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‘A New Kind of Play’: Theatre in the Digital Age

This study explores two recent productions that attempted to find a theatrical language for the digital age. The first is *Midsummer Night’s Dreaming*, a 2013 co-production between the Royal Shakespeare Company and Google Creative Lab. This production was presented as ‘a new kind of play’: an interactive online event structured around a live performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It was theatre shaped for the internet and speaking in the language of social media. *Midsummer Night’s Dreaming* challenged many of the essential elements of live theatre, but in creating a communal interactive experience it adhered to the spirit of Shakespeare’s play.

The second production examined is *wonder.land*, a musical that ran at the National Theatre, London between November 2015 and April 2016. Where *Midsummer Night’s Dreaming* brought live theatre to the web, this production brought the digital world to the stage. Both might be read as attempts to find a theatrical language for a digital age, but *wonder.land* more critically explores the tension between the real and the virtual in the age of Web 2.0. Ironically, with the launch of NT Live in 2009, the National Theatre was arguably at the forefront of digital innovation in UK theatre. Screening its productions in cinemas offered a hybrid, mediatized experience of live theatre. Yet *wonder.land* presents an uneasy perspective on the kind of immersive, virtual world once associated with cinema, and now popularly represented by the internet. But while its story implies that virtual lives must be abandoned for presence and connection in the ‘real’ world, this study argues that *wonder.land*’s exuberant staging of a phantasmagoric digital world contradicts its heavy-handed moralism.

Both *Midsummer Night’s Dreaming* and *wonder.land* betray the challenges of dramatizing the digital age. Yet in striving to adapt to a new media age, both the RSC and the National Theatre have kept faith with a key understanding of drama: as action taking place in the ‘here and now’.