, even if it is livestreamed-ness, in contemporary and especially pandemic discourse (Auslander, 2022: 62).

In Bradley's performance practice, the presence of the audience plays a significant role. In one of the interviews conducted for the Poetry Off the Page project, Bradley states: 'My voice is my tool and it's the thing that I do, that I use. But without that listening ear it's all redundant. So, I [am] appreciating what audience is there and hopefully they appreciate what I'm doing too' (2023b). In this instance, she is referring to an in-person audience giving meaning to her work. However, during the pandemic Bradley embraced digital audiences as well. Bradley (2023b) expresses both the importance of the temporal and spatially co-present audience as well as the appreciation during the pandemic of the option of tele-presence, which is mirrored in studies of audience and performer preferences which expressed the positive role of livestreams during the pandemic (Healy, 2023).

In terms of space, a form of spatial tele-presence exists between the Caretaker and Ms Noir in the final scene of the show. Georgi mentions '[t]he potential of the internet for the creation of temporal and the simulation of spatial co-presence in virtual space' (2014: 99–100) but maintains that this simulated space is only ever imaginary. I agree that simulated space cannot offer the same kind of experience that shared corporeality does (cf. Georgi, 2014: 89); one is not sharing the same sensory experience of the place and the bodies in the place. However, I propose that another layer should be added to the definition of spatial co-presence, namely conceiving of conferencing platforms as a form of spatial tele-presence. One clear example we have is in the credit sequence of *7DS*, in which the Caretaker and Ms Noir are recognisably on a conference call, playing the game Battleship (Bradley, 2020: 51:55–54:40). Their game and conversation are interrupted by the credits. This narrative shift is visually marked by the camera quality (significantly lower than in the rest of the recording), the positioning of the cameras and frames of the shots corresponds to phone or webcams (**Figure 2**). The composition of the shots and the close-ups create intimacy (Ryan and Lenos 2020: 48), which makes the scene legible to the audience as a less staged.
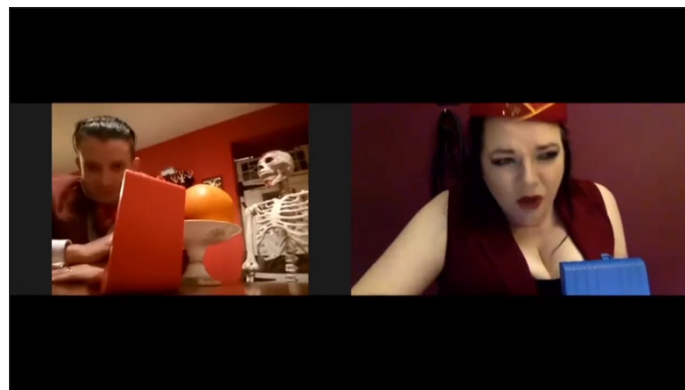

Figure 2: Credit Scene, *7DS*, 2020, 52:48.

The scene is a prerecorded segment, cut into the livestream. However, the two performers were indeed on a conference call, in real-time for the recording. In this scene there is temporal co-presence which allows them to improvise their conversation, as well as creating a simulated spatial co-presence. Not simulated in the sense that one could be led to believe they are truly in the same space, but rather simulated in the sense that there is a virtual 'room' they are inhabiting together that also indexes liveness to a (post-)pandemic audience. The optics of the conference call became recognisable to people during the pandemic as signals of a shared space, and of liveness (Auslander, 2022: 63). This supposedly private shared space – between only the two characters – creates a different role for the audience members as they become eavesdroppers to the following conversation:

> The Caretaker: So, they've all cleared off then?
>
> Ms Noir: Mhm. Done and dusted. For another year.
>
> The Caretaker: I don't know why you let them go again.
>
> [...]
>
> Ms. Noir: Have you seen the paperwork? Do you... Do you know what I have to process? Every soul that comes through?!
>
> The Caretaker: Rubbish. I'm the one who has to blood tidy up after them. And, I dug all those graves and you let them all go. (Bradley, 2020: 52:07–53:00)

The intimacy of this conversation between two coworkers is signalled by its casualness. Their conversation is repeatedly interrupted by the calling of Battleship moves and they speak over one another. Ms Noir's shift from rhyme and regular rhythm into a prosaic idiom also indicates the end of her 'performing' for the tour group. These facets are all supported by the visual features of the conference call. I argue that this moment simulates a shared spatial tele-presence for all participants from the audience's perspective. One can imagine that had the show taken place on Zoom, this conversation might have led to insecurity among audience members as to whether the show had ended or not. As it was, the interspersing of the credits indicates that the show is over, while the conversation between the characters continues to reveal more about the show and the dangerous position the tour group has been in the entire time.

It is worth noting that different technologies and social media platforms have different affordances that can offer or suggest different forms of engagement and communication (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). As stated above, 7DS was livestreamed on YouTube and not on Zoom for technical reasons. While YouTube livestreams have a live chat function which can signal liveness and foster interactions between participants, it is unclear whether this option was active during the show or whether it was used by

the audience. It was certainly not monitored or incorporated by the performers. Even if there was some spectator-spectator communication during the livestream, I posit that a YouTube livestream was less likely to present an immersive shared space and resulting sense of community for a small-scale, one-off performance than a Zoom meeting. In addition to the chat function, which both platforms have, conferencing calls generally involve a specifically targeted audience, direct interaction between host and audience, the potential visibility and audibility of attendees; conferencing technology is supportive of 'feelings of social presence' (Onderdijk et al., 2021: 22).

Browne's performance draws on the repertoire of Zoom's markers of shared spatio-temporal co-presence. He does this to create a sense of liveness and community through the simulation of a shared digital space. As Caretaker, he explicitly references the aesthetics of conferencing software in his monologues. At the very beginning of the show, he refers to the 'disembodied little heads, floating on a screen' (Bradley, 2020, 03:25–3:27), an image which suggests a disconcerting parallel between the typical camera angle of conference calls that cuts off people's bodies and the horror aesthetics of the show's setting. This also fits nicely with the larger context of the Derry Halloween festival. Throughout the Caretaker's scenes, oblique and overt references to the digital space abound.

However, the *7DS* show was streamed via YouTube, rather than on Zoom as originally planned. There is an odd disconnect between the Caretaker's attempt to simulate a shared space with the reality of the viewer's experience; members of the audience were not visible to each other, nor to the performer, and would have been aware of this. The prerecorded scenes end up being 'faulty' in that they presume a reality that does not exist; because the situation of the livestream changed, the Caretaker's allusions do not suit the setting, which is indicative of the risk of failure that is possible in mediatised as well as live elements of performances (cf. Georgi, 2014: 160).

Fleeting Faults: Ephemerality, Uniqueness, Imperfection

Ephemerality refers to the idea that a live event cannot be reproduced (Georgi, 2014: 113–114). Performance theorist Phelan argues that

> [P]erformance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance (1993: 146).

Georgi observes that in the theatre productions she analyses, which incorporate live and mediatised elements, there is frequently a destabilisation of the 'binary opposition of ephemeral liveness and reproducible mediatisation' (2014: 131). In *7DS*, it is not the combination of media (livestreamed and prerecorded) which is most interesting in terms of ephemerality, but rather the way in which livestream technology complicates the idea of reproducibility.

Although this performance of *7DS* could be ephemeral, the technology used makes it theoretically reproducible. The platforms used to host livestreams, such as YouTube, sometimes make incidental recordings of the livestream, which creates a repeatable film. YouTube, for instance, automatically archives livestreams that are under 12 hours in length; these must then be manually deleted or set to private (YouTube Help, n.d.). The artist, director or producer does not have to make a conscious choice to record a performance; rather, the technology does this (semi-)automatically. In the case of *7DS*, the full recording was produced by YouTube's software, which the audience would not have been aware of. The show would have been perceived as ephemeral by the initial audience. Significantly, the perspective of the camera(s)—and therefore of the audience's gaze—does not change between the original livestreamed version and the recorded version. One could reproduce a version of the event, were one so inclined. However, other markers of liveness—such as the explicit references to pandemic circumstances—would undermine any attempt to pass the recording off as live.

Unlike the shows Georgi (2014) examines, *7DS* does not intentionally play with the linearity and reproducibility of the prerecorded elements; the singular instance of repetition occurs for technical rather than aesthetic reasons. The first scene of the show immediately makes the audience aware of its partially prerecorded nature unintentionally through a glitch: after the first 55 seconds (Bradley, 2020: 02:15–03:10), Browne's clip begins from the beginning again. This was due to an audio issue according to Bradley (2023a). The restart establishes the Caretaker's scenes as non-unique and not live, undermining the gestures of co-presence the character makes throughout. However, it also reinforces the uniqueness of the entire show because this is a clear moment of unpredictability and imperfection.

Georgi persuasively demonstrates that mediatisation is not free from unpredictability, imperfection, or the risk of failure, yet also indicates that these characteristics are not purely the domain of the live performance (2014: 133–160). Moreover, whilst live relay videos can be highly unpredictable, Georgi outlines some of the ways in which prerecorded components can also be 'imperfect' (2014: 157–158).

As evidenced by the Caretaker's inaccurate references to Zoom and the repetition of the first scene, this risk of imperfection and unpredictability is present within the 7*DS* show. In addition, the technological failure of scene 6.1 (Bradley, 2020: 37:05–38:22) belies the supposed 'perfection' attributed to mediatised elements on a technological level. In this scene, Browne's audio continues but the visuals glitch. In these moments, the Caretaker is opening a hidden door in a bookshelf; his text can be heard but the image has frozen. This is unintentionally semantically compelling because it hides from the viewers which book triggers the mechanism to open the secret door, adding to the mystery of the world. Bradley's subsequent scene begins with her audio overlayed over the still image of the Caretaker's bookcase.

In the Ms Noir scene that follows (Bradley, 2020: 38:24–44:19) we encounter another instance of 'imperfection'. The framing of this shot incorporates parts of the space that are interruptions of the fictional story-world, namely the white box on the left and the white and grey parts of the wall on the right (**Figure 3**). These elements allow the audience to distinguish between the stage(d) space and the space that is not intended for their viewership. However, it is ambiguous as to whether this framing strengthens or weakens the illusion of Hotel Hell. It depends on whether one sees the ruptures as giving an impromptu glimpse behind the curtain of Hotel Hell itself, or into Bradley's stage space. I argue that this scene increases the voyeurism on the part of the audience, because they see something that neither Ms Noir nor Mel Bradley *wanted* them to see. In their totality, Bradley's scenes do not evoke a sense of unpredictability and imperfection to the same degree that they might have if they were in-person performances. There are few moments of perceivable imperfections in terms of Bradley's performance itself, except for an occasional verbal slip or pause that seem unintentional (e.g. Bradley, 2020: 07:46–07:48, 08:49–08:52).

Figure 3: Imperfect Framing, *7DS*, 2020, 41:19.

For Bradley, imperfections and risks are part of the joy and freedom of live and livestreamed performance. In our interview, Bradley stated that she prefers livestreams to recording performances:

> When you are doing a live performance, you've got one shot, that's it. You've got to get it and if you make a mistake, it's done. Whereas when you're recording stuff that's going to be permanent, you have to get it so [perfect] … And the retakes! … If it's streamed or if it's happening and somebody is recording, I'm live performing, that's not a problem (Bradley, 2022).

The retakes Bradley exasperatedly mentions here are those that she attempted to (re)create after the livestream performance of *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins* in order to address some of the livestream 'mistakes' and create a more 'produced' version of the show. However, in the end she abandoned this attempt and did not make the recording publicly available. For her, imperfections in live performance are part of the nature of the product.

It seems that the risk of imperfection is part of both prerecorded and livestreamed components. However, there is a difference in the types of imperfection mentioned here. Both prerecorded and livestreamed components are susceptible to technological failures. The Caretaker's scenes had a higher chance of inaccurately relating to the circumstances at hand, given that they were prerecorded weeks in advance of the show and before the event was moved to YouTube. Ms Noir's scenes more overtly demonstrated the potential for mistakes in the performer's verbal poetic performance itself. While imperfections do not necessarily distinguish between live and mediatised elements, the unpredictability of the performance overall does signal the liveness of *7DS*'s livestream overall.

Interaction and Reality: Possibilities, Limitations

The two final facets that are conventionally associated with liveness are interaction and the representation of reality. Georgi argues that 'liveness and interactivity are in fact not contingent upon each other' (2014: 192). While in-person audiences must decide more actively where to focus their attention within the performance, they may not actually interact much or at all with the performance on stage (Georgi, 2014: 181). But according to Georgi, both in-person and tele-audiences

> Hav[e] to reconcile their own experiences with what they are watching in order to identify with it or distance themselves from it (cf. Klaver 1995: 311). Mediatised

performances thus have the same potential to involve the audience emotionally. The intervention of the camera often even causes a more intense sense of proximity, immersion or identification with the characters by means of close-ups (2014: 182).

In *7DS*, the medium shots, which make up the majority of camera positions, produce a proximity that an in-person venue would not achieve with the performer being on the stage; there is a level of detailed visual experience that occurs with the mediatisation of this performance. Additionally, the audience is granted a view of the performers' homes, which adds another layer to the emotional involvement. Auslander refers to the 'effect of intimacy' created by the glimpses of private spaces made abundant in pandemic performance (2022: 64). Even though both performers' homes suit the fictional world, they are recognisable as *home* spaces rather than as designated performance spaces.

In order to simulate audience participation, *7DS* regularly simulated the breaking of the virtual fourth wall through the Caretaker's explicit references to (fictional) audience members. The entire show begins with the Caretaker seemingly being surprised by the appearance of the audience, which results in him spitting out his drink before he greets them. Then he addresses the audience in general and one member specifically. The Caretaker leans towards the camera, as if to inspect the audience members' appearances (**Figure 4**) and says:

Let me get a look at you, see that you're suitable. We've got certain standards we have to maintain down here, you know. No trainers. **And oi, you, top left!** No shirt, no service, alright. Don't you dress up properly to go to a show? Honestly. Go on. And ugh, put some trousers on, you're distracting me. I know this is a show about sin, but you're looking like you might be kept here permanent, sunshine (Bradley, 2020: 03:39–04:08, emphasis added).

Figure 4: The Caretaker's Welcome, *7DS*, 2020, 03:41.

This fictional interaction plays on the unstable boundary between performer and viewer in the context of conferencing technology and its specific affordances. Even if the audience at this event cannot be seen by the performers, the scene nonetheless picks up on salient pandemic circumstances: one could indeed attend cultural events without a shirt and trousers. Furthermore, there was always a risk of being addressed in an online meeting at an inopportune moment or being seen or heard when one was not intending to be seen or heard. Later in the show, the Caretaker again calls out to an audience member by name (Bradley, 2020: 37:29–37:30). To me, as someone with that name, this moment of appellation remains disconcerting even upon repeated viewing, especially as the Caretaker is calling out the audience's role as voyeurs. These moments destabilise the border between the performance space and the audience space, intimating that even as the audience are voyeurs, they can be made into the objects of the gaze. Further, they may become, or perhaps already are, 'tortured captive[s]' rather than mere visitors of hell (Bradley, 2020: 16:12–16:13), a veiled threat both Ms Noir and the Caretaker make.

The Caretaker, throughout the show, significantly contributes to 'an increased sense of emotional alignment with the remote audience in lieu of physical proximity' (Radak, 2023: 40). His role within the fictional world is to guide the visitors through Hell and to keep them safe, although he attempts this through threats:

> We've got only one rule around these parts, alright? Don't touch anything. I'm the Caretaker, I've got everything fixed up the way I like it. Okay? So I can do without you lot mucking it all up, knocking things over with your clumsy ways. And the way I understand it, just now, you're getting kind of used to not touching anything up in your world. Well, that suits me just fine (Bradley, 2020: 04:14–04:36).

Even as the character distances himself from the audience by referring to the lack of physical touch in *their* world, he creates closeness by acknowledging the actual circumstances of the audience's lives as well as implicitly commenting on the circumstances of the performance itself. An overt parallel is drawn between the rules for Hotel Hell and the lack of and fear of contact during the Covid-19 lockdowns. The audience already *is* in a kind of isolation-based hell.

Meanwhile, Ms Noir maintains her relationship with the audience by utilising vocally expressed text and bodily performance. Throughout the performance, Ms Noir refers to the subject of her tales using language that aligns her with the audience on the shared story-telling and story-listening endeavour: '**our** first victim', 'the next upon **our** list', '**our** little septet of sins' etc. (Bradley, 2020: 07:03, 12:33–12:35, 18:45–18:47,

emphasis added). She also directly addresses the audience, at one point introducing a new story of sin with a list of questions addressed to the audience:

> Do you crave a carnal couplet?
>
> Are you longing for some lecherous lines?
>
> Is it seduction from a sultry sonnet that you're seeking?
>
> Or would you rather be ravished by rhythm and rhyme?
>
> Care to venture a little voyeuristic versification
>
> With this lyrical libertine? (Bradley, 2020: 31:44–32:03).

There is something teasing about both content and form of the above quotation. She asks the audience questions, yet they have no voice to answer. Her words and movements speak to physical intimacy, yet the audience cannot touch her. Throughout the show, she gazes directly at the camera, performing to the spectators, often from under lowered lids. The combination of sexualised language, vocal production, dress, simulated eye contact, and humour are associated with burlesque, a practice that informs Bradley's Ms Noir persona (Bradley, 2022). Jacki Willson (2008: 36), argues that burlesque's 'potent combination of comedy, a powerful sexual presence, striptease, nudity and the gaze is unsettling and unnerving'. While not all of these elements are present in Bradley's performance as Ms Noir, the inspiration is visible in her outfits and the set design and audible in her voice and her poetry. The poetry itself is almost over the top in its sexually charged language, consistent rhyme scheme and abundant alliteration.

The passage above not only addresses the audience, it also emphasises the audience's double role: the audience has chosen to attend a performance of 'lecherous lines' via Bradley's event, and the fictional audience in the world of the story has chosen to visit Hotel Hell to listen to Ms Noir's 'seduction from a sultry sonnet'. The audience is repeatedly invited into the fictional world *as a group*. This sense of group cohesion is again only a simulation; the audience is not sharing the same physical location nor is a stable virtual world created for them. However, within the limitations of the platform and the lack of overt spectator–spectator interaction, it is still possible for the performers to attempt to provide a communal identity for the group, namely that of a group of visitors who have ostensibly set out to learn something from their visit. In Ms Noir's scenes, the sense of community is structured around the lessons per se; at the end of almost every tale there is a brief moral of the story that directly addresses the audience. 'As you can see from this tale of moral retribution/Be cautious in matters of the heart, lest you/Find yourself, like Bob, condemned to wrathful execution'

(Bradley, 2020: 44:02–44:15). Ms Noir takes on the role of educator in matters of morality, whereas the Caretaker is responsible for physical safety. Besides announcing the rules for the visit (see above), the Caretaker also implies a responsibility between the spectators: 'And don't forget: Keep together, alright? You don't want to get lost round these parts … 'kay, so look out for each other, 'kay. Keep an eye on who's above and who's below you on your little screen there and make sure everyone's together' (Bradley, 2020: 04:52–05:09). As discussed above, the reference to conference platform aesthetics does not reflect the actual medial situation in which viewers found themselves; the strategy cannot live up to the potential. The powerlessness and sense of isolation brought on by the lockdowns cannot be overcome here, but also would not have been truly overcome if the performance had taken place on Zoom.

Nonetheless, these pseudo-interactive moments reinforce a blurring of the fictional and real worlds. As Georgi states, 'the transitions between the personae's fictional worlds and the spectators' reality are a further means of raising a metafictional awareness of the stage as a fictional as well as a real physical space' (2014: 205). In this case, the performance space is threefold: On the one hand, it is the fictional setting (Hotel Hell), on the other, it is the physical setting created within the performers' environments, and finally, it is also an abstract digital space. The direct address of the audience by both Ms Noir and the Caretaker brings the audience into the first two spaces, and the Caretaker's explicit references to digital technologies tie in the third. Thus, once again, a simulation of co-presence, and by extension, liveness, is constructed. This co-presence places all participants in the show—fictional and real—in a space of implied togetherness while also acknowledging the isolation and disconnection inherent to both the confines of Hotel Hell and of homes during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Conclusion

Building on the foundations of pre-Covid research into liveness and mediatisation, this article has explored additional layers of complexity added to conceptualisation of live performance during the pandemic. I have done this by analysing Mel Bradley's 2020 livestreamed performance of her genre-defying show *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*, which incorporates poetry performance, prerecorded video clips, staging, props, costumes, overarching narrative, and burlesque aesthetics. I have outlined how Bradley and Browne used the affordances of digital technologies, including conferencing software, to create and simulate co-presence in terms of temporality and space and argued for the addition of spatial tele-presence as a component of liveness. My analysis has complicated the notion of ephemerality as it applies

to livestreams and has supported Georgi's (2014) claims in relation to risk of imperfection in mediatised components of performance work. I have also indicated the potential for interaction and alignment between audience and performers in digitally augmented poetry performance and shown that these can be fostered by both livestreamed and prerecorded elements. These strategies in creating or simulating liveness are in conversation with the themes and setting of the show, providing a disconcerting parallel between the misery of lockdown and the eternal suffering of Hotel Hell, emphasised by the audience's positioning as visitors to this space.

Writing this article in 2024, the world has returned largely to in-person events; indeed, theatres and venues for poetry performances have been opening to various degrees since 2021. Is therefore the analysis of liveness during the pandemic simply a retrospective undertaking? I do not believe so. The lessons learned during the pandemic for performers, poets, theatre-makers and even audiences will not simply be forgotten—just as they were not fundamentally new during the pandemic except in scale. More research is needed on pandemic and post-lockdown performance practices, as this work not only illuminates a significant period in cultural production and how art reckoned with a major global event, but also offers a fuller understanding of liveness as a malleable, ever-changing concept.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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