

Mediation and the PandeTheatre Digital performativity in the smart staging of *Brilliant Mind*

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Abstract

One of the negative impacts of the pandemic on creative culture is new limitations imposed on interactive performance in theatrical production. Producers resorted to digitality to explore the potentials of smart staging. A new play titled Brilliant Mind is a case in point for its innovative use of digital alternatives to maintain interactive performativity in what the producers describe as “live theatre in digital landscapes”. The play was digitally performed online in 2021, and members of the audience were allowed to digitally explore parts of the set and interact with characters. This paper examines the play’s use of digital performativity as a form of mediation for pandemic-era theatre by unpacking its digital interactive strategies. The authors offer a close textual and visual analysis of their experience as audience members in addition to employing theatrical principles of psychodrama, as well as concepts of affect theory as an approach to visual communication.

Keywords

Affect, transcultural mediation, psychodrama, interactive theatre, audience participation

Introduction

Immersive theatre relies on a site-specific setting and interactive performance to reach out to audiences, by immersing them into interaction with performers in a given setting (Bouko, 2016). With the recent constraints imposed by the pandemic worldwide, audience participation and the immediacy of interactive performance were negatively impacted. However, producers and creators have resorted to digital solutions to attempt new possibilities of interaction and improvisation.

A new play titled *Brilliant Mind* attempts digital alternatives to maintain interactive performance in what the producers describe as “live theatre in digital landscapes” (Bergstrom, 2021). The play was digitally performed online through May and June 2021. On the play’s website, the creators emphasize their innovative experimentation with audience participation, stating “our creative incubator is disrupting how audiences experience storytelling” (Bergstrom, 2021). Created and written by a first generation Egyptian-American immigrant, Denmo Ibrahim, the play is directed and performed by an international cast. The play has a self-proclaimed aim of propagating intercultural diversity as the play revolves around the experiences of immigrants (Bergstrom, 2021). The play is live-streamed, and the audience members are allowed to independently explore parts of the set and interact through text messages and other means with characters from the play, personalizing their digital engagement and maintaining a balance between synchronicity and asynchronicity.

This paper examines the use of digital performativity as a form of mediation for pandemic-era theatre by closely examining the digital interactive strategies expounded in *Brilliant Mind*. The play follows a deceased man, Samir (played by Kal Naga) who watches his own funeral and how his family – daughter Dina (played by Denmo Ibrahim), son Youcef (played by Ramiz Monsef), and estranged ex-wife Hala (played by Torange Yeghiazarian) – react to his death. The play can be described using one of the key concepts in this paper: smart staging. This term is used by Ibrahim to define the innovative use of technology and mediation in the play, highlighting the significance of the live, online component where no two performances are the same and where the visual aspect is paramount (Gladstone, 2021). The idea of smart staging may be divided into the two parts of the term. The smart part, Ibrahim argues, is intended to reinvent the theatre for the digital world, “reimagined for [a] different platform” (Gladstone, 2021, para. 7). The staging part is what makes the technological aspect theatrical, for, Ibrahim wonders, “without staging, is it theater?” (Gladstone, 2021, para. 7). For the purposes of this paper, smart staging can be defined as the incorporation of communication technology, such as text messaging, in addition to the use of a digital interface, such as 3D viewing and online performance, for a theatrical work. As a mediational performance, the play uses digital interaction to engage the audiences. In other words, it employs the digitalization of immersive theatrical strategies as a form of *smart staging* that mimics the physical stage.

Aim of research

The purpose of this study is to unpack the potential of employing new mediational methods in theatrical presentation that stemmed out of the pandemic. We investigate whether these methods, which functioned initially as crisis-inspired solutions tapping into digital interaction, might have opened new connections and possibilities for digital performativity that can outlast the necessities of the pandemic context.

We attended the play twice on June 1 and 13, and we offer a close textual and visual analysis of our experience as audience members in addition to our critical analysis of the play, especially the role of asynchronicity.

The study uses the play as a case in point for digitalizing the theatre as a cultural institution during the pandemic; hence, PandeTheatre, and its potential for sustainable use in the post-pandemic digital cultural scene, thus positions smart staging as a possible contender for the future of digital performance and highlights the increasing role of digital mediation as a proponent for media culture.

Theoretical framework

For our study, we construct a conceptual structure based on theoretical principles that combine, on the one hand, psychological approaches to interactive theatre, and, on the other hand, recent understandings of cultural digitality. This theoretical framework that we introduce is motivated by the foregrounding of the psychological manifestations of interaction and visuality that contextualize mediational theatre, as well as the incorporation of digitality due to its pivotal role in the repackaging of media culture during the pandemic and beyond.

We begin the analysis of the play by employing theoretical principles of psychodrama, specifically Jacob Moreno's ideas on spontaneity and creativity, in addition to immersive theatre and art-based mediation. Maintaining the spontaneous aspect of digitality is of primary importance, as Ibrahim emphasizes, "a recording of theater isn't exactly theater" (Gladstone, 2021, para. 6). Next, we examine the play within the structure of affect, relying on Silvan Tomkins's theory, given its strong investment in emotive content and visual expressiveness. The visual aspect is integral to the play, as Ibrahim states that "if the visual is unimportant, why don't we just listen to it as audio?" (Gladstone, 2021, para. 7). We carry out our analysis adopting these principles within a digital framework, thus, tracing the intersectionality of digitalization and performativity.

Methodology

The article defines three approaches in their capacity as research methodology: psychodrama, affect, and digital performativity. Each approach is applied to the play to unpack the role of smart staging in actualizing a digital cultural experience.

Moreno's psychodrama

Writing much earlier than the digital age and its implications for the theatre, Joseph Moreno introduced principles that, by problematizing traditional performance, addressed the need for performative interactivity and immediacy, which are currently quintessential for digital performativity. Known mainly for his contributions to psychology by coining the term psychodrama and implementing it in therapy, Moreno's inspiration is derived from the theatre, where his focus on audience participation paved the road for his theories. As Scheiffele (1995) argues, Moreno "wants to smash the barrier between actor and audience, inspire the spectator to become active" (pp. 145–146).

It is important that Moreno regulated the immediacy of performance and interaction with the audience: "There are different degrees of involvement", not only that, but "also at different times throughout the performance" (Schieffele, 1995, p. 146). His advocacy of spontaneity, however, does not permit the audience to enjoy total unchecked power over the performance. The participation of the audience must be controlled and regulated to avoid "chaos". The calculated sense of involvement may lend itself to digitality, where the audience can enjoy a suggestive and a relatively noticeable level of involvement, but their engagement will always remain checked by the limitations of the digital interface.

As a psychologist, Moreno intended for the theatre to have a therapeutic effect. A long history of therapeutic notions has been linked to the theatre, as early perhaps as Aristotle's catharsis (Aristotle, 1961). Moreno's therapy, when it comes to the theatre, should be distinguished from the traditional medical term intended for mental health only (Scheiffele, 1995): It is more of a general term targeting not individuals suffering from mental health problems, but humanity at large. The therapy of psychodrama in theatre, for Moreno, is collective healing of the human condition, or as he puts it, "[a] truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind" (Moreno, 1953, p. 3). Interestingly, Moreno links spiritual and psychological healing with therapeutic theatre, as he states that "creativity and spontaneity affect the very roots of vitality and spiritual development, and thus affect our involvements in every sphere of our lives" (Moreno, 1973, p. ix). This makes it appropriate for our collective malady of the pandemic, and, therefore, makes it significant that psychodrama, in its healing potential, finds a place in the digital experience that was only intensified by the pandemic.

Affect

Affect as a method of research underlies the role of human emotive interaction with the surroundings of an individual. In that sense, it is possible to interpret it as a psychosocial means of communication. Affects, in their plural form, are therefore modes of communication that manifest the human capability of interaction. Affects are defined as the "surging capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies and emergencies" (Stewart, 2007, p. 1). Affect theory is traceable to Silvan Tomkins's psychological categorization of human emotive

responses to the stimuli of everyday life. According to The Tomkins Institute, the nine affects are either positive, described as inherently rewarding; negative, described as inherently punishing; or inherently neutral. The affects are double-termed, thus reinforcing the affect. The nine affects are:

- Distress-Anguish: The cry for help (inherently punishing)
 - Interest-Excitement: The pull toward mastery (inherently rewarding)
 - Enjoyment-Joy: The social bond (inherently rewarding)
 - Surprise-Startle: The reset button (inherently neutral)
 - Anger-Rage: The demand to fix it (inherently punishing)
 - Fear-Terror: The signal to flee or freeze (inherently punishing)
 - Shame-Humiliation: The self-protection signal (inherently punishing)
 - Disgust: The need to expel (inherently punishing)
 - Dissmell: The avoidance signal (inherently punishing).
- (The Tomkins Institute, n.d.)

Employing affect in research has lent itself to interdisciplinary approaches. Incorporating affect theory for literary criticism contends that “at its most basic, affect refers to the senses and the personal, to things that move not us, not only in extraordinary situation [...] but, most particularly, in the everyday and ordinary” (Berberich, 2015, p. 219). In a world of virtual communication, the role of affect evolves to incorporate virtuality. Virtual worlds are defined as “simulations that initially reproduce actual worlds and real bodies, but then take on a life of their own” (Shields, 2002, p. 22). It is possible to distinguish between the virtual and digital as technological representations of reality (Massumi, 2002, p. 135). One argument stipulates that

the virtual is inaccessible to the senses and can only be felt in its effects (a concept diametrically opposed to Shields’s), and digital technologies offer a weak connection to the virtual and always require analogue processes to be experienced and transduced in effect. (Kaisar, 2021, p. 147)

Affect poses an interesting challenge to the digital transformation of cultural representation. Studying the increasingly potent visual component of digitality, however, might be a return to the emotive power of affects, and might be one of the vehicles that bring affect to work with, rather than challenge, digital life.

Digital performativity

The concept of performativity progressed from the initial inception of language as a form of action rather than only informative utterances. It is the movement from descriptive use to inscriptive action. Focusing on gender, performativity is a marker of social change from a constructionist perspective, as it unpacks identity as a social construct (Butler, 1988). Performativity, insomuch as it is part of the study of economics, contributes to shaping markets (Callon, 1998). In further studies, it is seen as part of the socio-technical

context (Callon, 2007). In technology, cybernetics examines whether performativity has the potential to enable a new level of interaction among the human and the non-human (Pickering, 2010). By stretching signs to non-linguistic realms as well, deprivileging speech expands performativity to the non-linguistic (Derrida, 1988). With all the previous contributions to the development of performativity, it can then be understood as an expression actualized as a defining action, shaping and forming. As performativity lends itself to several interpretations and functionalities in various disciplines, it is interesting to examine its contemporaneity.

Performativity in the digital age induces action and shapes contexts as much as it forms content. The alignment of the intrinsic nature of performativity and digital presence is due to the shared feature of fluidity that characterizes what might be termed digital performativity. While digitalization as a process is undeniable for several practices, such as artistic, economic, or educational, it is possible to challenge the assumption that performativity has been digitalized. Rather, it is possible to see digital performativity as a seamless result of the fluidity of both concepts and their practices. Performativity emerged in its digital form much like it shaped aspects of economics, politics, social studies, technology, and other disciplines. As a mode of expression geared towards generative action, performativity is increasingly positioned as a primary mode of expression of the digital age.

Digital performativity can be distinguished from digitalization as a process. Digitalization relies on ascribing new features to established practices, such as banking, purchasing, selling, and security. Digital performativity, on the contrary, does not revolve around the concept of performativity adapting to digital presence. Performativity did not necessarily evolve to fit within a digital context. It is already inherently a form of digital communication by its very nature. Digital fluidity, the ability to increasingly transform daily practices into digital versions, and performative fluidity, the permeability of the concept in myriad fields and disciplines, merge together to bring about digital performativity as a steadily growing means of communication and expression in digital interactions.

The innate fluidity of digital performativity lends itself to areas of digital communication. Digital performativity is central to the evolution of digital communication. It provides access that individuals and marginally represented groups can utilize to connect, thus shaping the contribution and the type of content being disseminated in the digital age. It expands representation and identity formation and pushes boundaries of communication to the non-human. The features of digital performativity relay its impact on digital life as a shaper, a mirror, and an active ingredient of a multitude of forms of digital existence. Studying digital performativity can unpack the trajectory that digital communication is adopting as it becomes increasingly social and, at the same time, growingly personal.

Discussion of *Brilliant Mind*

This section explores *Brilliant Mind* through the perspectives of Moreno's theatrical psychodrama, Tomkins's affects, and digital performativity.

Psychodrama and suggestive audience participation

Moreno's call for spontaneous theatre revolves around audience participation, which effectively causes interaction among members of the audience and the cast of actors during the delivery of the stage performance. Moreno's theatrical insights are among the bases for his theory of psychodrama, where the immediacy and spontaneity of interaction produces a collective therapeutic impact on participants, enacted through the performance of roles and reactions to such roles. *Brilliant Mind* proffers a digital equivalent to Moreno's ideas, procuring some degree of audience participation and interaction, as well as a dramatic performance that offers a mock-psychodrama through the rapid unfolding of characterization.

The members of the audience are invited to participate in more than one way. Before watching the play, each member of the audience signs up on the play's website. Email correspondence recommends signing in at least 20 minutes before the play begins. Once signed in, the audience is encouraged to see Samir's house. Visiting the house is a 360° experience, and the audience can look at the furniture and explore the house. Hovering on an item would result in a pop-up message commenting on the item (Figure 1). Samir's house has furniture, but there are no actors there during the 360° visit. This places the audience in a position of spatial intimacy, as if we share the house with Samir and his family.

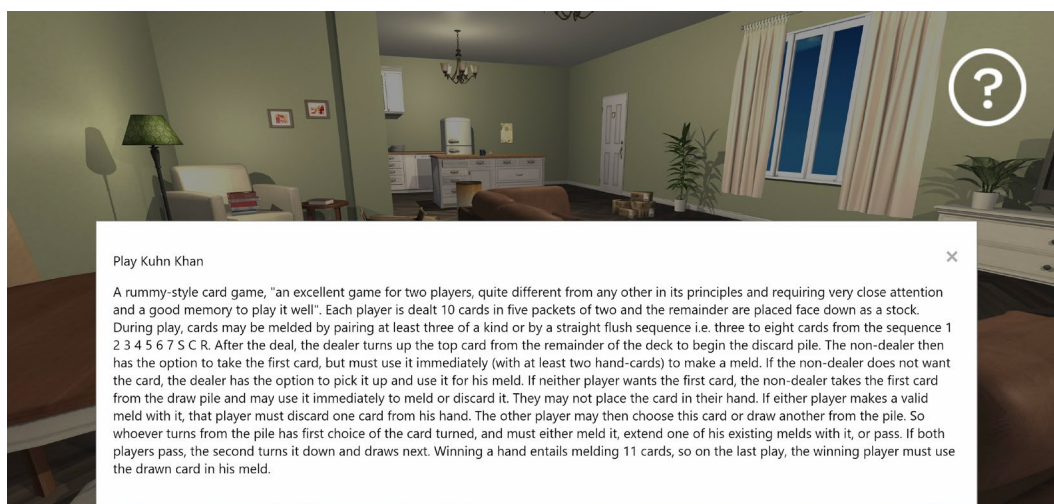


Figure 1. Samir's home in 360°

Narrative choice is another solid involvement of the audience. At certain times, the audience is offered a choice between two situations. The choice leads to one option of the play. The selection is made by displaying two pictures with a brief title, waiting for the member of audience to select an option. Once the audience chooses a path, the play resumes (Figure 2). In one selection, the daughter’s phone rings. We are faced by two options that determine who would be making the call. Either her mother is calling, or her children are. Choosing her mother, for instance, results in watching a rather tense conversation between the two characters.

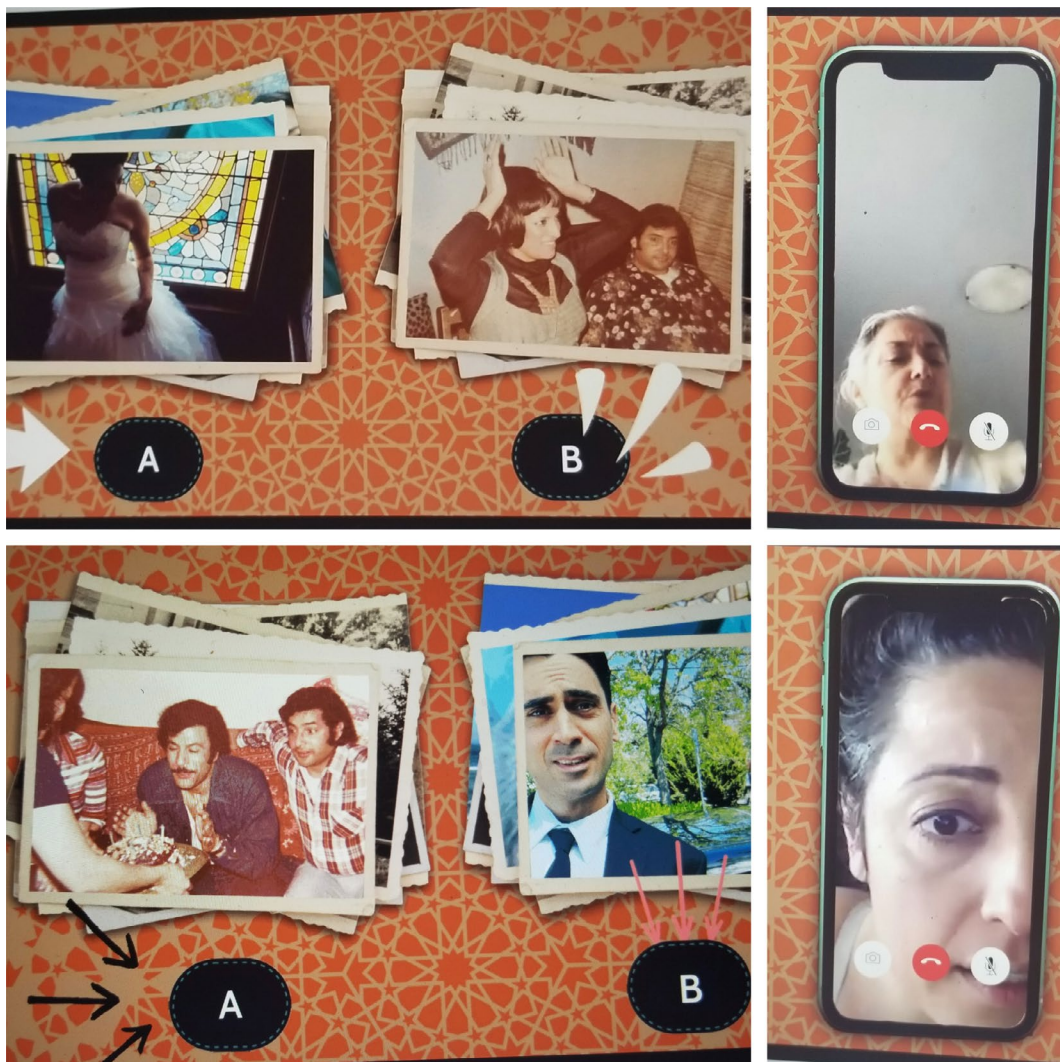


Figure 2. Narrative selection

Among the most innovative smart staging strategies featured in *Brilliant Mind* is Samir’s role. It is worth noting that his performance is the only live one in the play. He plays the

same role every show, while the rest of the play is recorded. The live connectivity to the audience is enhanced by another significant feature of the play: enabling the audience to exchange text messages with Samir. The audience can choose to receive text messages on their cellphones, and those who opt in are provided with a cellphone number under the name Samir El Mursi. Before the play starts, each member of the audience is texted a message welcoming them to the play (Figure 3).

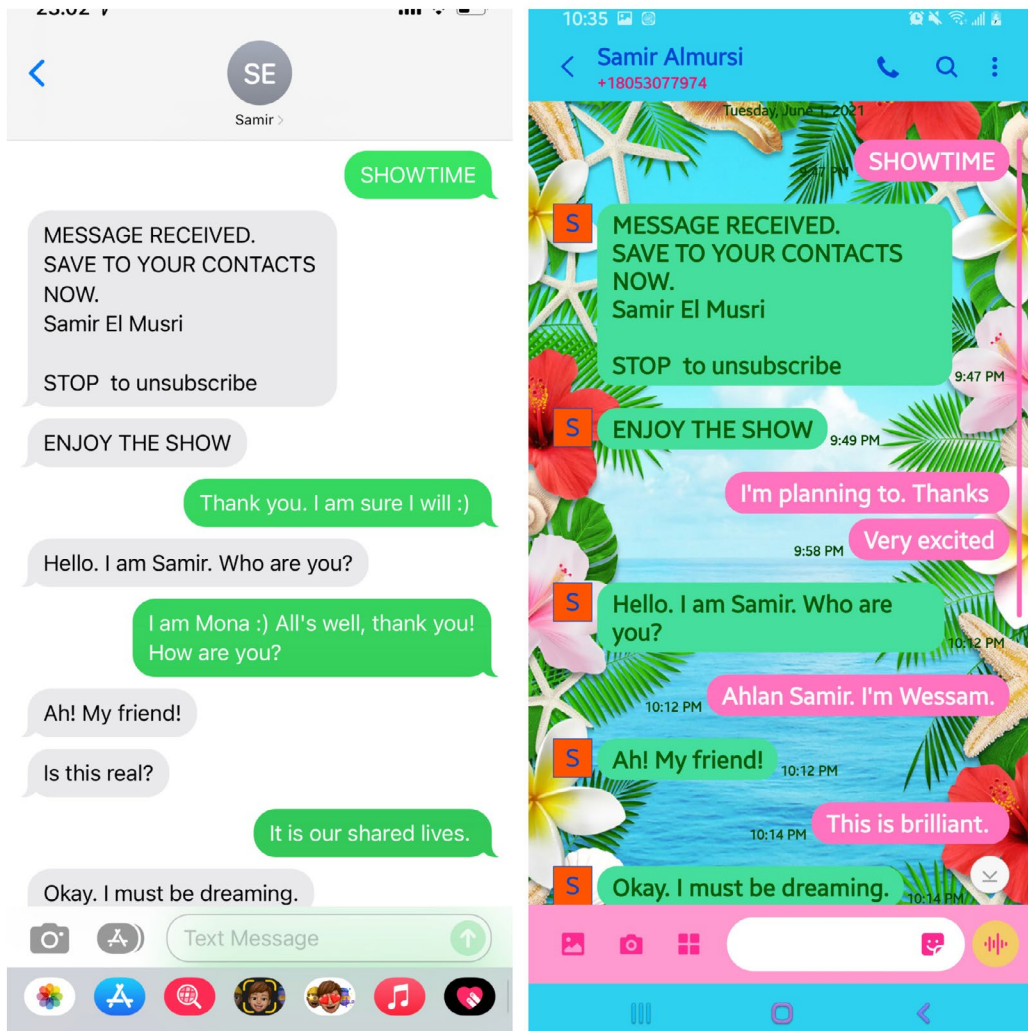


Figure 3. Text messages from Samir to the audience

Once the play starts, we receive our first message from Samir. The messages are synchronized with Samir’s performance and monologue on the digital stage. We see Samir on a hospital bed, presented as an animated illustration (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Samir on hospital bed in illustration

The screen goes black, then we are confronted by a close-up of Samir's eye looking searchingly at us. The camera zooms out and we see a perplexed Samir who does not know where he is. We receive a text from him asking, "Where am I?" Although nothing in the scene openly states where he is, we realize that Samir must be dead, because wherever he is – whether an afterlife or a transitional space between death and the afterlife – the place he is in seems like a traditional study or office, with an armchair, a desk, and a bookcase.

Text messaging remains the means of communication between Samir and the audience. As the play progresses, Samir shares personal anecdotes and experiences, such as photos from his childhood and of his father and his ex-wife (Figure 5). Watching his daughter and son argue and discuss family history, he texts the audience his comments, clarifying and adding details that explain some of the tension and family drama between

the siblings. For instance, he shows disapproval when his ex-wife favors their son over their daughter in her will. In addition to family issues, the play brushes with cultural and political innuendos. Samir texts a picture of the cover of one of Edward Said's books (1978), asking, "Do you know Edward Said?" in a quick homage to one of the iconic cultural figures of the Arab American diaspora.

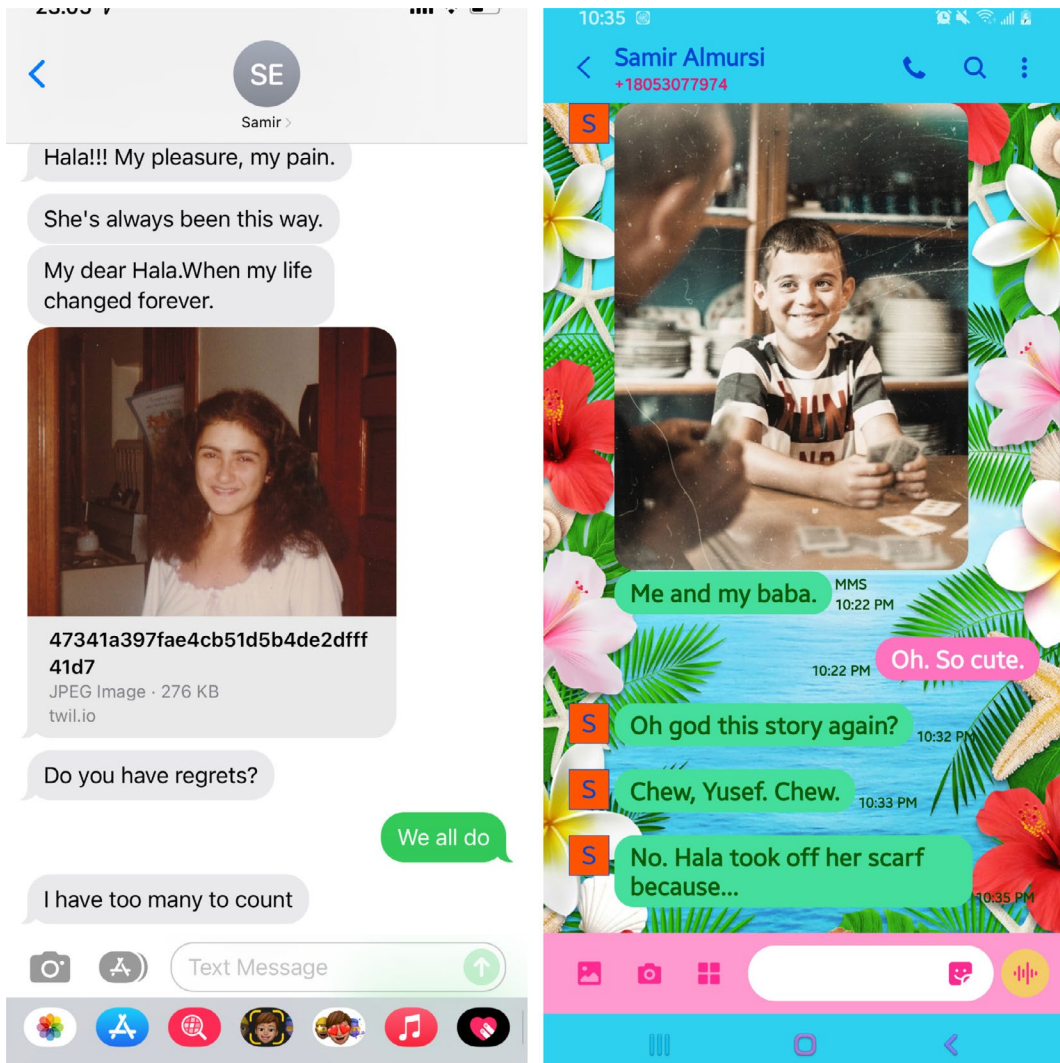


Figure 5. Samir's family photos sent in text messages

Apart from texting, Samir establishes immediacy with the audience through dialogue. While Samir's speeches are in reality monologues, since there are no other characters with him in his scenes, they are dramatically performed as dialogues, as he is mostly addressing us, the audience. Facing us through the screen, and delivering his questions or comments, full of exasperation or excitement, Samir insidiously posits us, the audience, as fellow

performers. By addressing us, whether through text messages or his monologues, we find ourselves digitally involved as performers.

According to Moreno (1953), psychodrama relies on the externalization of emotional problems, focusing sometimes on emotional triggers, mental stressors, and even traumatic experiences. The process is distinguished by its theatricality, complete with stage-like space and character interaction. *Brilliant Mind* digitalizes strategies of psychodrama by exploring conflict through confrontation among family members. The smart stage of the digital theatre is the space necessary for the action to manifest the polemic inner workings of the characters.

The collective revelation of a psychodrama session usually targets one person, where actors are role-players who perform situations and even characters that help the central figure achieve some form of release. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for the participants to all eventually become emotionally involved in the process, resulting in potential group therapy. It is interesting that all the major characters in *Brilliant Mind* present a literary mirroring of the structure of a psychodrama session. With Samir as the central figure of the session, the other characters – his family members – play a role in his increased awareness of his situation. In so doing, those characters come to terms with their personal frustrations and relationship problems as well. Samir's session, so to speak, is figuratively dramatized as his death. Realizing he is indeed dead is the grounds for mediation with the audience. On the other hand, responding to his death is the driving force for the plot progress and character development. Samir's symbolic, or metaphysical, realization of his death and his revival in a post-death state is akin to a psychological awakening and recognition of social and psychological issues that have complicated his relationships. As an observer from a distance, he begins to understand many of the issues he missed when he was involved. His off-stage presence is enacted as an on-screen presence in the digital experience of his presence behind a computer monitor. Samir's consciousness is visible to us through his monologues and his text messages.

Simultaneously, his daughter and son find themselves in a position where they have to grapple with their family history, childhood memories, sibling rivalry, and separate identities. As their personal and familial problems unfold through their dialogue, they not only bring forward their dead father's peace with himself, but they also forge a new future of mutual acceptance of their history and of each other as sister and brother. Issues such as their parents' separation, the sister's sexuality, and the father's indifference all surface repeatedly and rather heatedly in the discussions between the siblings. Their discussions, however, do not go unnoticed by the watchful father, Samir, whose presence is an interesting symbol of a muted patriarchy, as he can only comment and explain to the audience but can no longer interfere in his children's lives. Interestingly, we learn of the mother's sexist favoring of her son at the expense of her daughter. Gradually, the sister and brother reach a peaceful space where they air their differences. Samir reconciles with his past mistakes as he watches his children come closer to each other, and he is eventually ready

to let go after he watches his funeral. Even their mother in the end makes amends and apologetically talks to her daughter on the phone after she had initially favored her son in her will.

The psychodrama structure with Samir as the central figure benefits from the digital possibilities that enable Samir to interact with the audience via text messages. Samir sends his exclamations to the audience, commenting on family issues. The interaction is not one-sided. Samir goes so far as to text the audience a personal question: "Have you ever regretted something?" It is up to each member of the audience who received the text to respond with their personal stories, if they wish.

The play ends with the brother and sister driving away separately after Samir's funeral. They text each other amiably, promising to get together, emphasizing the success of the digital mock-psychodrama aspect of the play for the once-estranged siblings. The use of text messages between the sister and brother, with the contents of their texts to each other displayed on screen as the credits roll towards the end of the play, echoes the use of text messages to connect Samir with the audience throughout the play. The digital communication among the characters, and also with the audience, signals the powerful metaphor of connectivity that digital performativity plays in the psychological healing dramatized by the play.

Affective immediacy and proximity

Affective responses are intrinsically expected to be among the targeted reactions in a performance about family issues and death. This is further reinforced in *Brilliant Mind*, given its structure as an interactive theatrical production and its reliance on principles of psychodrama to enact a level of mediation with the audience.

The sustainability of affect throughout the play is maintained by mediation and digital performativity, with both forging a suggested or imagined sense of familiarity and personal interaction. It is explored how intimacy is increasingly implicated in digital spaces (Cockayne et al., 2017). While examining sexual intimacy, the concept of "folding the remote into the spatially immediate" (Cockayne et al., 2017, p. 1115) proved to be applicable to the role of spatiality in digital mediation, as it is expounded in our current study of *Brilliant Mind*. As such, it is notable that the level of affective digital intimacy, whether sexual or not, is procured through "entanglement and indivisibility of proximate and distance spaces" (Pain & Staeheli, 2014, p. 346).

Together, mediation and digital performativity form an experience of digitality that is capable of constructing an illusion of two factors that positively impact affect as an audience response: immediacy and proximity. Immediacy is actualized through mediation, granting the audience the suggestive power of interaction. This forms a personalized bond between each member of the audience and Samir in particular, due to strategies such as the exchange of text messages and Samir's direct speech and camera angles. Proximity – or more accurately, the suggestion of proximity – is garnered through the

close-ups not only of Samir, but also of his daughter and son. Being privy to their home – viewing different parts of it as they move from the front porch to the garage to the kitchen, charged with sometimes heated conversations that are deeply personal and emotional – makes good use of the private space of electronic devices that inherently already intensify a sense of digitalized proximity. This digitality of mediation and performativity fosters immediacy and proximity that are “suggestive of intimacy, and not intimate in and of themselves, being made distant through asynchronicity and mediated through digital technologies and space” (Smith & Snider, 2019, p. 45).

Immediacy is accomplished in *Brilliant Mind* through successful and recurrent mediation. The constant interaction with Samir cumulatively creates a sense of immediate communication, akin to the normalized mundane, everyday digital contact actualized by using text messages, video calls, and social media in the daily lives of the audience. This type of digital mediation is initiated early on in the play.

This is enhanced throughout the play by the careful consistency of Samir’s sharing of text messages, which form a growing illusion of personal acquaintance by using direct questions posed to individual members of the audience, eliciting responses about opinions on regret and choices, and even asking the audience if they were familiar with certain authors. Our responses, sent individually and separately, can exemplify how the responses of members of the audience would be received. Our replies showed up in the text exchange like ordinary text messages. There were no personalized responses to the messages, but other messages about new topics followed fairly quickly, maintaining a reasonable tempo of real-life texting. Probably using a chatbot or pre-set messages, the *Brilliant Mind* texting strategy created an illusion of exchanging text messages, relying on affect as a mental state formed by habitual practice.

In addition to texting, Samir’s metaphysical or psychological experience – depending on whether we interpret this last existential appearance of his life as a spiritual transition or subconscious delirium – helps push immediacy to a new edge, thus claiming another level of affect. During his stay in his room, Samir constantly speaks out his reactions to his surroundings. This ranges from his wondering where he is, to his experimenting with his newfound powers of asking for something only to find it falling from above to his grasp, not to mention his monitoring of his family’s discussions and finally watching his own funeral, which is interestingly presented offstage. Throughout Samir’s poignantly perplexed questioning, his rising frustrations, all the way to his final subdued submissiveness as his image fades away, Samir consistently addresses the camera. He never names his listeners, but we are in no position to assume he is addressing anyone else but us, the audience. By engaging us through video, audio, and textual communication, Samir’s role epitomizes the digitality of mediation.

Proximity is suggested through spatial availability – a privacy accorded to a select few. The privilege of hearing detailed conversations, witnessing emotional outbursts, and seeing corners of someone’s basement or garage are signs of physical and geographical

proximity. Offering those details digitally in a succession of revealing conversations taking place in different parts of the characters' homes – including peering over a video call on the phone conversation of Samir's daughter and her mother – gradually formulate an illusion of physical proximity, since in reality none of these situations are possible without being close to the person(s) performing those actions. It is the digital performativity, especially by Samir's family members – whether the siblings or, remotely, his wife – that solidifies this illusion of proximity.

Camera angles play a major role in fostering the sense of closeness to the characters. Interestingly, Samir's onscreen presentation differs from that of his daughter and son. One noticeable difference is steadiness. Samir's presence is intentionally less professionally filmed, with an implied amateurishness amplified by sudden zoom-ins, temporary blurriness, and changed lighting. In contrast, his daughter and son are presented from a steadier, clearer lens. Zoom-ins are frequent but calculated. Perspective alternates between the two characters during conversation; nevertheless, the closeness is maintained in all their scenes, including filming outdoor scenes. We rarely get a panoramic view of the parking lot and none whatsoever of Samir's funeral they attend, which Samir witnesses offstage. Even his wife, who is mainly offstage, is presented through a video call with her daughter, thus giving us a brief glimpse of visual closeness as well. The different methods of closeness, whether in Samir's case or that of his family, grant us a sense of proximity, be it seemingly haphazard and rather ambiguous with Samir, reflecting the mental and/or metaphysical state his scenes are portrayed in (depending on our interpretation), or more realistically grounded in geographical locations of various places outside and inside his family's house and inside the cars of his daughter and son, or through his daughter's phone screen.

Throughout the play, the various attributes of proximity are achieved digitally. Such digitality becomes directly responsible for the closeness to characters that the audience experiences. Spatial barriers are digitally erased and replaced by a form of digital affect. We feel close physically and emotionally, through digital connectivity, to the characters. At one point, Samir's daughter is supposed to make a phone call, and two options appear for the audience: one with her mother's photo on the phone screen and the other with her children's. We get to choose the path. The ability granted to the audience to make a selection of which phone call she should answer empowers the audience with the illusion of making decisions that only she could make, answering or making a phone call. We therefore personify with her digitally as she connects to her mother during their video call. During the final scenes of the play, Samir witnesses his funeral, and even says a prayer for his soul just like he would have done for a stranger in traditional Arab and Muslim funerals, and while we do not see the funeral, we achieve a measure of affinity with Samir's unusual situation, again empathically establishing affect through the digitality of our connection to Samir. His proximity to his own funeral is complex, as presumably his body is in the funeral, but his mind or spirit are behind the screen, where we witness him



Figure 6. Tomkins's affects and Samir's facial expressions (positive and neutral)

witnessing his funeral. Thus, we achieve proximity to him and to his funeral through the digitality of smart staging.

Tomkins delineates affect visually based on facial expressions that reflect emotive states ranging from distress to dismissal (The Tomkins Institute, n.d.). The facial expressions corresponding to the negative, neutral, and positive emotions described by Tomkins can be captured in *Brilliant Mind* by following Samir, more than any other character, while his face bears witness to his emotive status as he develops and rapidly shifts from confusion to recognition to submission (Figures 6 and 7). Samir's expressions follow the three main categories based on his predicament. The neutral category – with only one affect in Tomkins's list – that of surprise, is Samir's initial reaction when he is startled by his surroundings, trying to understand where he is after he wakes up from his death or coma



Figure 7. Tomkins's affects and Samir's facial expressions (negative)

at the hospital in the opening scene of the play. The positive category includes joy and excitement. Those are displayed when Samir discovers that he can ask for objects and they are immediately dropped into his open hand, in a comedic reference to the simplistic human ideal of life after death as a place to grant wishes, devoid of serious existential questions. The more morbid affects of the last category, the negative category, include distress, disgust, anger, dismissal or avoidance, fear, and shame. Those are all displayed by Samir in response to his realization that he is dead or dying, his watching of his family's dysfunctional relationships, remembering his childhood and youth, and finally witnessing his funeral. There is shame at his failings as a family man, distress at his diminishing position in his family, anger at the sibling issues between his children and his wife's favoring of

their son over their daughter, fear of his funeral, disgust at the withering of life, and futile avoidance of his impending end.

Digital performativity through mediation and fluidity

The tenets of digital performativity as defined in this study encompass delivery of communication. One aspect of delivery involves mediation and fluidity. Both are paired together as key methods of communicating within the structure of smart staging adopted by *Brilliant Mind*. They determine *how* the content, if that expression can be used here, is communicated to the audience, focusing primarily on the level of interaction among actors and the audience. The other aspect of delivery is the content itself, or *what* is delivered. Digital performativity in this analysis, therefore, would comprise how mediation and fluidity are vehicles that put forward the content and its context, to make the theatrical digital experience comprehensible and definable for the audience.

Mediation is multifaceted in *Brilliant Mind*. Relying on the mediational potential inherent in digital communication, the play packages mediation as intersectional with audience participation. This is accomplished by using Samir as a mediator between the rest of the characters and the audience. Through text messages to the audience and monologues addressing them, he fills in narrative gaps and provides background information about his family and his life. At the same time, Samir and his family are linked by the audience only. We have the privilege of omniscience and omnipresence as we are capable of simultaneously witnessing Samir in his metaphysical space and the children in their realistic existence. Mediation is not, therefore, restricted to the central character, but through the digital experience of viewing and participating in the play, is shared with the audience, even if only via text and 360° viewing. In that sense, the audience practices a form of digital performativity as well, by digitally roaming Samir's space, actively engaging with him through shared text messages, and by making narrative choices.

Just like mediation explores different facets of character/audience digital interaction, fluidity is ensured by the digital experience, moving from 360° viewing to texting, and from narrative selection to the split screen of Samir in his distant realm looking over his children who are oblivious of his existence. Such fluidity not only reinforces mediation, it also provides a separate performative stance for three sets of characters: Samir in his transitional stage, the sister and brother in their shared space, and the mother who is present offstage and only over the phone, whether during a video call to her daughter or a voice call to both her children at the funeral. Finally, the audience members experience the utmost sense of digital fluidity by witnessing all three sets of characters, and, more importantly, engaging with all of them in different methods.

The digital environment provided by smart staging merging mediation and fluidity is dramatized by Samir's overarching presence. In a sense, he personifies the digitalization of performativity, as his apparent entanglement with other characters and with the audience launches the entire digital experience. After discovering his undefined presence

in the transitional space that he finds himself in, Samir soon realizes his daughter and son are *down there*, which is emphasized by his looking down, at times literally watching his daughter from the upper left corner in the screen. He then connects with the audience by texting, which is visually presented as he types on his phone moments before we receive texts from him, thus further connecting the audience to Samir, visually and electronically.

The content of the play, for the purpose of this study, is the plot progress as it is developed by the characters' actions and relationships. This content relies on a spatial-temporal process. The spatial element comprises two main spaces. The first is Samir's home, which is established early in the play as a metaphysical realm of after-death existence, complete with comic relief, as seen when Samir makes simple wishes and he is granted them instantly. The second space is realistic places that bring together Samir's daughter and son, namely their home, and the funeral house, and also a video phone conversation between the mother and the daughter, which interestingly weaves a digital space on a smaller scale within the digital stage of the play.

The temporal element, like its spatial counterpart, is divided into two categories. The first is the present time, when Samir realizes he is dead and watches his family grapple with the challenging family dynamics he left behind. The second temporal plane belongs to the past, which is an integral part of the play. It is presented using different narrative strategies. One of those is traditional flashbacks, where memories of previous events are enacted, and another is through the dialogue between characters, who simply refer to incidents, mostly traumatic but at times funny, that marked their relationships. Another interesting device used is the illustration of Samir's hospital bed, where he is watching television and writing notes. The illustration gradually fades into reality and a real human Samir faces us, staring into the camera, as he embarks on the surreal journey of discovering his death, watching his family's reaction to it, and finally attending his own funeral.

A significant aspect of spatial/temporal shifts in *Brilliant Mind* is manifested in the workings of memory, mainly Samir's but also his family's. It is through memory that the content of the play is contextualized. Samir's memories are shared with the audience through his text messages, which include family photos, ranging from childhood photographs of himself with his father, a photograph of his wife, and of his children when they were younger. The sharing of personal old photos in text messages is a significant communicative strategy that turns memory into a digital interface of mediation, and, in so doing, represents digital performativity and links it to mediation.

In addition to text messages, memory latches on to the unraveling of Samir's family through visual memories presented onscreen. During the last few moments of his life, after his funeral, Samir yields to the closure of the funeral, accepting his death, perhaps relieved in a sense that his children are moving towards reconciliation, perhaps coming to terms with his mistakes, or simply saddened by saying farewell to it all. As the scene darkens around his face, his image starts to fade gradually into darkness (Figure 8). This

corresponds to images and videos early in the play that depicted black-and-white scenes from famous Egyptian songs and films, with prominent Egyptian diva Umm Kulthūm (Danielson, 2022) and iconic film star Adel Emam (IMDB, n.d.) zapping on the screen before we are transferred from the scene at the hospital to Samir's room. It is the same opening scene that had an animated illustration of Samir on the hospital bed, but this time we see the real Samir in the same position that we saw in the animation earlier, with the oxygen mask and a monotonous beeping from the life support machine, indicating he has apparently departed.



Figure 8. Samir's face fading at the end of the play

It is possible here to view digital performativity within the context of psychodrama. Moreno saw the design of the stage as ideal to incorporate the psychological and the

metaphysical (Scheiffele, 1995). He coined the term “surplus reality” for the different reality that the actors enter onstage where they appear more explicitly and deeply than they would in “life reality” (Moreno, 1946, p. 268). Indeed, the concept of surplus reality can function as a precursor predicting the digital experience of reality. The director skillfully merges the psychological and metaphysical in *Brilliant Mind*. It is just as possible that Samir’s dilemma is a metaphysical portrayal of a transitioning departing soul as it is a psychological portrayal of a mental deterioration of a dying man. The last scene proposes the potential interpretation that the entire play was the last moments of Samir’s life, going through his mind as he draws nearer to his end. The iconic cultural figures he envisions are digitally interlaced with the presence of Samir, thus digitally reflecting his subconscious mind on the screen. The images are all of Egyptian figures, thus contrasting to the American portion of his identity as an immigrant. The persistence of his cultural origin in his mind is digitally manifested as the last thread of memory he hangs on and the last visual representation we see of his character. This digital performativity of the cultural component of his identity as an immigrant is profoundly entrenched in the mediation process between the smart stage and the audience, especially as no explanation of those images is given. The identity of the singer and actors will be picked up by those familiar with them among the audience. It can only be guessed or interpreted individually in any other way by members of the audience who are not familiar with Egyptian pop culture. This individualistic openness to interpretation digitally liberates the delivery, just like the initial scenes of Samir’s hands writing on a notebook leave it to the audience to imagine what he is writing.

Conclusion

The concept of the PandeTheatre as it is used in this article revolves around the use of digitality to present theatrical performance as a vehicle for communication with the audience during a time of intense distancing, reflected in *Brilliant Mind* as a trifold dramatization of mental and psychological stress, social and familial tension, and a metaphysical and spiritual question, all brought to the foreground of the human condition by the pressures of mortality and fear unleashed by the global pandemic. The threading of all factors in smart staging strategies employs digital performativity and mediation as two communicative methods of choice for pandemic-era communication that digitally reconstructs the theatre as a cultural product suitable for the challenges of the pandemic.

The unpacking of *Brilliant Mind* as an example of the PandeTheatre is carried out using three main approaches, all interlinked through the digitality of the smart staging experience. Through digital connectivity, one of the most significant contributions of *Brilliant Mind* is accomplished: the digitalization of psychodrama as a theatrical and communicative strategy. Through suggestive immediacy and proximity, the audience is granted a

powerful illusion of interaction with the performers, carefully structured through the digital architecture of text messaging and audience narrative selection.

Such connectivity leads to another significant method employed by *Brilliant Mind*: digital performativity. Using the fluidity of digital communication, the play provides contextualization and mediation to connect with the audience and to provide a relational bond within a unified digital experience, relying on, for instance, 360° viewing of a main character's house.

With the emotive charge that characterizes the pandemic culture, *Brilliant Mind* harnesses the visuality of digital communication to aptly present digital affect as integral to an audience experience in harmony with the dominant cultural production of the pandemic as a new furtive existence of visual and digital affect. In the study of digitality and affect, the role of the virtual is significant. Indeed, "there appear to be two main definitions of the virtual: one that connects it with that which is unseen, a mental space of potentiality; and one in which it is equivalent to the digital" (Kaisar, 2021, p. 147). In *Brilliant Mind*, a type of mental space of potentiality, skillfully mirrored by Samir's mental space, is expounded to bridge the gap with the audience by eliciting their affective responses through digital performativity and mediation.

By examining the innovativeness of the experimental play *Brilliant Mind* from different approaches, this study unravels the potential that the interconnectedness of digitality and art has to offer what might be a new reality of digital culture. This can be exemplified by the PandeTheatre as a cultural product of digital creativity reflecting the need for new modes of cultural communication, a need intensified during the pandemic, but which might in fact help shape how digital communication and art intersect moving forward.

The accomplishment of the experimental theatrical performance of *Brilliant Mind*, therefore, is significant in the potential it provides. In addition to the intersectionality of communication and art, the mediational power of interactive theatre and the significance of visuality as an integral component of theatrical performances are shown to have impactful resonance on a digital platform. The analysis of the play underlines that the psychological element of spontaneity, interaction, and visual affect are maintained in digitality as manifested by this play. This is significant from both literary and communicative perspectives as well, as the potential of smart staging can develop further, and as digital media culture expands. We perhaps wonder, as much as argue, whether the innovation of the *Brilliant Mind* experimental nature can inspire new attempts to communicate and experience various aspects of a digital world changed by – but also potentially evolving beyond – the crisis of the pandemic.

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