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THEATRE BLOG

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Theatre dares to go digital

Theatremakers' use of digital technology is prone to malfunction, but without these pioneers, theatre would be a far duller place



Pathfinders ... Theatre Sandbox's *Give Me Back My Broken Night* used digital projectors to develop a guided tour of the future of Soho. Photograph: Katie Day

When theatre performances moved inside buildings during the Renaissance, audiences couldn't see as well as they had been able to outside. In the absence of electricity, candles were suddenly required to illuminate the action. What nobody could have predicted was that in 1539, a theatremaker called San Gallo would take the candles and use them creatively to conjure a rising sun effect on stage by filling a crystal sphere with water and illuminating it from behind. That moment was possibly the stage's first recorded lighting effect. The practical had become the imaginative, with a little bit of dreaming.

Of course, getting this sun lamp right must have taken a great deal of experimentation. There were surely performances when it didn't work. Any new technology or idea requires a lot of tinkering before it becomes fully functional, and time acts as a brilliant filter in discovering what works. In the car a couple of months back, I unexpectedly found myself listening to a business programme about companies using web-based technologies. It became clear that it often wasn't the first person into the market with a good idea who reaped the rewards. It was often the second or third, who had taken time to evaluate and learn from the mistakes of the first, that had the major success.

But somebody has to be the first. There is no progress without pioneers, the early adopters who are prepared to do the hard graft. This was very apparent at the Edinburgh fringe this summer, where there was suddenly a whole rash of shows created using digital technologies and pervasive media. Did all of them work? Of course not. My own experience of Blast Theory's mobile phone show, A Machine to See With, was dismal. A hiccup in the mobile phone technology combined with human error meant that at a crucial moment in the piece I ended up in a car park with a huddle of confused people. I battled on, but some decided not to continue – although the audience's departure from such a piece doesn't have quite the same impact as a theatre walk-out. But the fact that it didn't work on that occasion doesn't mean that the show never works, any more than you could write off Robert Lepage's Elsinore simply because on its opening night in Edinburgh in the mid-90s, the technology broke down and the show was cancelled.

Yet it is often irritating when technology kiboshes a show. When a computer glitch meant that the scenery got stuck halfway through Peter Stein's Troilus and Cressida, also at Edinburgh, a few years back, it was hard not to feel wistful for the days when all that was needed to move a set were a few strong and willing stage hands. There remains something hugely appealing about an empty space, a bunch of actors and very little more, as a show like Tell Them That I am Young and Beautiful, currently at the Arcola, proves.

There will always be a place for that lo-tech, gadget-free theatre. But there is room for other things, too, and for that we need the willing pioneers. Theatre Sandbox (who match theatremakers with techies to develop technological projects) has already proved its worth, both as an enabler of pioneering theatre and as a way to distribute knowledge and share experience.

One of the great things apparent in Edinburgh this year was the willingness of theatremakers, both young and more established, to play about with some of the technologies that are transforming our everyday lives. These technologies – from iPads and iPods to mobile phones and wireless headphones – are also helping to transform

theatre, the way audiences and makers interact, how theatre is distributed and even the way it is possible to tell stories. Yes, some of these experiments are going to fail, some may fall short as an audience experience. But even the deeply flawed come with a tickle of possibility and a willingness to make a leap into the dark and hold a candle to the future.

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