



Drama goes digital
vs
Theatre invades digital



**Suggestions and recommendations
for publicly funded theatres, policymakers
and funders at the local,
national and European level**



Society, media and culture are changing before our very eyes.

In light of this sea change, European state theatres must urgently adapt to the new digital landscape of the twenty-first century. The digital transformation has changed the ways we create, present, distribute and circulate content, including theatrical works.

This fact motivated the European Theatre Convention (ETC) – a unique network of 40 member theatres and active in 24 countries – to conceive the European Theatre Lab (ETL), a two-year EU-funded experimental research and co-production project based on the needs of its diverse members in the face of the digital transformation.

While they all have to cope with implementing digital innovation, the member theatres differ enormously in terms of cultural background, political and social situation, financial structure, and artistic approach. To that end, the ETL (2016–2018) was designed to combine the research, experimentation, hands-on experiences and collaboration of seven European state theatres – Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe (DE), Kote Marjanishvili State Drama Theatre (GE), CDN Nancy Lorraine La Manufacture (FR), Théâtre de Liège (BE), Teatrul National Craiova (RO), Det Norske Teatret Oslo (NO) and Croatian National Theatre Zagreb (HR) – as well as technical institutions (universities, applied research centres and others), artists from the digital media field and an advisory board of experts.

The threefold approach behind the ETL project aimed at examining the effects of new technologies on aesthetics, audience development as well as communication and dissemination. The intense research phase was dedicated to the creation of three creative projects that have been staged in the partner theatres.

With seven OpenLabs, two conferences, four theatre productions and two publications (including this one), the ETL has attempted to combine research, applied innovation and documentation. The experimental character of the project focused on learning and trial and error rather than effectively staging a state-of-the-art production.

Based on the experiences of the ETL's two-year project, the following ideas are suggested to decision-makers in theatres, funding bodies, and political and cultural institutions at local, national and European levels as a way of contributing to the discourse and forms of action on how publicly funded theatres can contribute to the world of technologies.

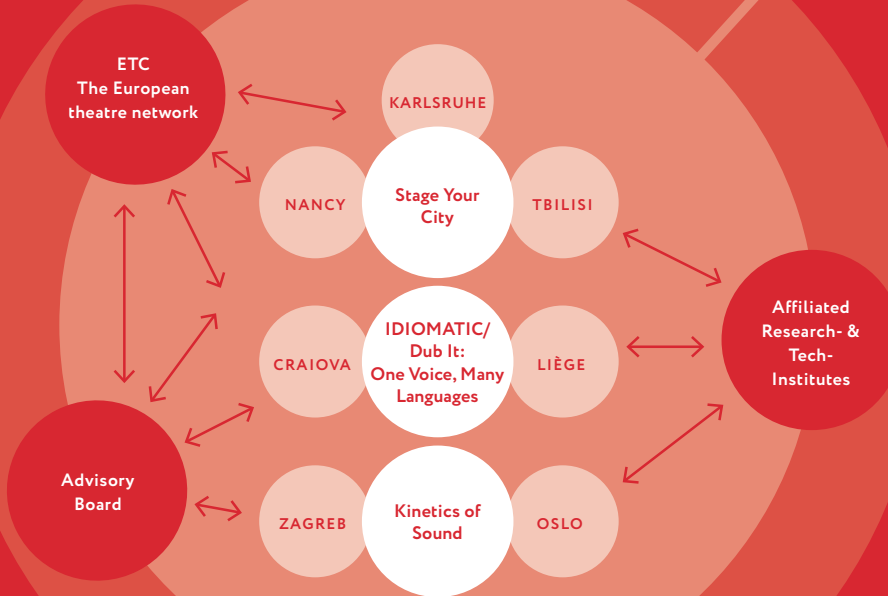


ETL Ecosystem

Creative & sustainable management structure

Cross-sectoral level of science, technology, media and performing arts

Cross-border level of creative research



- Productions (4) / Premieres (7)
- Conferences (2)
- OpenLabs (7)
- Reports (2)
- Final Showcase (1)

The ETL Timeline



Evaluation



Suggestions for publicly funded theatres interested in taking this digital challenge

Be open to 'holistic' change

- Recognise the use of new technologies in theatre as an issue that will affect the whole value production chain within your theatre: aesthetics, creative production, storytelling, audience development, team organisation, communication, dissemination, services, etc.
- Develop a digital policy for the theatre, involving all your colleagues and embedding your operations. Search for support to come up with guidelines that work for your institution and that are updated regularly based on the latest technology.

This may, for instance, mean:

- including new technologies in your vision/programme: a change of schedules due to different development and rehearsal processes, new ways of team organisation and cooperation with experts.
- not considering – and this goes in particular for artistic directors and creative producers – what technology can bring you/your theatre, but more what you can bring to the world of technologies and how you can incorporate them in terms of the artistic process, narrative building, use of texts, etc.

What we learned through the ETL project:

- The publicly funded theatre sector is not too late with regard

to new technologies. It seems important not to confuse 'digital performances' (see Steve Dixon) with the 'digitisation of theatre'. This shift is not neutral, as has been noted by Clarisse Bardiot¹ (invited to the ETC conference in Karlsruhe as part of the evaluation process), since it would imply that the theatre world is 'late' with regard to the overall recent movements and would focus more on the dissemination of art works to the public – more communication than creation. This could have been one of the biases of the project between the creation of digital performances and the development of audience(s) or digitisation. This shall be also considered in the post-digital context in which we are evolving – with creation processes implemented via computers and networks.

- Time is needed: Change cannot happen overnight. ETL partners had the pressure to produce four performances in less than two years. However, from the very start, it was decided to add one OpenLab to continue exploring, discovering and testing ways to embed technologies into theatre and forms of creation. Also, there was a common understanding that the process should be preferred over the end results and that learning would be acquired through mistakes.
- Involvement of all in the process is needed. This was the key point shared by most of the partners present in the final Oslo wrap-up meeting: "We should have included the artists, authors, the technicians, the sound engineers, the communication team, the audience, etc. in a much earlier stage (...) this is what we would do differently". The overall work process is being changed, as attested by La Manufacture. They noted that with the *Stage Your City* project there was a need to communicate and promote differently, and a way to plan and rehearse differently.
- There is a need to consider new jobs such as digital dramaturges or digital producers. A few ETL project advisers realised that an

intermediary position was needed within the theatre to foster contacts, exchanges and co-working sessions from the start of the project and more generally to embed digital into the theatre organisations, both as a process and as a format of creation. Dick van Dijk (Waag Society) notes with regard to the digital producers: "They do not have an artistic agenda of their own but understand both worlds in terms of goals/ambitions, ways of working and timing of work to be done (planning) and are a linking pin between the two disciplines." The artist Chris Ziegler mentions for the digital dramaturge: "Digital Dramaturge (DD) brings 'post dramatic' terms from theory into practice (...) A DD could influence the way theatre production gives weight to other media for content development. Without a DD, text and verbal expression will always stay the highest priority."

Collaborate and share

- Identify and collaborate on a long-term basis with independent theatre companies and artists working on the issue.
- Collaborate with experts from the technology sector and higher education institutions, universities and research institutes.
- Develop, when relevant, partnerships with other theatres working on this question, from local to European and international levels
- Involve your audience (current and new ones) in the creative process.
- Exchange and share this knowledge in the theatre, but also with colleagues in the whole cultural field – by creating programmes, discussions, conferences, books, etc.

What we learned through the ETL project:

- There is no need to reinvent the wheel: This was an important lesson from the first meeting of the ETL with the advisers. The ETL project would not change anything in our world per se but changes

would happen more in a collaborative and holistic way, both internally and externally. For instance, the ETL project initiated that the CDN La Manufacture in Nancy dedicated its RING Festival to digital theatre and is embarking on a collaboration with an associate artist working on new media for the 2018–2019 season.

- There is a need to focus on and learn from other European and international initiatives and this was the core of the OpenLabs' series to explore virtual/augmented/mixed realities projects in different contexts.
- There is a need to think in terms of open source for the device conceived within the scope of experimental projects. Théâtre de Liège has already suggested to continue these discussions and present technical devices developed during the ETL as part of the upcoming IMPACT Festival in November 2018.
- Audiences can be renewed through the project: This seemed more visible for the *Stage Your City* and *Idiomatic* projects: where there was a much younger audience that was more connected to one another (for instance, when technology was not optimal in the process) as well as a new dynamism with a greater number of volunteers involved for a performance which 'felt different'. However as Gerfried Stocker said from the very first meeting in Sarajevo in October 2016: "Do not believe that you will attract young people only through the use of technology". This new generation of audiences is not automatic and shall be nurtured and/or challenged by new forms of experimentation such as the workshops/OpenLabs that were organised by Det Norske Teatret Oslo and the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb alongside the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim and Radiona in Zagreb.
- The audience needs to leave with a theatrical experience in mind, as stated by Joris Weijdom: "Audiences should leave talking about

the story, not the technology employed in telling it. Make the story interesting enough that they are still thinking about it a week later"².

Invest and think long term

- Invest in research and development projects without focusing on seeing results immediately. Make room for experiments (provide time, space, staff) as part of an ongoing development process to stay alive and learn as an institution.
- Invest in regular digital training sessions from your theatre's various departments – marketing and administrators, directors, dramaturges and actors, set designers and technical staff (sound, light, video, etc.).
- Invest in new technology – for the stage, the art works and the process, communication and dissemination (live streaming, etc.)

What we learned through the ETL project:

- Technologies have a (high) cost: The overall investment for the project was for involved theatres often higher than expected.
- Team involvement is important in the project. That is also a way of minimising the cost and the 'last-minute bad surprises': most of the seven partners had at least three people of their respective teams (from communication to technical to artistic direction) involved in the OpenLabs as well as in the personal and online meetings. The ETL was seen in that sense as a way of capacity building in digital and theatre within ETC theatres.
- People (from the team to the artists involved) are finding processes and a new vocabulary but they need competencies to further develop them, hence the need of training and capacity building-related sessions.
- Repertoire theatres can be involved in the process. In the *Kinetics of Sound* project, sound was the common point through the two

repertoire performances. Both theatres in Zagreb and Oslo now have two new productions that are fully integrated into their theatre repertoires even if, as far as sensors are concerned, one performance embeds technologies more than the other (both in terms of process and final performance). For Clarisse Bardiot, this aspect was the innovative point of the ETL project: not so much the question of digital and theatre, which has been worked on for many years, but the fact that publicly funded theatres – and, in particular, repertoire theatres – are taking up this digital challenge beyond the gadget/added value of it. As noted in the interim report, "the innovation may be less in the implementation of new technological devices but more in the adapted choice of existing devices (e.g., surround sound). The innovation lies in the fact that repertoire theatres are using these technologies and thinking of embedding them in the plays. This choice fits better within the time constraints imposed on all projects."

- ETC will continue to work on the subject and each of its upcoming International Theatre Conferences will contain a focus on digital and publicly funded theatres as well as its related activities (such as ETC Artist Residency, ETC Theatre Academy in Avignon). Some advisers also suggested connecting with other networks that are related to the sector and/or the fields of action such as the International Society for Intermedial Studies or the International Federation for Theatre Research.

¹ <http://www.clarissebardiot.info/>

² *Mixed reality and the theatre of the future*, Arts and New Technologies: <https://www.ietm.org/en/publications/fresh-perspectives-6-mixed-reality-and-the-theatre-of-the-future> (p.60), - a publication by IETM written by Joris Weijdom, also present at the Oslo Conference in June 2018.



Suggestions for policymakers and funders at local and national levels

Recognise

- Recognise the issue of new technologies and theatres in a holistic/global perspective (from aesthetics to audience, communication and dissemination).

Facilitate and enable

- Facilitate links with the educational sector. Help schools and universities incorporate the issue of digital technologies into their curricula – for actors, directors, stage and costume designers, communication experts, technicians and video artists and even digital producers/dramaturges as introduced before.
- Facilitate support schemes allowing more partnerships between publicly funded theatres and the private sector in order to nurture innovation (e.g., clusters, research centres).
- Enable conditions for long-lasting processes, including investments in dedicated staff positions, to focus on innovative approaches to new technologies in aesthetics, communication, audience development and dissemination.

Support

- Support lifelong training for theatre professionals from dramaturges to directors to technicians – with specialised academies, workshops, training camps and other initiatives.
- Support theatres in establishing a structured research and development (R&D) policy by providing space, training and funding.

What could be done:

- Mapping of experiences such as the ETL at national and local levels, if not done already, highlighting relevant experiments with universities and research labs – like the OpenLabs – or the partnership between tech companies INCESA (Romania) and MULTITEL (Belgium).
- Support surveys to better understand the needs of theatres/institutions, such as the field survey conducted during the ETC conference in Karlsruhe that highlighted, for instance, the fact that most European theatres interviewed were interested in digital innovation to connect with new and younger audiences. They also wish to stay (or become) an interesting art form for the generation of digital natives. Theatres also seem keen to explore how digital can be better incorporated into artistic performances on stage.
- Support the development of new positions such as digital producers/dramaturges: See, e.g., the experience of Watershed and the National Theatre of Wales with the Digital Producers' Lab.
- Consider supporting experimental projects (residencies of artists, labs, etc.) based on existing practices like the one in France: a research/residency/production pilot scheme entitled CHIMERES for artists and researchers working on and/or with new technologies is being tested by two national theatre and centres, Théâtre Nouvelle Génération in Lyon and LU in Nantes, with the support of the French Ministry of Culture.
- Support for R&D at various levels, from policy development to actions. In most European countries, one of the problems is that there is no culture of structured R&D in the publicly funded arts. In the United Kingdom, quite a lot of incentives are provided by economic development agencies to commercial companies to undertake research and development; the Arts Council England is exploring how it might be possible for publicly funded organisations to take advantage of this. As noted by Simon Mellor

and Paul Glinkowski from the Arts Council of England, there can be different entry points to support this digital strategy: “offering the incentive of more funding to support digital R&D, encouraging organisations to place more emphasis on R&D within their existing programmes, by asking them, for example, to develop digital policies and plans that require them to re-evaluate and re-envision the role and potential of digital within their organisation; or encouraging initiatives that will help to support and grow infrastructure and capacity to enable digital R&D, such as skills building/sharing programmes and programmes that invite and foster collaborations (with other arts organisations but also with technology based companies and digital research expertise in universities).”



OpenLabs

There is a need to focus on and learn from other European and international initiatives and this was the core of the OpenLabs series that explored virtual / augmented / mixed reality projects in different contexts.

The OpenLab was an evolving concept that each of the partners could adapt according to its needs and those of its theatre colleagues. However, after the first two editions (Nancy and Linz), some key ideas were proposed by the advisory board based on the initial feedback of the ETL theatre partners. The OpenLabs could be open in terms of format and actions, and articulated around three core ideas:

EXPERIENCE / BRAINSTORMING / CONNECT

EXPERIENCE — Visits / presentations of tech-related projects / experiments / venues (while keeping in mind the relevance of the types of projects presented in terms of topic and budget)

BRAINSTORMING — Internal brainstorming on projects (with one or two key points / aspects to tackle: technical setting, role of the audience, etc.)

CONNECT — Follow-ups for the further implementation of the project in one’s respective theatre (teams including technicians as well as local partners / stakeholders)



Suggestions at the EU level

Recognise

- Recognise the important impact theatre can have on the digital revolution: as a place for critical thinking, social gathering and interactions with a 4,000-year-old tradition, the theatre provides a counterpart to mere enthusiasm for technology. "Do not only ask what theatre can learn from technology, but also what technology can learn from theatre." (Gerfried Stocker, Creative Director, Ars Electronica Linz)
- Recognise the issue of new technologies and theatre in a holistic/global perspective (from aesthetics to audience development, communication and dissemination).

Facilitate the collecting and use of data

- Facilitate the provision of research and data on the subject.
- Facilitate the sharing of best practices on supporting publicly funded theatre/organisations developing sustainable partnerships with the private sector.

Support the mobility of professionals and art works

- Allow the mobility of connections between theatre professionals and researchers/technology developers in a transectorial and process-based approach.
- Design-specific support schemes to facilitate the dissemination/ touring of theatrical creations embedding new technologies (cost may be more important and/or some technical components may be problematic due to customs).

What could be done:

- Support the mapping of innovative digital and theatre-related experiences based on existing projects like ETL, publications and national mapping
- Connect projects related to new technologies and funded under Creative Europe. Following the model of gathering projects/platforms or network coordinators, consider organising more topic-based types of meetings to share experiences and expertise, e.g., on new technologies. This could happen during the biennial European Cultural Forum.
- Facilitate thinking and knowledge sharing between projects experiencing different models of audience development through the use of new technologies while questioning the notions of audience participation levels and interactivity. "(...) Audience members can decide for themselves how interactive – or influential – they want to be in relation to the theatrical experience. This dynamic approach allows audience members to choose both their perspective and active relation to what is happening theatrically, with the option to change these modes during the piece"³.
- Develop adequate support mechanisms for the export of theatre and digital-related work to expand audience development in Europe and internationally in relation to innovative and experimental theatre works using digital.

³ Mixed reality and the theatre of the future, Arts and New Technologies: <https://www.ietm.org/en/publications/fresh-perspectives-6-mixed-reality-and-the-theatre-of-the-future> (p.age 16).



Conclusion

In general, funding and support schemes at European, national and regional levels should take into consideration that the production of interdisciplinary, international projects need a long-term approach.

They should allow the private sector to get involved and foster public-private partnerships; include independent artists working outside the established theatre structures; focus on the artistic possibilities of the digital onstage to encourage the exploration of new aesthetics; provide enough time and financial resources for experimenting with new technologies; strengthen awareness and capacity building for the digital in European theatres, as well as facilitate their circulation. Such a context also implies a progressive shift within European theatres in terms of thinking and developing artistic works, team organisation, partnerships and collaboration.

ETC has committed itself to working in this direction while continuing to address the question of theatres and digital in its conferences, training sessions, programmes and advocacy actions.

EUROPEAN
THEATRE
LAB

DRAMA GOES DIGITAL

Partners

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