

# **InstaStan – FaceBrook – Brecht+: A Performer Training Methodology for the Age of the Internet**

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# **InstaStan – FaceBrook – Brecht+: A Performer Training Methodology for the Age of the Internet**

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What do we do with a cohort of student-performers who show more interest in Instagram than Konstantin Stanislavski, in Facebook than Peter Brook and in Google than Bertolt Brecht? Based on our experience of working with second year BA (Hons) Performance and Media students at the University of South Wales, this paper aims to provide a performance training methodology for the age of the internet. In particular, it focuses on our approach to creating a laboratory style training experience, engaging student-performers in critical-creative processes as both participants and facilitators of creative practice. We argue that this exploratory and experimental journey of using social media and online platforms in live performance allows student-performers to make strong connections between everyday digital tools and theatre and performance methods and techniques. Additionally, we ask questions about what forms these laboratories may take in the future: What would a StanChat laboratory look like? How can we incorporate InstaStan, FaceBrook and Brecht+ into our training practices for digital performance more broadly?

Keywords: Brecht, Brook, cyberformance, digital performance, iGeneration performers, performer training, Stanislavski, social media

## **Introduction**

This paper explores our practical approach to performer training in the internet age with specific reference to social media. We use the term ‘social media’ not only to refer to popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat, but also in a broader sense to include ‘any technology that allows two-way interaction between artists and audiences/participants’ (Hadley 2017, p.8). Social media offer digital stages (or cyberstages) on which ‘drama is performed using video, photographs, blogs, link sharing and textual engagement from characters’ (Wotzko and Carroll 2009, p.168). As highlighted by Bree Hadley (2017, see also Blake 2010), the use of social media in theatre and performance has been seen as a ‘game changer’. The interactive and real-time character of social media, as well as the co-creative and collaborative spaces they create – a type of virtual stage (cyberstage) – have changed the way audiences engage with theatre and performance. Theatre spectators of the internet age can now follow, tweet, share, like and comment, turning social media into an extension of a live event. In the pre-internet era, their reactions, thoughts and responses were, for the most part, hidden in the darkness of the auditorium. They can now engage with and often become active participants who have a contributing role within the live performance. This article discusses social-media-informed (or digital) strategies for performer training and online interaction between performers and audiences/participants. In particular, we explore how social media conditions our own performer training methodology and the way we perform.

New and exciting methods for performer training, built on collaboration and the awareness of performance-making as a democratic practice, can emerge when seen in light of each other. In particular, we draw inspiration from practitioners such as Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook and Konstantin Stanislavski, as well as using our habitual

interactions with the internet as performers and audience alike. Although the proposed methods – InstaStan, FaceBrook, Brecht+ – cannot replace studio-based practice and training, they can be used as an extension to more ‘conventional’ actor training and as a way of engaging iGeneration performers, also known as Generation Z, or those who grew up with a smartphone or tablet in hand (Schneider 2015). This is particularly the case with reference to Brecht’s training and rehearsal methodologies and the V-effect, Brook’s collaboration techniques and Stanislavski’s character-building approach. Forged through an experimental pedagogy, historical performer training frameworks and principles of creative exploration, we suggest that mobile devices can engage rather than distract performers. Indeed, in some cases it is the very immediacy of these digital tools and spaces that lend themselves to the responsive/improvisational nature of training that we – performers, teachers and directors – seek to work with. These practices are designed to enable performers in creative experimentations and an artistic endeavour that does not always have to be goal-oriented.

Our approach to performer training is holistic in the sense that it encourages exploration and engagement with all aspects of performance-making from designing, planning and devising to rehearsing and performing for a live audience. We argue that social media gives performers ways of using the internet and digital applications as tools for rehearsing and performance documentation, inviting creative experimentation instigated by artistic inquiry between performer, audience and technology. Although informed by traditional forms of actor training and performance-making, we aim to re-imagine existing methodologies for the internet age, drawing attention to the possibilities of digital tools, spaces and forms for audience interaction. We combine traditional rehearsal and performance practices with apps and social media, which for

the most part constitute the first language of a new generation of performers (the iGeneration) and belong to their daily practice and spaces.

### **Brecht+: ‘Inspired Auto-didacticism’, an Intermedial and Interdisciplinary approach to Performer Training**

We have adopted a (cyber-)Brechtian style of performer training, turning both the performance space and the digital tools we use into a laboratory for experimentation and learning. Brecht’s ensemble-oriented theatre created a space where experimentation and learning occurred on the basis of collaboration rather than a pre-formed concept completely controlled by a dictator-director (Weber and Munk 1967–68, Barnett 2013, p. 130, Barnett 2015, p.162). We thus approach training as facilitators of an exploratory journey – a form of ‘inspired auto-didacticism’ (Camilleri 2015, p. 23), where student-performers lead the training process based on their own interests, adapting the sessions for the specific needs of the participants. Student-performers are invited to develop their work and experiment using their current knowledge, skills and tools in combination with new propositions from the training sessions. iGeneration student-performers have a better knowledge and understanding of social media and their tools than their instructors, allowing them to contribute to the training process in a constructive way. For instance, our student-performers are more familiar with Snapchat than us, enabling them to develop Snapchat performance possibilities and practices in their training. This is achieved through exploring and engaging with a variety of online and digital platforms, including virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life, The Palace), streaming media (e.g. Skype), purpose-built platforms (e.g. UpStage, Waterwheel Tap) and popular social media (e.g. Twitter, Chatroulette), as well as digital performance theories and concepts such as liveness, mediatisation, intermediality and transmedia storytelling.

This theoretical understanding is important because it trains student-performers to understand, contextualise and respond critically to their own practices.

Our student-performers are ‘bombed’ with and ‘exposed’ to a wide range of digital and online performance disciplines and practices, including but not limited to digital performance, cyberformance, telematic performance and live cinema (see Table 1). The intermedial and interdisciplinary character of new media performance practices allows them not only to explore digital and cyber-practices from different perspectives, such as theatre, film, television and live art, but also to develop boundary-crossing performance skills:

The use of computers in the performing arts does not merely add a new tool to an old discipline. It challenges some of our most basic assumptions about performance. First, it blurs the boundaries between performance disciplines. [...] Second, it blurs the boundaries between scholarship and creative practice. (Saltz 2004, p. 129)

Intermediality and interdisciplinarity facilitate a comprehensive understanding (Newell 2007) and enable student-performers to develop ‘subskills’ by working across media and disciplines, by synthesising them (Spelt *et al.* 2009) in a creative setting. [Table 1 near here]

Inspired by Brecht’s directorial practice, we gave critical thinking and practice, (cyber-)documentation, feedback, and (cyber-)collaboration a significant role in our (lab) approach to performer training. Brecht’s work was intended to ‘provoke’ discussion, not to ‘dominate’ it (Barnett 2013, p. 135), and his directing methods were closely tied to his dialectical understanding of the world (Mumford 2009, Barnett 2013). As facilitators of the training process it is important to focus on awakening student-performers’ critical thinking and practice. Our sessions aim to ‘provoke’ discussion around key digital performance debates, including ‘liveness and mediatisation’. Most

importantly, student-performers are invited to build online blogs and reflect on their own artistic work, a useful exercise for contextualising and creating critically thinking practice. Online blogs and websites provide linear and non-linear spaces which allow student-performers to document and archive their rehearsal processes, link different sections and platforms, and create ‘performative writing’ pieces. Referring to the performative aspect of Brecht’s writings, in particular *Messingkauf* (or *Buying Brass*), Cohen Ambrose defines ‘performative writing’ as ‘any piece of writing that not only describes the practical application of theoretical ideas or concepts, but also performs its own theories’ (2017, p. 44). In this respect, blogs in combination with social media platforms provide performative spaces for online audiences, allowing student-performers to produce multimedia and transmedia content, and reflect on their own work in a creative and performative way. For instance, one of our student-performers built a ‘3 Ps: Plan-Practice-Perform’ structure for her blog, based on the lessons she learned through her own practice, to advise fellow student-performers on using new technologies in performance to engage their audiences.

The internet offers a range of digital tools and platforms for documentation and archival purposes, including blogs and social media. Documentation was an important element of Brecht’s training methodology. Brecht used recording methods, such as *notate* (notes) to train young theatre directors and *modellbücher* (modelbooks), a series of photographs with captions detailing specific gestures and positions for each production (Mumford, 2009, p. 44). *Notate* were written by Brecht’s assistants as a training exercise and combined description, analysis and reflection. Likewise, much theatre and performance training in Higher Education deploys reflective journals/blogs as assessment tasks for describing, analysing and reflecting on the student-performers’ rehearsal process. As David Barnett highlights, Brecht’s notes ‘are not just records of

rehearsals, but writings that seek to get inside the process, to account for why a decision has been made or why it has been discarded' (2015, p.163). According to Mumford, Brecht used these blog-like and album-like documentation methods mainly for 'pedagogical purposes' as a 'dialogue between theoretical commentary, playwriting, and staging' (2009, pp. 44, 49) rather than as a means of recording performance. Thus, blog- and album-like social media, such as Instagram and Flickr, could serve as dialogic performance training platforms. Owned by Facebook and linked with Twitter and Tumblr, Instagram allows photo- and video-sharing, provides collage and montage tools for editing and adding captions, while it archives the photos in a set of three columns and allows audiences to like and comment. As an archival space and documentation tool, Instagram opens new polymorphic possibilities for dialogic performance training that need further investigation.

Our approach to critical thinking and practice extends to self-evaluation, observation and feedback practices. Student-performers are invited to observe and give feedback to each other, while they are also constantly encouraged to self-evaluate their work. Brecht also sought feedback from less-experienced and less-qualified sources, such as young audience members, theatre technicians and even his driver (Barnett 2013, p. 135, Weber and Munk 1967–68). By using social media to connect and interact with audiences, student-performers receive feedback from different sources during their rehearsal process, as well as during the actual performance due to the real-time character of those digital interactions. Facebook and Instagram live streaming provide tools for visual (emoticons), textual (chat) and audiovisual (Instagram Two-person Live) responses from spectators.

Social media make feasible Brecht's (1964 [1932]) utopian vision of altering radio from being an apparatus for distribution into an apparatus for communication:

That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers. (Brecht 1964 [1932], p. 52)

The call by BBC News to ‘share your experience by emailing’ and the features of online platforms and social media to comment and reply, do allow listeners to speak and hear, to engage in discussions and debates with each other, to form public-like spaces: ‘[t]he internet is the new agora, a meeting point for politics to be discussed and ideas to be shared’ (Papagiannouli, 2016, p. 14).

The interactive character of social media allows performers not only to interact remotely with their audiences, but also with one another. Student-performers build their own Facebook groups, use Skype and other online platforms to develop their work. These are used mainly as rehearsal space extensions, allowing them to follow up and progress their work remotely. We will explore cyber-collaboration in more detail in the next section with reference to Peter Brook’s collaborative practices.

Moreover, engaging with and studying those online public-like platforms helps student-performers understand Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (V-effect) strategies, such as ‘fixing the not but’ (Brecht’s strategy to identify contradictions between the actor and the character; Mumford 2009, pp. 66-67) and *Gestus*. Social media platforms are flooded by contradictions, debates and different perspectives. They also provide stylised forms of written language that embody social structures in a similar way as Brecht’s stylised acting of *Gestus* aimed to demonstrate social class in relation to body language (Mumford 2009, p. 54, Bradley 2006, p. 6, Barnett 2011, p. 29). Written language can reflect social structures in different ways, from the choice of words to repetition of commonly-used phrases, to spelling mistakes and modes of writing (i.e. formal or informal), to the use of language. This is well demonstrated in comments by supporters

of Golden Dawn, the neo-Nazi, far-right nationalist party in Greece, who post nationalistic and ‘hate-speech’ content on social media that often contains spelling and grammatical mistakes, reinforcing the stereotype of the uneducated Golden Dawn supporter.

### ***Practical Exercise: Exploring Mobile Phones***

The following set of introductory exercises gives student-performers the opportunity to explore different ways of using their mobile phones, in particular the in-built camera and text-based applications, to generate performance material. These exercises adapt familiar ones from theatre, such as walking around the space and freewriting, as well as introduce Brecht’s montage and collage techniques and Antonin Artaud’s ideas of ‘body without organs’ and the ‘double’. Like Brecht’s use of collage and montage to create discontinuity and build polymorphic spaces based on tableau aesthetics (Mueller 1987, Doherty 2000), student-performers create their own polymorphic spaces using their mobile phone as props on stage and mobile phone applications as cyberstages (see Figure 1). [Figure 1 near here]

- (1) *Phone-camera as eye extension.* Walk in the space with purpose and then use the mobile phone video camera as an eye extension tool, meaning that participants should look only through their camera screens. Although no peripheral vision is lost (unless VR mobile sets or glasses are used), participants should centre their vision on the live camera image of the space on their screens. Participants watch the recordings from their phones and discuss how the use of phone-camera as eye extension affects their walking and their relationship to other people and other objects in the space.

- (2) *Phone-camera as a frame.* In groups of five or six, participants use their mobile phones to frame specific parts of a participant's face/body captured on video or photographic image. Participants place their phones on the floor in such a way that re-creates the actual body of the subject they filmed and watch the recordings. They are then asked to move the phones around and create different collages, mixing different subjects and exploring what different 'creatures' they can create with their recordings.
- (3) *Freewriting using different media.* Freewrite for five minutes using a paper and a pen, followed by a freewriting exercise using the mobile phone. Participants then discuss the differences between the two freewriting exercises, including the streaming quality of the different media. Participants either express a preference for hand-writing or phone-writing and they argue that the change of media alters the context of the text. For instance, if they use the messaging tool, the written piece takes the form of a text message to the specific recipient.
- (4) *Editing text for specific platforms.* Following the freewriting exercise, participants choose one of the two written works to adapt for specific platforms, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. Participants need to take into consideration the following questions: What question does each platform pose? (i.e. Facebook asks 'what's on your mind?', while Twitter asks 'what's happening?') What different languages and tools does each platform employ? Who are the audiences for each platform? What tools do they offer, such as hashtags (#) and GIFs, and how can they be incorporated and become a key element of those texts?

To further explore these practices, participants can be given time to collaborate on co-creating in groups a short piece of performance based on these exercises. This is

important because it allows student-performers to experiment in a safe space and to use their own interests, knowledge and skills in a creative way.

### **FaceBrook: (Cyber-)Collaboration**

As discussed in the previous section, social media offer a very direct means of sharing and connecting with diverse collaborators and remote audiences. Even in the writing of this paper, we have communicated, found meaning and explored teamwork within a shared virtual space (Googledocs), which was a useful creative tool for inspiring our written and practical outputs. This activity has not replaced face-to-face conversation but it has provided a productive and creative means of connection, conversation and reflection in a space that has the capacity to capture written text, images, links, videos and documented conversations. This practice simulates Brook's thoughts on 'the empty space': '[we] can take any empty space and call it a bare stage'; someone enters this empty space whilst someone else is present, 'and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged' (1996, p.9). Brook is referring to a literal, physical meeting place here, but we have found that this same inventive and imaginative connection can be initiated within a virtual (cyber-) space. The performative nature of Googledocs was enhanced by the sense of co-presence when we were both online at the same time. We could see each other's writing process in real-time, with the style and flow of writing, deleting, re-writing and editing almost creating a live performative act.

During a post-workshop discussion with Upstart Theatre's Tom Mansfield and student-performers on *Phone Home: London, Munich, Athens* (2017), we reflected on the realities of companies turning to digital platforms to collaborate and discuss their works in progress – primarily as a means of generating and facilitating creative ideas,

but also as a way of working around the expense of physical rehearsal spaces. In this context, virtual spaces are not only useful as a means of gathering ideas collaboratively and engaging in creative discussions, they also function for the very practical purposes of stimulating and sharing conversations through text and audio-visual material for companies who create work without a ‘home’ studio or space.

Web and mobile applications such as Pinterest serve as tools for collating images and links to visual sources, which as interactive platforms offer various opportunities for creating virtual mood boards that might inspire both design and performance choices. Creating this online network suggests that we can generate a democratic means of expressing and sharing meaning, as advocated by practitioners such as Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, who in their Viewpoints exercises (2006), attempt to develop shared vocabularies for performance-making based on collaboration. We suggest that incorporating social media platforms in rehearsal and performance offers one way of establishing shared techniques and vocabularies that are built upon non-hierarchical intentions. Collaborating via such platforms means that performers have collective ownership of their work and that rehearsal and production processes do not abide by the interests of a single individual or authority. Introducing technology as a means of communication and experimentation and embedding these platforms as a central tool in our workshops fulfils our intention to frame collaboration as a non-hierarchical exchange between student/teacher and the participants themselves. Technology – and more specifically social media – allows us to create and collaborate in an environment where the participants do not rely solely on the teacher or director as transmitter of knowledge or instigator of creative exchange. Rather all participants have the tools and the vocabulary to suggest how and what they explore, experiment with and create in collaboration with the other participants online.

One example of a performance that employed this approach to making and performing was a student theatre production called *Lost in Translation* (Figure 2), which took place at the University of South Wales in March 2018. The piece sought to engage its audience in a murder mystery style production wherein audiences could access evidence and speak directly to the suspects being held for the crime. The unique take on this project was that three out of five of the student-performers did not have English as their first language. The company involved a student whose first language was Welsh, one whose first language was Greek and one whose first language was Chinese. Following a short, compressed creative process that involved exploring technology as a creative tool in rehearsals, the company decided to present details about the ‘suspects’ via Instagram platforms that they had used and edited throughout the making process. The image photo-sharing quality of Instagram meant that participants who do not speak English as their first language could interpret and make sense of the narrative action via visual language rather than written or spoken word. [Figure 2 near here]

The students also used Google Translate as a means for audiences to interview the suspects, wherein student-performers would engage audience participants in a discussion about the murder inquiry via the two-way instant speech translation, and type to translate features of the Google Translate app and web tool. Audience members would either type or speak out the question in English and then translate it into the first language of the ‘suspects’. In some cases, audience members could speak the question in English and the translate app would repeat it in the performer’s first language.

The combination of browsing the characters’ Instagram profiles and communicating with the performers via Google Translate meant that participants had an active role in the performance. They had the freedom to explore as much or as little of

the narrative as they liked, independently or in groups. Not all audience members were competitive in their endeavour to find the correct answer. Instead, during the post-show discussion, several audience members suggested that they were more interested in interviewing, talking with and hearing the witnesses/performers' stories through Google Translate and their mobile phones than they were in trying to solve the crime.

Peter Brook tells us that 'the only thing that all forms of theatre have in common is the need for an audience' (Brook, 1996, p. 127), that the human connection brought about by the co-presence of audience and performer is central to creating theatre. Regardless of whether performers share the same physical space as the audience or whether (cyber-)connections emerge within a shared virtual space, the emphasis on audience awareness for the performer remains central in rehearsal and performance. If performance relies on the participation of others, how might the performer make a meaningful connection with the audience in a virtual space? And, taken one step further, how does the performer invite a response from participants and work with them as creative partners? These questions of collaboration are core to our investigation of performer training methodologies for digital and experimental forms. This is why we work *with* rather than *for* the students.

The process of discovery in these practices – about the relationships built and experiences shared – are typically more meaningful than looking at the end result. In their book on acting for screen, for example, Tom Cantrell and Christopher Hogg insist that

[T]here exists a long-standing critical tendency within screen acting research to prioritise the analysis of the end performance products over an understanding of the professional or artistic processes on the part of the actor' (2017, p. 2).

This is also true of the role of collaboration in performer training for new technologies.

We often overlook the meaningful contributions and connections that are developed when performers, directors, technicians and technologies work together in a process that is always and inherently driven by questions, trial and error, and the desire to discover more. These experimental practices are lost if we look solely to traditional forms of acting training, such as acting for camera, screen and stage, which sometimes disregard taking risks in favour of playing it safe and generating familiar outputs. Contra to methods that encourage predictability and performance-making in a more straightforward manner, we promote traditional forms of performer training as a starting point for asking questions, opening ourselves up to the possibilities of collaboration, not knowing things and sometimes getting lost.

In this sense, we emphasise process-driven rather than performance- or goal-oriented practices. The former place the performer at the heart of all aspects of production in order to capture what Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke suggest is sometimes missing in training actors for screen:

The mediated status of performance elements has led observers to elide the training, experience and creativity that actors bring ... [O]ften over-looked is the bank of knowledge and experience that actors draw on to produce the gestures, expression and intonations that collaborate and combine with other cinematic elements to create meaning. (cited in Cantrell and Hogg, 2017, p. 2)

For us, the emphasis on creative agency, collaboration and awareness of audience as potential participant are all core elements to performer training and new technology. Working with student-performers through exploratory, experimental and improvisational means is as important in our methods as retraining our bodies and devices for creative purposes. This is something we have tried to capture in the two exercises below.

### ***Practical Exercise: Snapchat improvisation and hashtags***

The White Tent Company is a performance collective that has emerged from our working with students in the ways outlined in this article. As a company committed to exploring performance and engaging audiences in different and imaginative scenarios, they use various exercises and tools derived from their laboratory-style learning in our workshops. Because the company predominantly work with audiences as participants/characters, role play and improvisation constitute a key part in their devising process. One exercise they use in their workshops and production processes centres on the character and storytelling possibilities of the social media app Snapchat. Snapchat is typically used by individuals to share and upload images or stories. It involves a plethora of creative tools ranging from voice changers, filters, special effects, time, date, temperature and location details, face swap features, and various other props and backdrops. The app can be used independently as a way of character development through solo improvisation or role play, which can then either be shared publicly or kept private. Alternatively, The White Tent Company advises that Snapchat can serve as a platform for collaborative storytelling, which involves playing with and considering multiple roles, improvisation, and continuing to respond and generate material as the process unfolds.

- (1) *The White Tent Company's Snapchat Storytelling.* Make a personal story or group chat on Snapchat using your camera and the drawing tool. The aim of the exercise is for a group of individuals to create a narrative using their surroundings and stickman figures, which are drawn by the users. In turn, each person takes a picture of a location and adds characters, objects, etc, using the drawing tool, uploading it to their group chat for the other members to work from. The next person then takes control of the story and draws the next

snapshot of action based on their location. The narrative can twist and turn, depending on who is in charge of the snapshot of action. You can then download the story as a short film, or as an episode for a stickman series (see Figure 3).

[Figure 3 near here]

- (2) *Hashtags and making connections.* The next exercise can be used for both character-building and storytelling practice. Take any subject matter – a theme or idea – and create it into a hashtag for posting on Instagram, which is predominantly a visual platform. This exercise can span various different visual forms (static image, live stream, recorded video) on one platform, thereby reinforcing the playful and experimental qualities of performance-making. Hashtags are a form of metatagging designed to identify and connect individuals, blogs and posts with a common theme or specific content. This practice encourages the retraining of our devices and interactions with social media, developing a character-led, story-driven or one-off aesthetic practice. Content should be uploaded daily (where possible) and posts can be either public or remain private for personal reflection. BuzzFeed's *Romeo and Juliet* Insta Film uses tags to connect people, stories and concepts. The story is set in Verona High and is brought to audiences via posts from juliet\_bythebook, paris\_not\_perez, mercutie\_yo, queen\_tybalt and hopeless.romeo, to name just a few. Each profile represents one of the core characters from Shakespeare's play and allows the story to unfold via images, videos, and instastories, as well as via the characters' tags, posts, and their direct addresses to camera. The direct addresses mirror Shakespeare's use of asides in performance, which is another useful way of thinking about how performers might use traditional forms of storytelling within their social media practices.

## **InstaStan: Building and Exploring Characters Online**

Another key element of our cyber-approach to performer training is the use of social media as a method of character exploration and for digital self-reflection. Building a character's profile on social media is a useful exercise for generating and exploring new characters/personas and for revisiting and re-exploring characters. By building characters' profiles on social media and posting messages 'as if' the characters, student-performers engage with Stanislavski's 'magic if' and his system of using the imagination to build and explore a character. Rebecca Wotzko and John Carroll (2009) recognise the potentials of character-building on social media to 'aid the development of characters for a traditional theatre setting' (2009, p. 178). As they argue, building a character's detailed profile on social media increases its depth and fosters authenticity. Answering a Facebook character profile's questions, as well as the posted question 'What's on your mind?' helps student-performers to use their imagination and Given Circumstances to build their own characters and question what their characters want (see Table 2). On the other hand, Stanislavski's questions 'Why do I want it? How will I get it?' and 'What do I need to overcome?' can be useful for student-performers to make them think about and articulate questions such as 'Why Do I share it on Facebook/Instagram/Twitter?' 'How will I attract the interest of social media followers?' and 'What do I need to do to get more comments, likes and shares?' These could be used both to assist them build a narrative around their characters' posts, as well as to articulate a methodology for engaging with their online audiences.

Student-performers have used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat to create digital footprints of their characters in different ways. One of the student performances at the University of South Wales in December 2017 centred on a fake Facebook account that was created to mislead audiences and make them 'friend' the unknown person, who was listed as a University of South Wales student. The

performance immersed participants in a cyber-escape room environment through Facebook, where they had to answer four questions linked to information available on co-participants' Facebook accounts. The aim behind these questions was to raise awareness about cybersecurity, online safety, and most importantly about sharing and giving access to personal information to unknown people through social media. The correct answers revealed a room number where all participants met for the conclusion statement. The performance shocked participants and made them rethink their use of social media platforms and who they 'friend' on social media. To research and flesh out their characters, Stanislavski's action analysis method was vital during the rehearsal process, while the 'Hot-seating' exercise played a key role in the training and rehearsal process. Hot-seating is a rehearsal exercise that works with elements of Stanislavski's 'Given Circumstances', i.e. the contextual and environmental information about the character that we can glimpse and interpret from the written text. The exercise also considers what Stanislavski termed the 'Magic if' – an imaginative task that asks performers to consider how their character might react, feel or perform in any given situation. This workshop exercise can be applied to any character-building process (for stage or screen) and the forum quality of the task allows for all production members to take part in the improvisational process. Everyone involved in the play – character, actor, director or crew – can address questions to the performer in order to generate an improvised conversation, allowing the performer to respond to the given stimuli and explore their character. This process connects to Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's notion of creating new ideas from the text in order to construct the 'Play-world' (Bogart and Landau 2006, p. 167).

In digital performer training there are various tools and platforms available to develop this exercise further and, indeed, to take outside the physical rehearsal space.

Social media profiles and the live streaming and video qualities of Instagram (Instastory Live Video [with the possibility to invite audience members to have a two-person Live Video]), Facebook (Facebook Live) and Snapchat, all offer performers a way of exploring their character outside of the rehearsal space either independently or by responding to stimuli in much the same way as described above. Imagine the performer outside of the rehearsal studio, surrounded virtually by a community of performers in a closed group – these features can involve performers in a character development process online, within a digital world. Such social media platforms are intrinsically performative in nature, so why not work with rather than against them? These features can function as a creative space to share moments as a character as well as to explore relationships within the performance you are producing or rehearsing.

Indeed, social media can provide a stage for performance by offering online platforms for building and exploring characters' profiles. In the Royal Shakespeare Company's twitter adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*'s love story, *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010), performers built twitter accounts for their characters and posted 'as if' the character for a period of five weeks. Using small comments with 140 characters, the actors improvised around a given story grid, written by Bethan Marlow and Tim Wright. 'Followers' of the *Such Tweet Sorrow* characters unexpectedly started interacting with the performance through sharing tweets, videos and pictures, thus becoming active participants in the durational performance.

In 2014, artist Amalia Ulman created an online persona on Instagram by posting selfies to ask questions about gender as part of her *Excellences & Perfections*<sup>1</sup> online project. Instagram's format allows users to build personas and stories with images and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections>

videos, providing a helpful tool for performance exploration, documentation and staging. Recently Instagram introduced a form of interactive live streaming tool where users can invite their followers to join them and co-stream from remote locations in front of an audience.

Similarly, in the case of Etheatre Project's *Cyberian Chalk Circle* (2011) – a cyberperformance adaptation of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* – audience members directed questions during the course of the performance to Grusha, the digital performance's main character, via a chatbox on UpStage platform. Textual improvisation served here as a method to build the narrative of the piece by engaging the audience in an interactive process through improvised conversation during the actual performance:

<grusha says> Simon is the one i love [...]  
<grusha says> he is a soldier  
**oooooo!!**  
**from where?**  
<grusha says> an egyptian soldier  
<grusha says> we met at work  
**Oh!**  
<grusha says> we were both working for the government  
**at the pyramids?**  
**are u a soldier too?**  
<grusha says> me at the kitchen

*Text log of Cyberian Chalk Circle (2011) performance at the 11:11:11 UpStage Festival. Quoted exactly as it stands in the original, the lines beginning with '<grusha says>' are part of the performer's text, while the bold lines are typed by anonymous participants.*

As demonstrated above, engaging with social media platforms in this way does not always have to take place within the closed group rehearsal room environment. Because of the potential to record live, pre-record, edit and manipulate digital content, these platforms invite audiences to be part of the playworld, i.e. not only to engage with characters but even themselves become characters. These social media platforms do not just create a 'neat solution' to the lack of studio space and rehearsal time. Their features as digital performer training tools have two further benefits: firstly Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat, in particular, offer performers a visual and virtual tool

for exploring character and/or recording their journey/process as character/performer which can be shared and into which other cast members or directors can easily be invited; secondly, and above all, these platforms offer a way of generating and interacting with audiences.

### ***Practical Exercise: Hot-seating on Facebook***

Create a Facebook Profile for your character by exploring Stanislavski's 'Who Am I?'. Each answer/statement can be explored in more depth during a hot-seating via Facebook group-chat, allowing the performer to listen and respond to questions from other participants. This practice should encourage the performer to explore the Given Circumstances and the potential sub-text of their character in more detail (see Table 2).

[Table 2 near here]

### **Conclusion**

It is certainly the case that performer training has dealt with and responded to technological shifts, but there is further work to be done in exploring how digital practices have impacted the performer's role. We have shown that and how social media offer performers helpful tools for engaging audiences and exploring performance practices – whether by translating traditional exercises onto digital platforms or by creating activities anew. We have argued that incorporating the internet into both rehearsals and performance, making it central to the creative process, offers key extensions and innovations to traditional training approaches – not only in using new technologies to our advantage but also in shaping our everyday tools and modes of communication as artistic practice. We have shown how social media platforms may be used to 'update' familiar actor training exercises, and how practices such as blogging

and digital archiving can serve to document this process digitally. In addition to functioning as an accessible way of recording and reflecting on one's own creative process, documenting this through the internet with interactive blogs, images and video recordings, also means that individuals can share their work directly and remotely with other performers, cast members and directors.

Distinct from performer training exercises that 'refresh' and offer a digital take on existing methods for traditional forms of stage and screen performance, here we make a case for the need to address demands from digital performers seeking to create and present online characters for an online audience. Our training methods also take into account online audience engagement and participation. Performers need to become used to seeing social media and new technologies as a means of creating and sharing work for audiences who may not necessarily be found in traditional theatres. Rather than digital tools and platforms being used to stream or capture live theatre performances from live form to digital media, we have argued that social media actually offer a way of creating cyberstages for engaging audiences online. *Phone Home EU* was a project that created performances in three different theatres and connected the stories online for multiple live and online audiences, but the RSC's *Such Tweet Sorrow* differed in that the characters and narrative were both created and presented via social media platforms. An audience could interact with and have an impact on the characters' journeys in this and *The Cyberian Chalk Circle*. Writers and performers had to use their skills in improvisation and their knowledge of the character's subtext to respond to the participants' prompts.

For us, this is where platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat are useful. Their real time features connect individuals to other users, participants and audiences, offering direct and immediate possibilities for interaction and performance

experimentation, as well as opportunities for exploring and extending performance training online. These platforms combine fun filters for effects/backdrops, props and costume accessories, as well as the potential to add text, animated characters and information and time, date and location. Even if they are used solely for a rehearsal exercise, they extend the possibilities of traditional rehearsal practices instead of translating said practices from one form to another.

Further exploration is required for developing these initial practices and ideas into discrete laboratory-style workshops, methodologies and exercises. Such an investigation would require the continuation of our multi-perspective, experimental learning process: students learning from us and from each other, us learning from students, incorporating their varying levels of interest in and knowledge of social media forms. Such advances are only possible if we work *with* rather than *for* the students.

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## Tables and Figures:

Table 1. Online performance practices and examples

Terms	Platform/Technology	Artist/Company	Key Performance Example
<b>Digital Performance</b>	Various	Blast Theory	Karen (2014 with NTW)
	Cameras/Screens/Projections	Wooster Group	Route 1 & 9 (The last act) (1981)
<b>Cyberformance / Online theatre adaptations</b>	UpStage Platform (purpose build platform)	Etheatre Project	Cyberian Chalk Circle (2011)
	Twitter	Royal Shakespeare Company	Such Tweet Sorrow (2010)
	Second Life (virtual world/avatars)	SL Shakespeare Company	Twelfth Night (2009)
	The Palace (virtual world/avatars chat)	Desktop Theater	<a href="http://waitingforgodot.com">http://waitingforgodot.com</a> (1997)
	Internet Relay Chat (IRC)	Hamnet Players	Hamnet (1993)
<b>Telematic Performance (use of streaming and video conferencing applications)</b>	Skype	Upstart Theatre (with Sforaris and Pathos München)	Phone Home: London, Munich, Athens (2016)
	Life Streaming	Forced Entertainment	Quizolla (2013)
	Skype	Imploding Fictions	You Are Invited (2011)
	Purpose-build, downloadable application / Live streaming	Field Broadcast	Field Broadcast (2011)
	Purpose-build application – similar to Skype	Dries Verhoeven	Life Streaming (2010)
	Chatroulette	Merton and Ben Folds	Mertonian Chatroulette (2010)
	Web remotely controlled cameras	Parkbench	ArTisTheater (1994)
<b>Networked Performance (use of networks)</b>	Phone/Radio/Internet	Rimini Protokoll	Call Cutta in a Box (2008-13)
<b>Live Cinema</b>	Satellite	NLive	Hamlet (2015)
	--	Secret Cinema	Back to the Future (2014)
	--	Katie Mitchell	Forbidden Zone (2014)

Table 2. Facebook Profile questions that help explore Stanislavki's Who Am I? question.

Stanislavski Character's Question	Facebook Profile Questions
<p><b>Who am I?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add Work Experience</li> <li>• Add College/University</li> <li>• Add Secondary School</li> <li>• Places you've lived (Add Home Town)</li> <li>• Contact Info</li> <li>• Basic Info</li> <li>• Other Names (Do you have any other names?)</li> <li>• Relationship</li> <li>• Family Members</li> <li>• Interested in</li> <li>• Religious views</li> <li>• Political Views</li> <li>• Life events</li> <li>• Films</li> <li>• TV Programmes</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Phone camera as a frame

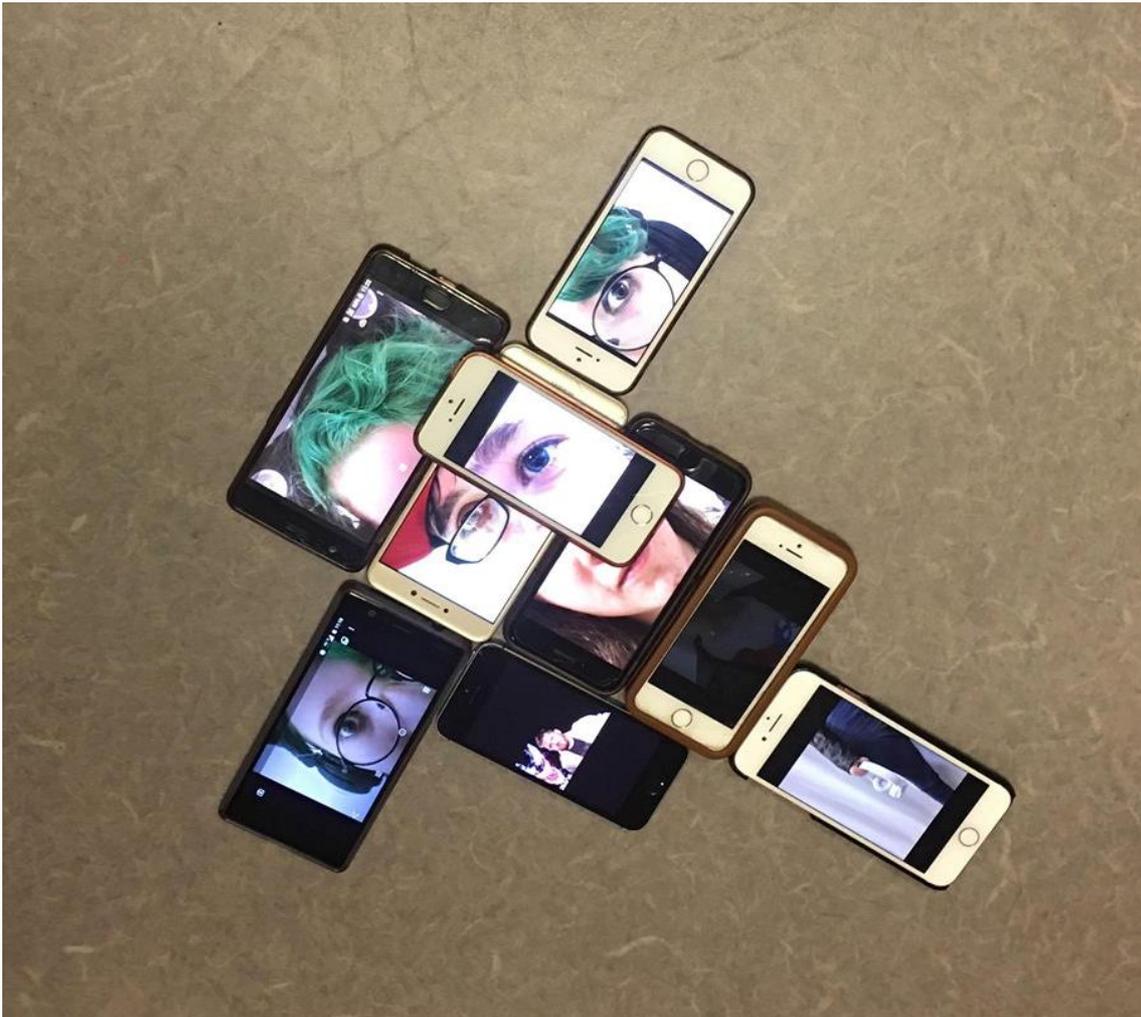


Figure 2. *Lost in Translation* March 2018



Figure 3. The White Tent Company Snapchat Practice

