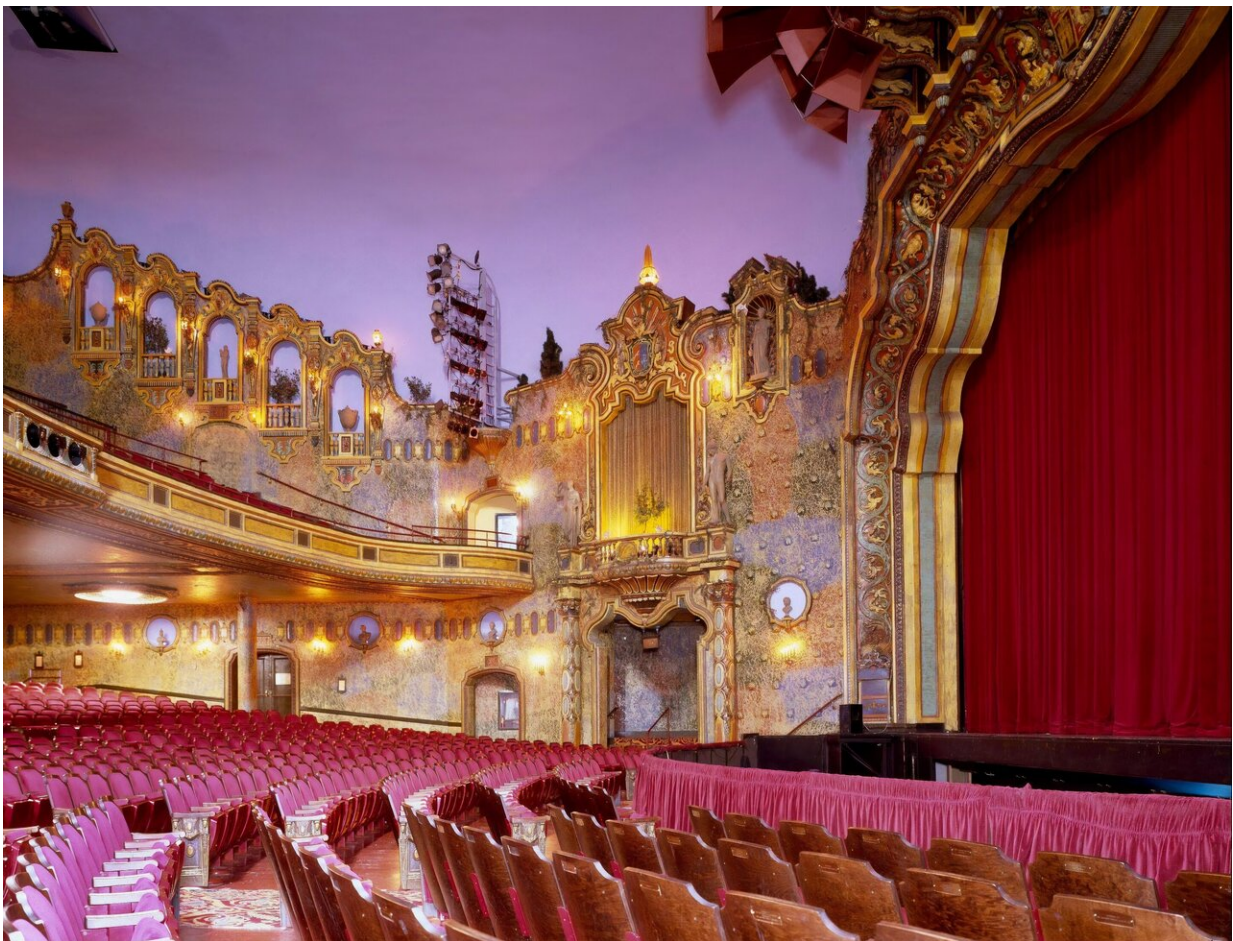


Digital transformation will be key to ensuring survival of theatre industry during coronavirus, research shows

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Digital transformation will be key to ensuring the survival of the theater industry during coronavirus because people are willing to pay to see shows online, new research shows.

Virtual performances can help theaters to keep functioning in lockdown or when outdoor performance is not possible.

Around three quarters of those who responded to a new survey said they would purchase tickets to watch a live Zoom theater production at any time, even when theaters were re-opened.

Audiences said participating in Zoom performances made them feel part of a community and provided them the opportunity to do something with friends and family. They also said it reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The research, by Professor Pascale Aebischer and Dr. Rachael Nicholas, from the University of Exeter, was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the UKRI COVID-19 Research and Innovation funding.

Experts have analyzed the lessons learned from the successful [digital transformation](#) of Oxford's Creation Theater and its co-production with Big Telly of "The Tempest" on Zoom earlier this year during lockdown. Academics surveyed thirteen administrative and creative staff involved in the production and analyzed 93 responses to an online questionnaire sent to audiences who attended a Zoom performance of "The Tempest" in April and May 2020.

Their report of initial findings includes a digital toolkit for companies who want to produce live digital theater while working remotely, and the report also has advice on Zoom performance offered by Creation Theater's "The Tempest" team, a set of guidelines drawn up in

consultation with a representative of Equity, and a checklist for Zoom performance compiled with Creation Theater's Production Manager.

Professor Aebischer said: "Although efforts to provide free art content during lockdown has been appreciated, we need to ensure this doesn't become a substitute for audiences paying for tickets. This creates jobs, new productions and ensures freelancers—who make up around half of all staff in the industry—can continue working in the industry. While many in the industry are focusing their efforts on bringing back physical performances in outdoor settings, with winter approaching and the threat of further lockdowns, the ability to switch rapidly back to a digital mode of performances will be ever more important to the survival of the industry."

Most people who took part in the research said they wanted to watch an adaptation of a well-known play or novel, suggesting that familiarity with a work may be an important factor in audiences wanting to engage with Zoom theater. However, similar proportions of respondents also said they would be interested in watching new work.

When the production of "The Tempest" had been performed the year before, it reached 3,368 individual [audience](#) members with summer visitors from 11 countries. The Zoom version in 2020 reached more than 1,200 households in 27 different countries, allowing the company to develop its audience in exciting new ways and provide access to its shows to people previously excluded from theater-going.

The critical and financial success of the production, for which Creation Theater charged £20 per viewing device, is helping it stay open during lockdown, make a small profit and continue to produce new work with an international reach. The overwhelming majority of those surveyed said the performance was good value for money, particularly as they were charged per-device, and 79 percent said they would be willing to

pay to watch other Zoom theater, both in and out of lockdown.

Audiences said they found it easy, or very easy to use Zoom technology during the performance. Watching live as the actors performed was important to them, as was the fact the production was designed so they could participate and feel a sense of community as an audience.

Challenges include Zoom fatigue, which affects performers and viewers. Performers also had to cope with Zoom time lag, and use mobile phones, improvisation skills and the goodwill of audiences to cope with internet disruption.

The Zoom production was also effective at reaching new audiences. 27 percent of respondents said that they had not heard of Creation Theater before watching the Zoom production. A total of 13 percent of respondents said that they rarely attended live theater performances.

More information: The initial report is available online:
www.creationtheatre.co.uk/about-creation-theatre-transformation/

Provided by University of Exeter

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