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Balancing Human Spirit in Theatre in the Age of Technology and AI

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Abstract: In April 2011, during the Europe Theatre Prize at St. Petersburg, two groundbreaking performances — Kafka's *Metamorphosis* by Vesturport and *Mr. Vertigo* directed by Kristian Smeds — showcased how technology can transform the theatrical experience. These plays highlighted the potential of integrating innovative tools into a live performance. Today, theatre faces both opportunities and challenges with advancements like Artificial Intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, digital streaming and holography. While streaming archived productions like Laurence Olivier's *Othello* offers access to legendary performances, the irreplaceable magic of live theatre still holds strong appeal. However, each technological innovation needs careful consideration; there is no universal solution. For example, while AI can assist in scripting or technical aspects, its overuse could dilute the emotional and human core of theatre. Similarly, excessive focus on spectacle risks undermining storytelling and performance quality. Theatre must treat technology as an evolving tool, not a threat. The priority should remain on preserving the human connection at the heart of theatre, ensuring that technology complements rather than replaces the magic of a live performance. Balancing both is the key to theatre's enduring relevance.

Keywords: theatre, technology, Artificial Intelligence, digital performance, live presence.

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The wind off the Gulf of Finland carried a lingering chill that April in the year 2011 in St. Petersburg. The city — majestic, with its pastel baroque facades and winding canals — was buzzing with visitors for the Europe Theatre Prize. Inside the grand theatre hosting the event, conversations in multiple languages floated over the clink of coffee cups. Critics, directors, designers, and actors — representatives of Europe's theatrical vanguard — had gathered not merely to celebrate achievement but to exchange visions of what theatre could become.

I took my seat with a sense of curiosity and a small degree of skepticism. Technology, I had always believed, should never overpower the human presence on stage. Yet the two performances I saw that week dismantled my preconceptions.

First came Vesturport's *Metamorphosis*, an adaptation of Franz Kafka's unsettling novella. Vesturport's hallmark physicality was on full display: performers dangling from harnesses, flipping through the air, navigating a vertical set as though gravity had loosened its hold. Multimedia projections intensified Gregor Samsa's alienation — walls closed in, images swirled, light fractured. This was not mere embellishment; it was a visual metaphor woven into the marrow of the storytelling. Technology didn't compete with the actors; it was their co-conspirator.

Later, Kristian Smeds' *Mr. Vertigo* took the stage with a very different rhythm — dreamlike, poetic, and layered. Its use of technology was subtler: precise soundscapes that shifted emotional temperature, understated projections that expanded the inner landscapes of characters, lighting that felt almost sculptural. Here, technology whispered rather than shouted, deepening intimacy instead of spectacle.

That evening, I realised something fundamental: the real question was no longer should technology enter the sacred arena of live performance? — it already had, and it was there to stay. The real question was how it could do so without eroding the very heartbeat of theatre: the live, human connection.

When pondering "technology and AI in theatre," we often think of it with a contemporary lens. In fact, theatre has always embraced innovation. Ancient Greek theatre built impressive amphitheaters with incredible acoustics such as stone and space rather than technology, masks that exaggerated features and sounds as well as mouths that acted as microphones to exaggerate sound.

The first mention of theatre traditions in Kashmir in northern part of India can be found in *Nilmata Purana* believed to have been composed in 6th or 7th century A.D. It appears from the *Nilamata Purana* that there were no auditoriums in existence in Kashmir during those days and the dramatic performances were taking place in the open spaces beside bonfire during the evenings. However, some art historians have testified to the existence of Natya Mandapas (performance spaces) inside ancient palaces and temples in Kashmir where plays and dances were performed.

Renaissance theatre in Italy and England added moveable scenery, trap doors, and perspective painting. Flat backdrops were turned to deep and illusionistic landscapes. The Globe Theatre's "heavens" were a painted canopy with trap doors allowing for the essential entry of the gods and spirits to descend, or for "thunder" to roll. These were essential for Shakespeare's audience as much as they were to the narrator. The presentation of theatre in the 19th century with the introduction of gas lighting enabled directors to control brightness and focus which created dramatic shadow play and subtle mood shifts. Critics worried that gaslight would distract audiences from the actors, but it actually made performances more expressive. In India, kerosene lamps were used for the purpose. By the late 1800s, electric light took over from gas. It provided greater accuracy and safety. Spotlights appeared, letting directors highlight a face in a crowd and create intimacy on large stages.

However, nowadays, the speed of technological change is greater than anything we have seen in theatre history. The list of new tools seems almost fictional. In the early 20th century stagecraft advanced with mechanical scenery and revolving stages. Scene changes that once took a long time could now happen in seconds, leading to smoother storytelling. Meanwhile, improvements in sound equipment changed acting styles. Performers no longer had to project to the back row with just their voices. In India, the luxury of revolving stages is restricted to a very few metropolitan cities and in the rest of the country the stages are fixed and the directors have to use innovative ways to denote a change in the scene. Voice projection also continues to be part of an actor's training regimen.

Costume and makeup technology also improved. Synthetic fabrics allowed for more movement, and new makeup stayed put under bright lights. Each change initially raised eyebrows, but eventually became part of theatrical tradition.

The lesson from history is clear: theater is not a static display of tradition; it is a living art that grows through change. What matters is how we use each new tool. Let's examine some of the major challenges posed by technology and artificial intelligence in our times.

Artificial Intelligence: The New Playwright

AI is already writing plays. Some of these experiments are rough, but others show real promise. A playwright might use AI to create several drafts in minutes and then choose the best ones for inspiration. Therefore, we may not have a Shakespeare, a Tennessee Williams, an Edward Albee, a Harold Pinter, a Tom Stoppard, a Samuel Beckett or an Arthur Miller anymore but there will definitely be great scripts. So we may miss the great playwrights in future but there will certainly be great scripts either fully created by AI or inspired by AI. AI can create scripts, absorbing centuries of theatrical texts and offering insights on pacing, themes, or character structures. Imagine an AI advising a director on how audiences from different cultures might interpret a scene or suggesting alternate staging options.

However, AI may threaten one of theatre's most vital qualities: its emotional unpredictability. Human dialogue often relies on hesitation, subtext, or imperfections. AI's "perfection" can feel lifeless. A joke that looks good on paper might not work in performance because it lacks the subtle human touch that influences timing. The temptation to overuse AI is real. A producer might see AI as a way to save costs by replacing writers or designers. This could weaken the variety of human voices on which theatre relies. Moreover, who owns a script an AI writes? Is it the person who made the program, the person who told the AI what to write, or the people whose work the AI learned from? These questions need to be asked and addressed before treading on the path of AI generated scripts.

Digital Streaming: The Desire to Reach a Large Audience

The pandemic sped up theatre's shift to streaming. Productions like the National Theatre's *Frankenstein* and archival gems like Olivier's *Othello* reached millions online. Streaming offers clear benefits: it's accessible, educational,

and helps preserve work. However, there's a trade-off with immediacy. When watching a recording, you can pause, rewind, or even scroll on your phone, which isn't possible in a theatre. The shared focus of a live audience is unique. While digital streaming brings bigger audiences to a show, it poses a real threat to the very essence of theatre, the live audience, sitting in an auditorium and enjoying a live performance.

While streaming archived productions like Laurence Olivier's *Othello* offers access to legendary performances, the irreplaceable magic of live theatre still holds strong appeal. Therefore, while live streaming of performance may eventually harm the very spirit and appeal of a live performance, streaming of old and great performances of our time, after a time gap, can actually help in attracting more people to theatre. The theatre people across the world can decide the time frame (Two, three, five or ten years after the actual show in a theatre auditorium) after which a performance can be screened on a digital platform.

Virtual Reality (VR): The Immersive Promise

VR can surround audiences with worlds that are impossible to create in real life. Imagine experiencing *The Tempest* where you feel the storm around you, the deck moving beneath you, and Ariel's whispers close by. For immersive theatre companies, VR introduces a new possibility; geography is no longer a barrier. However, VR can isolate audiences instead of bringing them together. One of the great joys of theatre is the shared response, the wave of laughter, the collective gasp. A headset is designed for individual use. The challenge is to find ways to use VR that maintains the sense of a shared experience. This could be through hybrid spaces where virtual and physical audiences can interact.

Augmented Reality (AR): The Invisible Layer

AR offers subtler possibilities. A production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could allow audience members to see spirits dancing on their shoulders with AR glasses or to display Oberon's magic in sparkling trails above the stage. Since AR overlays reality instead of replacing it, it can be integrated more naturally into live performances. The risk is in using gimmicks. Too many AR effects can distract from the actors' performances and make the show feel more like a video game than a play.

Holography: Between Tribute and Exploitation

Holograms can create amazing effects. Actors can interact with projections of themselves, or scenes can unfold in multiple locations at once. There's even discussion about holographically bringing back great actors for new shows. This raises a serious ethical question: when does paying tribute become taking advantage? If Olivier were alive, would he agree to be digitally brought back in a production he never approved? Does a holographic performance risk turning an actor's craft into a gimmick?

Case Studies: When Technology Elevates — and When It Erodes

Elevations

Vesturport's *Metamorphosis* (2011): Physical daring and multimedia projections came together in a clear vision that highlighted Kafka's themes of alienation and entrapment.

National Theatre's *War Horse*: Life-sized puppet horses, combined with digital projections of changing landscapes, created an emotional realism that no real horse could equal.

Complicité's *Mnemonic* (1999, 2024): Minimalist projections and sound design used precisely to deepen themes of memory and connection.

Robert Lepage's *The Andersen Project* (2005): A smooth mix of video, set mechanics, and storytelling that broadened narrative possibilities without overshadowing human presence.

Erosions

A Shakespeare production added AR effects to *Macbeth*. At first, the animations were impressive, but they soon became repetitive and distracted from the actors. By the final act, the audience's attention shifted from the story to the spectacle. An AI-generated score for a contemporary drama didn't match the rhythm of the live performances. This created an atmosphere that felt generic and emotionally disconnected. Some VR productions, while visually stunning, left viewers feeling tired and disoriented. This undermined the social energy that is at the heart of theatre.

The Human Core: Why We Still Gather in the Dark

Technology can improve theatre, but it cannot replace the core reason why audiences come together in person. Theatre is about presence. It captures the electricity of a live performance, the vulnerability of actors who can't "edit out" their mistakes, and the audience's role as a silent partner. A streamed performance of Olivier in *Othello* preserves his voice and gestures, but it misses the intense feeling in the room when he stepped onto the stage. In theatre, the magic lives in the unique moments. No algorithm can recreate the instance when an actor forgets a line and improvises brilliantly, or when the audience's collective intake of breath changes the rhythm of a scene. The human error and the shared discovery — these are what keep theatre alive.

The Balancing Act: Technology as Partner, Not Master

Adding technology needs self-control. Directors should ask:

1. Does this tool make the audience feel more?
2. Does the flashy stuff help the story, or is the story just there to show off the flashy stuff?
3. Will people still like the technology years from now, or will it seem old-fashioned?

Sometimes, the simplest things pack the most punch — one light on a sad character, a sudden darkness after a big reveal. There are also questions about ethics and responsibility in the digital age theatre that need to be addressed. We can't talk about technology in theatre without thinking about what's right and wrong e.g. should families control how holograms use dead actors' faces? Could laws cover this? New technology that gets the audience involved might collect information on how people react. How do they keep this information safe, and who can see it? Further, as rich theaters adopt state-of-the-art technology, will this keep out smaller groups making artistic representation less equal?

These issues aren't just side notes; they'll mold how theaters and audiences connect in the years to come.

The Future: A Theatre of Teamwork

I see a future where tech experts join theatre groups as key creative partners. "Tech rehearsals" might happen months before casting, giving time to

try out new tools. AI could offer set design ideas, but human designers will make the final picks. The goal will be to mix in tech without letting it take over — tech as a tool, not the whole show; as a helper, not the boss.

In this future, a new director could put on *Antigone* with holograms that change from old ruins to digital cities, while real actors still face age-old questions about power and doing what's right. The cool part won't just be flashy effects, but how those effects shine a light on the human heart of the story.

Epilogue: Lessons from St. Petersburg

As I left *Mr. Vertigo* that night in 2011, I experienced the uncommon thrill of glimpsing the future in its early stages. The shows I watched didn't focus on tech taking over human creativity; instead, they showcased how tech could fade into the background helping to tell stories and evoke feelings. Theater will survive this wave of new ideas just as it survived kerosene lamp lighting, the proscenium arch, mics, and automated stages. The human heart, which beats under every show, is its longest-lasting technology. If we keep this in mind, the stage will stay — whether candles or holograms light it up — a spot where we come together in the darkness to watch each other's dreams unfold.

***RAVINDER KAUL**, an acclaimed cultural critic from India, has devoted over four decades to the rich tapestry of theatre and literature. His voice has resonated in national and international forums, from Europe Theatre Prize sessions in Italy, Poland, Russia, and Greece, to Cultural Summits in Abu Dhabi, China and Russia. As a theatre expert, he has penned influential papers for leading journals like* Critical Stages *and acted in and directed over 30 plays. He is a member of the International Association of Theatre Critics. Honoured with multiple awards, Kaul continues to be a vital presence at global cultural platforms.*