

**ALICE |  
A VIRTUAL  
THEME PARK**

## A THEATRICAL WONDERLAND IN THE WASTELAND OF LOCKDOWN

**FOREWORD**

Alice | A Virtual Theme Park was an immersive theatre adaptation that was performed online during lockdown throughout August 2020.

The production mixed live actors, Zoom video technology, AI-powered interactive characters, multiplayer games technology, and a variety of theatre production techniques that had never been used before.

This booklet is intended to chronicle the insights and experience we gained from the production, and pass it on to anyone who might want to produce something similar.

The entire theatre economy is undergoing immense hardship. Our goal with Alice was to create a financially sustainable production model for digital theatre that would channel money back into the freelance world. In this booklet we have been transparent about our costs and charging models. It is our view that digital theatre productions should have ticket prices, and that free is giving up.

This booklet is structured as a series of interviews with the cast and crew. This format is intended to convey the personal impact Alice had on those involved, and in particular the impact of a project like this on peoples' mental health in a time of extreme hardship for the entire theatre economy.

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the show, and who provided their honest and open contribution to the pages that follow. In particular, we would like to thank InnovateUK who gave funding for Alice that enabled us to increase our ambition, to employ more freelance contributors for longer, and to write this open access booklet.

Finally, if you find value in what you read here, please pass this booklet on. It may help provide inspiration and income for theatre practitioners and for the industry, in whatever shape it may become in the future.

**“We’re not just making digital theatre.**

**We’re changing the world!”**



## INTRODUCTION – CHARISMA.AI, BIG TELLY AND CREATION THEATRE PRESENT ALICE | A VIRTUAL THEME PARK

### CHARISMA.AI

“Powering the stories of the future”, Charisma.ai creates “highly intelligent storytelling platforms” and is “powered by AI to deliver immersive and realistic character-led experiences that drive measurable audience engagement by focussing on: Conversation, Context and Character.”

The Oxford-based company helps creatives generate interactive stories for any medium – TV, movies, games, mobile, online and VR experiences.

“We’re constantly exploring changes in storytelling that are inspired by the new technologies available.”

### CREATION THEATRE COMPANY

An Oxford-based company, Creation Theatre focusses on bringing to life “those books, the ones that you’ll always go back to” and “the stories that we love”.

The company finds unusual spaces – castles, antique mirror tents, college gardens, bookshops and factories, “These stories aren’t set in theatres, so we don’t put them there ... We’ll go wherever the stories take us.”

At 24 years old, the company have produced 70+ shows, with over 500,000 audience members from 5-95 being swept away by the power of their productions.

### BIG TELLY THEATRE COMPANY

As Northern Ireland’s longest established theatre company, Big Telly “make professional touring theatre. We specialise in site responsive theatre. We also create participation projects across NI.”

The company has made productions in shops, swimming pools, and towns as well as on the stage. “We are playful, skilled and experienced. We’re not afraid to do things in different ways or make work in new contexts.”

Set up in 1986 by Zoe Seaton, they are based at Flowerfield Arts Centre in Portstewart on Northern Ireland’s north coast, and are “proud to be part of Northern Ireland’s strong theatre heritage and its vibrant creative future.”

### ALICE | A VIRTUAL THEME PARK

<https://vimeo.com/442683243>

This summer fall down the rabbit hole for an experience like no other. Wherever you are in the world, Wonderland needs you.

Welcome to Wonderland.

In Alice | A Virtual Theme Park, let your computer become a portal to Wonderland. Combining live performers, death-defying stunts, incredible AI cats and even a chance to race your own handmade hedgehog, we can promise that this show isn’t like anything you’re expecting, or any show you’ve seen before!

The show played from 1 – 30 August 2020.

According to the AI Cheshire Cat, “Audiences leapt down the rabbit hole for a mad, interactive adventure, filled with magic, mayhem and silliness. A family night in like you could never imagine.”

## METHODOLOGY – PRODUCING DURING LOCKDOWN

This collaboration is proof that the pandemic did not squash creative potential. According to Charisma.ai’s Guy Gadney, “What we often find in the tech world is that anything is possible, but it will take time. For us it was, where do we settle on this idea and how ambitious can we be within the confines of time and budget?”

The move to online was for many motivated by the pandemic “And a bit of serendipity, with Big Telly suggesting we explore this.”

### MAINTAINING THE IMPACT OF THE SHOW OUTSIDE OF ITS CONTENT

As the producer, Creation Theatre’s Lucy Askew made Alice more than the narrative or the technology by focussing on those moments that push past the show, “For me it’s how you as the audience navigate through the performance and what your experience is. Some of it is the marketing, making sure people coming into the performance know the expectations of what they’re going to do and how it’s going to work.”

But even thinking about the core point of the show and its purpose within the setting is key. “It was really important that we had that element of choice. That for us was part of the initial concept, that families were having their choice removed so much right now. It’s not a family show where dad can be checking his emails while watching because you’ve got to work together, and you’ve got to get up and interact. It’s positive family screen time where you’re all interacting together.” Alice capitalises on the desire for positive experiences that bond a family together.

### FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

As is always the case with theatrical productions, most things that you can improve on came down to money – more rehearsals, higher budget or more time. But cutting down on freelance staff and piling all responsibilities onto a select few is not the way forward, notes Lucy, “A lot of live venues are responding to COVID-19 with a really small management team doing everything. That’s the way they can survive, but it’s cutting off the freelancers.”

Surely that dilutes expertise, creative viewpoints and stifles the potential output, no?

**SUSTAINABILITY BENEFITS**

An unexpected key driver for creating more online work is the impact on the environment. Creation Theatre were looking to reduce their carbon footprint before the pandemic came along, "You quickly realise that the biggest thing you're doing to destroy the planet is encouraging your audience to travel. Whether we use electricity or recycled costumes to make a show is relatively tiny in comparison.

"Accidentally, we've stumbled across the most sustainable way to make theatre. There's a 99% reduction in carbon emissions when doing a digital show. If every theatre took one month a year and only produced digital work, the impact on the climate would be enormous. The planet surviving is more important!"

**A FULL CREATIVE AND PRODUCTION TEAM**

As a producer, a way to engage with the wider pool of freelancers is to treat digital theatre just like a physical show – think about your ancillary support functions, like a front of house team. They will have different responsibilities, but the role is no less essential, observes Lucy, "We have our box office manned, signposting people back on track and fixing IT issues for them.

"It's nice to feel like we're mapping the team onto the digital work. There is a place for a box office, there is a place for front of house, there is a place for a lighting designer and a sound designer – they can all come with us on this journey.

"I was in a seminar for the Association of British Theatre Technicians and what's clear is there are a lot of technicians who are anxious about digital work, about if they're going to lose their jobs. You need to get good at doing Zoom but there's absolutely a place for technicians, probably more so!

"You assume there's only one person doing magic coding, and then the actor on screen. It's a whole theatre team, and people in theatre are so adaptable because it's what we do all the time. Every show is different, that agility is baked into the industry. You just give people the challenge of making it work on Zoom and they work it out."

THE WHITE RABBIT, PLAYED BY NICKY HARLEY,  
PICTURED IN THE 3D CROQUET GAME THAT THE  
AUDIENCE PLAYED

That full team can be a benefit in rehearsals too, adds production manager Giles Stoakley, "Even if we're not in rehearsals, we can have the noise in the background and the camera off. So, when someone says something like, 'Wouldn't it be nice to set fire to this?' I can dip in and say, 'let's not do that!' Problems get sorted out more quickly rather than coming out in rehearsal notes – the speed of rehearsals is much quicker, which is really great. Also, knowing how to market the show. From a top-level management, that's really useful about digital theatre."

**GROWING LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES**

Online work gave Creation Theatre a global presence at just the click of a button, notes Lucy, "It also gives you a format where you can be ambitious, grow audiences, have an international profile and keep your physical work very local. Lockdown gave us a model where we can do both things – be local and be international at the same time. If we can make more work regionally and people can live around the country, it's a big improvement in quality of life for a lot of people.

"Imagine if Wise Children had an audience all in Bristol and they didn't tour but they made amazing digital shows. We could all access it, and the physical shows could be specific to that area of the country. Then Kneehigh in Cornwall, Slung Low in Leeds – those big producers could give regions an identity to be proud of, but can still have the national recognition you need to be on the Arts Council radar and get the funding and attract the talent to keep pushing forward."

**METHODOLOGY – CASTING FOR IMMERSIVE, INTERACTIVE WORK**

The importance of casting in this kind of work is not just the resulting cast. The entire method of finding individuals needs to be best suited to this way of creating, notes Big Telly's Zoe Seaton, "We were looking for people who were playful on Zoom. We are constantly looking for the risk takers and the brave. It's less about if that person's right for that part and more about is that person right for this process;



will they draw from other experiences; have they got an eclectic and wide knowledge and experience and interest in the arts? I'm more interested in magpies in that way.

"You should audition people in the platform in which they're going to perform – you can see what they're going to be like in the final thing. If someone can be interesting on Zoom in an audition, you can make easier judgements. We set the right tasks in the auditions, so it was clear to us who was going to be playful."

And despite being such a technologically heavy show, auditioning wasn't about whether the cast knew Zoom or were technically minded, "Some auditionees had so much knowledge of the tech that their audition became about showcasing that – it sabotaged them."

"We were creating six individual experiences – individual as in led by an actor – so you want six different flavours; you don't want the same thing. It was about playing with the actors to see how far we can push and build, letting them have fun with it and being confident, curious and inquisitive."

### **METHODOLOGY – REHEARSALS DURING LOCKDOWN**

Rehearsals in a pandemic were logistically, emotionally and technically difficult. How do you engage with your actors, your fellow cast mates, through an online portal? How do you cope with the outside pressures of turning your home space into your working environment, balance the concerns about lockdown with a focus to develop and feel free to be creative?

### **THE SOCIAL AND WELLBEING ELEMENT**

Online rehearsals for an online show may seem obvious, but they are not without challenges, comments Zoe and members of the Alice cast:

"It's not a normal rehearsal – you don't get to hug your colleagues or speak to them after a show to find out how things went. I didn't realise how much you rely on that community feel until doing a show digitally."

"What you miss are the casual conversations, the context in which you can read signals. You miss the gentler things. It means you check in

with people more, message them after – it's important to trust your instinct on that, to be reassuring outside the room."

"We miss out on all those body language things – when Black Lives Matter was at its height, we were in the middle of doing a show. It meant so much that the directors and the makers of Creation came and checked in with us, really made it very clear that they're taking this seriously."

"I was worrying about fitting in with the group – there wasn't any social time built into the rehearsal process. Warm-up games and ice breaker stuff, that all has to do with trust and safe spaces if you're making something together. But if you just drop in for 90 minutes to rehearse, what can you say to people you've never met?"

### **DEBRIEFS AND FEEDBACK**

The lack of feedback that goes with such a sharp disconnect can also seem unfulfilling, as can the general format of rehearsal – more focussed, shorter and sharper sessions:

"There were a few times where you don't have that debriefing that you usually have after a show. You're left with your own thoughts and that's very bizarre, especially if for some reason it was emotional. Being that we're dealing with something artistic, it usually is emotional in some way. So sometimes it was a bit lonely and a bit unsettling to end the call."

"It was a one- or two-hour shot of rehearsing on your bit rather than a full day, having these shots of energy and hoping you fill that with the right creative energy. And then you go off and squirrel away ideas, come up with stuff and feed it back."

### **WORKING AROUND PEOPLE'S SCHEDULES**

Rehearsals with people from home also brought on challenges – or perhaps these were opportunities in disguise, muses Zoe, "The boundaries are different. I felt the actors' pain when their kids would come in while they were working. But we were delighted to see them! There was one joyous moment during the Mad Hatter's tea party where a daughter came in, sat down at the table and started making tea!

It was the best moment; she was only three and she started pouring tea and drinking! Everybody in the room made that the best moment. It's really important to acknowledge the context people are in, also after rehearsals to invite in the partner who's been waiting outside the door. To bring them into the pub with you."

### **METHODOLOGY – APPROACHING THE MEDIUM AS AN ACTOR**

#### **THE CHALLENGES OF A NON-PHYSICAL AUDIENCE**

Despite being a collaborative effort, during those performance times actors are entirely alone on a stage of their own making. The cast of the show shared their thoughts on this potentially isolating format, how to get audience perspective and create a connection through a screen:

"It's set up, so we all do a solo vignette. After we have our half-hour call where we're all together, at beginner's call we get thrown out and we sit in our rooms and wait in silence for an audience. You could have anyone pop up at any time! Even working as an ensemble, we were all so divided that placing your energy and trying to find it was very interesting."

"This is one of the first productions I've been involved in on this platform where I haven't understood what an audience experience is like because you're not going through that world. You're giving it your all, but you have no idea what the feel is. If you're doing it live on stage, there's a shared atmosphere that the actors and audience feel together. There's much less awareness of that when you're just looking at a camera. It's an odd thing – as a performer you pick up so many things subconsciously from people's faces, suddenly that's taken out of the equation completely and you're still trying to interact with them."

"I don't have control over who I pick on, someone's face just flashes up and I have to think quickly about what I can say to them. Sometimes I worry that it might not be appropriate. In a live situation you can gauge the energies and you can make things better, but if you'd said something wrong here, they could just leave. I'm mindful about how comfortable people are – whether they want to have people shouting at them, whether they want to participate."

With all that in mind, all the basic principles from live performance apply to digital theatre:

"Don't try and be something that you're not – the most important thing is telling stories, your engagement

"You should audition people in the platform in which they're going to perform"

"It's not a normal rehearsal – you don't get to hug your colleagues or speak to them after a show to find out how things went."



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A CATERPILLAR'S ADVICE. 63

This sounded promising, certainly : Alice turned and came back again.

“Keep your temper,” said the Caterpillar.

“Is that all?” said Alice, swallowing down her anger as well as she could.

“No,” said the Caterpillar.

Alice thought she might as well wait, as she had nothing else to do, and perhaps after all it might tell her something worth

with the story and with the audience. Find out about the companies that you're working with and the people that you're working with. Treat it like you would a play – warm up, even though you're in your room – you want to be as relaxed and as certain in yourself and your abilities and your bodies as possible."

"Come with suggestions to a rehearsal. As a performer, it's usual to trust in the director to have most of the answers. But because this is new to everybody, be prepared to come in with ideas also, so that they know we're in this together and we're learning at the same time, so it feels like an open conversation."

"Watch Zoom shows and get used to how actors behave on it. Your performance level has to be specific. You can't just chat, but you can interact with the camera by looking down the lens, which is different to looking at the screen of you. Set up calls with yourself and practice camera work and see how to make your surroundings change."

"Really commit to making your setup work – it's worth it, not only for you but for the audience. A webcam or some extra cabling to plug into your router. The last thing you want is trying to do something on your phone and be getting calls."

"Get work out there – on your own Facebook Live page – just to take away the fear of getting things out into the world and not judging yourself or being too worried about people thinking it's good or bad. There's so much opportunity for cabaret slots where you can do five minutes, try that live feeling."

"Approach it with an open mind, and don't be afraid to be frustrated because you're going to be. Don't try to pretend it's fantastic."

"Be open minded for where this could go. Whoever goes into this will learn a new set of skills – obviously all the tech, but as an actor you're learning to create your own show almost and develop your characters more."

"Remember that it is about connecting, it still translates. You can take your time with it, take space in a different way."

## MANAGING CROSS-SECTOR PRODUCTIONS DURING ISOLATION

A production that crosses sectors and artistic disciplines requires an understanding, appreciation and respect of all those things that are both specific to each process and of those that interconnect the various media. As a creative who spans multiple worlds, Guy notes, "Even between theatre and film, there's a chasm of language and methodologies and production. That's the same between technology and theatre."

And the merging of these worlds is in many ways dependent on timing, adds Lucy, "Live performers, performing at home in their bedrooms with green screens – if we'd proposed that to professional actors or Equity a year ago, I don't think we'd have ever got it off the ground. We're really excited to bring these together – it could only have happened with COVID-19."

### A THEME PARK EXPERIENCE

Alice was billed as a virtual theme park – the idea that audiences can move around a variety of different rides in an order of their choosing to get a complete but unique experience of the world. That's very different to having someone sitting in front of a screen or in a seat in a theatre.

It's a new way of breathing life into this story, notes Zoe, "Alice isn't an amazing narrative; the book isn't very strong. It's about encounters with characters, so a theme park felt a genius way to think about the story. Also, the narrative isn't linear. It's a series of episodes so you can start anywhere with them. Creation Theatre's concept that you could encounter characters and it didn't matter in what order – it could involve choice – was inspired for this text."

But it takes logistical thinking, as with immersive work, "You've got to get the timing right to prevent backups and merging."

### BRINGING TECHNOLOGY INTO THE VIRTUAL

For Zoe, "Alice could take more technical experiments than other projects. We wanted to explore Alice being in the middle of a world

between computer gaming and AI and theatre."

The pandemic has shifted focus within all creative industries. For Guy, "Prior to the pandemic, we were looking to involve Charisma.ai in the physical immersive theatre environment – it might be you walk into a café and you talk to a pepper pot. The focus of our involvement was around integrating the digital into the physical. What the pandemic's done is changed that because everything is digital, and so the roles reverse."

### USING ZOOM THEATRE

Zoom as a software has expanded what is considered possible in digital theatre: perfect timing to be fully utilised throughout the pandemic. But working within its limitations is still a restriction when trying to expand and consider new creative ways of working. This type of technology is normally not built for adventurous application, it serves a commercial function of being widely used in a very narrow way.

Guy comments on the use of Zoom as such a creative platform, "The enabling part is all its feature sets, the functions that exist – it can do green screen; it can do break out rooms. The inhibitors were the things that are not in the feature set, but that were quite unique to our play."

"It is always beneficial for technology companies to get creative industries involved in their design over and above a colour palette and a user interface, to think about the core thing. What comes out at the end is something that can then be used in different ways, and that's a good thing."

And when pushing boundaries of technical applications, you inevitably come across more of their limitations based on how your audience interacts with the programme itself, adds Zoe, "It depends on your server, your cookies, whether you've opened it in the browser or the app, whether you get kicked out and go straight to the website or whether Zoom instructs you. Things felt like a mistake for some people on some devices even when it wasn't."

Despite its limitations, various Zoom packages offer a much broader art of the possible, if you have the skills and the time to take advantage, notes Lucy, "We knew spotlighting and knew how to make a show in Zoom. But we upgraded to the expensive Zoom account late in the process – you have to be able to write CSS and HTML to personalise it.

"The main thing we did was to personalise the launch

"Set up calls with yourself and practice camera work and see how to make your surroundings change."

"Alice isn't an amazing narrative; the book isn't very strong. It's about encounters with characters, so a theme park felt a genius way to think about the story."

that has never been done before.”

#### CONSIDERING THE AUDIENCE IN INTERACTIVE WORK

Work should always be about the audience experience – and especially in interactive productions where the public will individually self-select to participate or stay back and watch. Zoe observes that in the digital sphere, “Audiences at home are much less inhibited than audiences at the theatre and that’s joyous. The best interaction is where you make an offer and people respond with their take on it. It’s about choice – the audience can turn their camera off at any point and disengage.

“It’s co-creation! But be careful about not putting the audience under pressure. In our shows you’ll always have to put up your hand and volunteer, we’ll never put people on the spot. Because that community is where the show has true power, but with that comes responsibility. I would say to the actors, it’s alright to be witty but nobody should feel crap. Sometimes people were singled out for the wrong reason and I would pick up on that. The audience have to have a good time.

“I like that extension of care for the audience in immersive and interactive work. We caretake.”

#### AUDIENCE WELLBEING IN DIGITAL INTERACTIVE THEATRE – NOT JUST THE ACTORS, BUT STAGE MANAGEMENT TOO

In a production like Alice, where the audience self-selects and then can be spotlighted for individual interaction on screen, it’s not always the actors that decide who is picked for one-on-one time, notes Zoe, “The stage manager is the person responsible for spotlighting the audience – looking in gallery view at who’s up for being chosen, people inviting attention. It’s more important in this format to read that and to know what’s happening to the people not being spotlit.”

The audience in these situations are aligned closely to game theatre, “It’s about offering people a spectrum of playfulness, making people feel loved and valued and feeling that their way of experiencing it is just as valid. Just because somebody wants to sit back, they’re

page. When you click on one of the links, you’d normally meet the white page that said Zoom was loading. We personalised that so you get the star field and the help button in the background. Then after five minutes in a Zoom call that background changes, so when you come out of the call you should get the choices.”

#### PICKING THE BEST ZOOM AUDIENCE MODEL

For Zoe, it was clear from the start that the idea of choice was integral to this show, “There’s the uber choice of how you experience a story, then there’s the choice of how much you interact within episodes. For me, digital works best when it’s live and interactive and the audience’s presence is acknowledged, sometimes used and blended. The experiences engaged an audience in very different ways – you weren’t constantly being asked to do the same thing or being spoken to in the same way. They had a personality of their own in terms of what they were asking the audience.”

For Lucy, the challenge was how to build in those encounters with each character, “We spent a lot of time trying to work out different audience models for how the show could work. Were they going through three breakout rooms; were they self-navigating round different Zoom calls; is the entire thing in one zoom call? What we didn’t have in the process was time to split test those ways of packaging the content.”

Giles notes the potential differences in audience experience as well, “At one extreme of the scale is that you could have one Zoom call that people come into and watch a set order. At the other end is us having six rolling scenes that the audience can come in and out of as they like.

“We found the one Zoom call disappointing and we found the other end far too free – the audience doesn’t get a good experience. What it ended up with is that young people, particularly kids, like the idea of the multiple Zoom calls because they’re much more confident with technology and being able to choose. The most traditional, older theatregoing audience are more comfortable with the idea of sitting back and watching.

“It’s a constant debate and part of the reason we got the funding for this – trying something



just as welcome at the party. It's about feeling welcomed – the tone of the conversation in the room is important.”

## CREATIVE GUIDANCE – HOW TO WRITE IMMERSIVE SCRIPTS FOR FILM/GAME EXPERIENCES

### USING CHARISMA TO EASILY EDIT YOUR NARRATIVE

“Our entire vision for Charisma as a technology platform was that it should be used by writers, to write a story and then change that story when they saw how people were interacting with that story.”

### GIVING AUDIENCE AGENCY WHILE RETAINING CONTROL

“You never relinquish dramaturgical responsibility – I'm not interested in a show that might end up here because somebody's decided that's the ending. That's our job as makers, to make sure it's a satisfying ending.”

## TECHNICAL PRODUCTION GUIDANCE – VIDEO PRODUCTION IN ISOLATION

### USING ANIMATION WITHIN PRODUCTION

For quick animation changes, Charisma came up with an innovative way that made the whole fine-tuning process as responsive as the theatre industry requires.

Guy explains, “Animation is a highly labour-intensive industry and to record a new piece of animated lip-synced footage a couple of hours before it's meant to go live would be a bit of a challenge. Fortunately, I worked out a production pathway where we were using existing tech – an app that does lip syncing. We took in the drawing of the Cheshire Cat and I lip-synced it to my own face, then had the voice of the cat automatically generated by Charisma.

“The pathway meant that I could chop and change a piece of animated Cheshire Cat and voice it and lip-sync it in about 20-30 minutes.

“When Picasso was asked, ‘How long did it take you to do that drawing?’ he responded, ‘An

hour and forty years.’ To be able to produce an animated cat in 20 minutes takes decades of understanding, and carefully finding the right tool that achieves that simplicity.”

## HOW TO MANAGE AUDIO AND SFX AND PROGRAMMATIC VOICE PRODUCTION REMOTELY

The production uses a combination of software packages, many known to the theatre industry already – QLab – and many that may be better known within the technology sector – ManyCam. It often takes a change of mindset to adapt to these new ways of working.

Stage manager Sinead Owens comments, “Up until Zoom theatre started, I wouldn't have described myself as a technical person! It's very different to what I'm used to as a stage manager – our devised shows are normally in some old building, where I run the show by hiding in the chimney or something, so not a normal stage manager! The majority of the time too I'm doing other things, that integration into this was perfect – I have apps on my phone that can run the sound without looking at a QLab file for example. I had bits and pieces I could bring over straight away.”

## BEST PRACTICES FOR USE OF DIGITAL PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGIES AND COLLABORATIVE TOOLS DURING A LOCKDOWN

### INTEGRATION OF ZOOM WITH A GAMES ENGINE

Guy explains, “To get Zoom into a 3D games engine, we created a beautifully rendered lifelike natural setting above the rabbit hole and then the rabbit hole itself. That's a Charisma deliverable, a thing we created. To put that into the beginning of a show is quite unique. Then, to pull the feeds from Zoom apart and reconstruct them into that games engine, has never been done before.”

### TECHNICAL REHEARSAL – OR LACK THEREOF

It's important to embrace the things that are quite different for a digital show, notes Giles, “The process of creating a technical Zoom show means that there isn't a technical rehearsal,

so you're continually running tech stuff as you go through the process. Once you start doing notes when the show is running, there isn't time to catch some of that technical stuff up. So, you do get those first three or four shows when you're finding that obvious things are hard work.

“Working around the technological latency between operating and when it shows up on screen – it takes practice to time it properly, trial and error. It's not a challenge, it's just upskilling.”

### UPGRADE YOUR HARDWARE AND CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE VIEWING PLATFORMS

In a live show, the method by which the audience observes is far more universal – everyone is in the same space, so considering blocking and sightlines is key but you know that people will be engaging with the production by physically viewing it. Access issues are of course a vital consideration, as they are with physical theatre too. But here, rather than sightlines, you have audience technology to contend with.

Giles adds, “What is difficult about this show particularly, but also most Zoom shows, is that technologically it's the most advanced that we've tried to do and the platforms that we're using are all quite specific to the hardware you're using. There are things in the show that I can't do because my Mac is old, there's things that Sinead can't do because she doesn't have a PC. Even then, the very programme we're using works differently in small ways. The most difficult technical thing is working out the distribution of technical responsibility – who actually can achieve some of the things.

“Because of the way the show works – jumping in and out of multiple Zoom calls – there were about three shows at the beginning of the run that essentially you couldn't watch on an iPad or tablet. Just because of the way the Zoom app works differently to the Zoom web browser. We did manage to get that fixed – hooray for Guy and his amazing team!”

## TEAM MENTAL HEALTH AND PROJECT IMPACT

Wellbeing during the pandemic was of paramount importance for all our creatives and freelancers. We were keen to capture how this production impacted the wellbeing of those involved given the context of the industry i.e. the closing of all theatres. We want this show – and others like it in the future – to be

“It's not a challenge, it's just upskilling”

“There are things in the show that I can't do because my Mac is old, there's things that Sinead can't do because she doesn't have a PC”

a beacon of light that combats the very real mental and physical health implications and risks around performers/freelancers being out of work and stifled of creative outlets for their talents.

Several members of the show's cast and creative team were asked two standardised questions to gauge the extent with which Alice A Virtual Theme Park had affected their mental health and wellbeing, in particular considering that this piece of digital theatre and interactive storytelling was taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted during the show's run in August 2020.

- How were you feeling about the theatre industry before this show, at the start of the pandemic?
- How are you feeling about the industry now, having been involved in this production?

The answers given were frank and honest, a reflection of the anxiety that pervades our industry at a time of such uncertainty.

#### WELLBEING DURING THE PANDEMIC

Lucy, "I've generally found lockdown and digital theatre to be much better for my mental health and wellbeing than the old life. And the efficiency - we've been able to achieve so much more in a week. You can fit it in because the efficiency of being at home is huge. For us it has shown that there is a different way to work."

"Creation Theatre are almost entirely working parents. There's always a preconception that your children should be in childcare while you're working, or at school - you shouldn't have them at home. But because we've all been forced into this situation, you realise it's all fine! For what it means for us as an organisation, for work-life balance, for people with caring responsibilities, I'm excited for how we translate that onto actors. We talk about access of the audience, but access for the performers as well is key."

Zoe, "I really struggle to want to go back to the real world in some ways. I've loved the freedom. Because we're funded by the Arts Council, my priority is first of all to give work to actors living in Northern Ireland and that means normally

that we don't have a diverse range of actors so that's been really freeing.

"But in the beginning, I was utterly consumed by it. I was up at 4am, doing and planning and working at a pace that wasn't sustainable. I needed to do it, to be there - if I just shut the computer and not done anything, I would have struggled. It's only now that I'm getting better at returning to working at home rather than living at work."

Members of the Alice cast, "At the start of lockdown there was a lot of uncertainty, it was quite an anxious time for everyone. It was a surprise that even doing something I love was something I needed to bandy myself up for."

"It was a communal grief period. Then people started doing things and others felt guilty about not creating, 'Don't shame me into making work' and all that."

"It [the pandemic] kicked off while I was in a show with Creation Theatre, so I felt depressed. It was very sudden - I was more focussed on having lost the character and show quite suddenly. But then as I started to gain more knowledge about the impact of COVID-19, I felt scared for the industry and how on earth it's going to cope and bounce back. It was more the way that people who were more knowledgeable about the industry and more experienced, the fact that they were worried made me worried."

"Similarly, to everyone, I was bewildered by it all, terrified, unsure, gutted - our industry got completely blindsided and put on the back burner. Even still, really. I was taken out by it all and a bit worried."

"We found out on St Patrick's Day that the Big Telly show I was working on wasn't going to happen. From Tuesday to Friday - even though it was only three days - I thought, 'what possibly could I do during this time if theatres aren't open?!' But from the Friday it was more excitement of what we could do during this time. I had three days of an existential crisis, of whether I'd picked the wrong career to go into. And then it was great!"

"When we started, Creation Theatre and Big Telly were really courageous and made a decision about not doing live shows until summer 2021. I think that's very sensible and the only effective business plan for them."

## THE BENEFITS OF WORKING ON ALICE | A VIRTUAL THEME PARK

Guy, "Taking on this project gave people a welcome challenge away from the challenge of living. That's why we do what we do, we enjoy creating. The problem arises when creative people are not able to do that and there is no outlet. I think that's often the source of anxiety that leads to mental health issues."

Zoe, "We started doing this in complete lockdown where your costume was what you had in your wardrobe. People were dealing with the realisation that we were in a pandemic – sometimes it seemed ridiculous that we were all on Zoom having craic! You were aware that people would be messaging you to say, 'Without this my life would have been a nightmare'."

"It can be a lifeline for some people, but I also feel the pain of people with families who are trying to work in one room while not putting their kids to bed in the other room. That's hard because you're constantly in guilt even though you're working. You're confronted with what you're not doing and that can be difficult. It's important to acknowledge the context people are in after rehearsals, to invite the partner who's been waiting outside the door and bring them into the 'pub' with you."

"The potential for the show to bring people – strangers and families – together, that was the joy that got me through lockdown. Knowing people responded to that and felt like they were being a part of something. Being in a community with strangers, that's what we do well."

Members of the Alice cast, "It feels in so many ways like a regular job, a regular play. It's been pretty hairy at times, but that's just like being on stage in that respect. You get nervous; you have a good show; you have a bad show; you have people that respond, people that don't respond. I'll be blue when it's all over."

"Although we've been given a grant in the meantime, we've got families to feed so we're having to do odd jobs. So, I'm really blessed to be doing this. It's a terrifying time for anyone that is self-employed, period. Not just actors, anyone. You are reliant on yourself."

"Creation have always looked after me. More than anything, they wanted to be able to

employ freelancers. That's right at the top of it and that's amazing."

"I've had really mixed feelings about the industry in its entirety. With the Zoom style of production, it's really lifted my head on a personal level. I see it as very different to theatre, a different genre. At the start I had difficulties trying to get my head around it, but I approached it like learning a completely different, new skill and embracing it for what it is."

"It was like a life raft; I jumped on board and was buzzing to do it. It snowballed into this amazing thing. They realised this was a great form of work, not only for the company but for the industry. Then I went through a whole process of, 'I'm acting and managing to be paid for it in a pandemic?' There was a certain amount of guilt that came with that. Loads of my friends had to move home, they lost jobs and flats, and I'm still working. I wrestled with that for a while, it was a roller coaster."

"I feel like it's lifted me out of potentially a dark place as an artist. I can see the opportunity moving on from this, a future where the arts are still a possibility."

## THE INDUSTRY GOING FORWARD

It's a brand new way of operating that has suddenly become the normal, notes Lucy, "The whole industry has shifted to a different business model that we've never had before and that we hadn't decided to do – it's just happened overnight."

Small steps are the order of the day for Guy, "I remain cautious about any positive steps in the theatre industry before mid-2021. The government can relax rules, but you'll see a two-phase approach. The psychology behind it is going to take longer – the fear of sitting beside someone, behind someone who sneezes and potentially that sneeze over a two-hour period could be life-threatening. I think there'll be a lot of people who simply won't go because it's too risky."

"What that does from a financial perspective is ask the question, 'How long can a theatre survive when its business model is not working?' Say a theatre has a breakeven point of 70-80% of seats, and social distancing rules

say even after the doors are open you can't do more than 50%. You're losing on every performance you give – something has to change; you cannot carry on incurring losses."

In other ways, the burden has been lifted from some theatre companies, adds Zoe, "We've had more freedom to work with a wider range of actors, ones with families who we can accommodate caring responsibilities around. It means that we can do more diverse casting. And our audience catchment area is global – you can be bolder about the work."

Members of the Alice cast, "As a performer you know that you're going to be the last ones coming back to work. There isn't an openness within the industry that tells you what's happening. I think people try to keep their cards as close to their chests as they can, they don't want to give any wrong information. But no one is giving any information out, which is even worse."

"The wider theatre industry thought that we'd all get panto... We're all used to the idea that you're going to have months without any work, but now we've got to a point where essentially all pantos have gone. I think it gets increasingly worrying – what gets people back into a theatre? When are we going to start touring? What brings back the audiences in the numbers that we need to make theatre profitable and keep it running? To some extent I'm lucky to be isolated from that – I work for Creation Theatre and Big Telly a lot and they are committed to keeping up their digital programme. But a lot of my friends have lost their Christmas work and it now looks like a year before they do paid theatre again."

"The Government's self-employed income support scheme has been absolutely incredible, a vast amount of money. But it's also now over, with potentially months of no work – where does the money come from? Who knows?"

"There are theatre companies that take the majority of the money, which should be leading the way and haven't. I'm really disappointed in that. When the Arts Council offers public money to big corporations, they should be leading the way. They should be offering something because you're basically taking taxpayers' money to make more money for yourself."

"Working for a company that isn't even funded by the Arts Council, you start to realise how incredible artists can be. Artists are often found at non-profit organisations rather than corporations, who are willing to take public funding but are not willing to do anything for the public."

"I'm really blessed to be doing this. It's a terrifying time for anyone that is self-employed, period. Not just actors, anyone. You are reliant on yourself."

"I feel like it's lifted me out of potentially a dark place as an artist. I can see the opportunity moving on from this, a future where the arts are still a possibility."

"Being that I've been able to work with Creation Theatre time and time again, and they've been keeping me busy in all sorts of ways, it's given me hope. I do feel quite optimistic now, I trust in the fact that we have an ability as an industry to be so creative. While it might be a bit strange the way that we go about keeping the industry alive for the next few months, we're going to do it one way or another. I'm not fearful for artists as a whole, I know we'll find a way to keep being artistic and supporting ourselves in that way.

"The theatre, I'm keeping my eye on it but I have a lot of faith that we're going to keep making things happen in a way that means when we are able to bounce back, it's not starting from the ground up. It won't feel like everything's been destroyed; it will feel like we're just dusting off the shelves.

"I think the most unsettling and scary thing is we don't know for sure how it's going to happen. I know that we'll keep trying to keep that element of community. It's so beautiful in that theatre tries to keep everybody together, keep that family feel. That's such a powerful string that pulls us all together. That's what makes me think we're going to keep exploring ways to keep this industry alive."

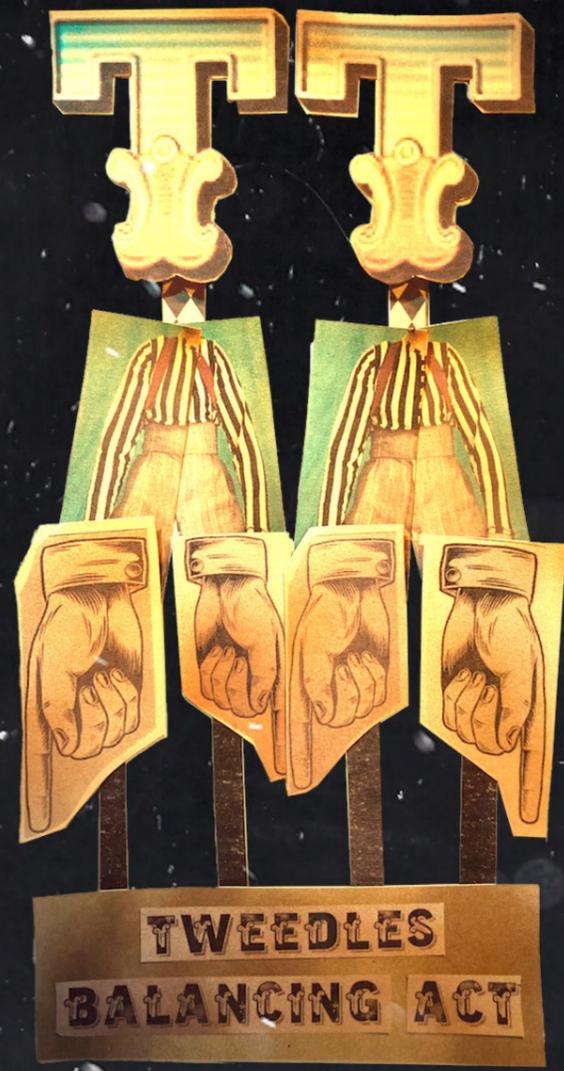
"I think it's positive and hopeful, but I've always been a bit of a realist. There's a side of me that wonders how it's going to work financially. I'm in the Midlands, and some of my big regional theatres - Derby Theatre, Nottingham Playhouse - I worry how they're going to do it without full capacity. And thinking would I feel comfortable going to the theatre yet, interacting with actors on stage, sanitising props and everything? It feels a bit rushed but it kind of has to be - I totally feel for anyone making those decisions out there.

"I certainly feel hopeful for next year, I feel like we're going to come back strong and this is a weird limbo period we're in where people are just trying and that's all you can do. But I don't blame people for being optimistic!"

MAD  
ATTERS  
HAT



ILLS  
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CAUCUS  
RACES  
SPORTS DAY



WHITE  
RABBIT  
CARDS



**THEATRICAL IMPACT – PRESS REACH****NEW YORK TIMES**

“During a brief holiday in a rental cabin, we watched Alice: A Virtual Theme Park, an ingenious, overstimulated show from Creation Theatre and Big Telly Theatre Company, in partnership with charisma.ai. I had seen their version of The Tempest, one of the first pandemic shows to really explore and enjoy the possibilities of Zoom. This new effort, an interactive adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, has more ambition.

“After an introduction, audience members – or their parents – can navigate from one Zoom room to another, interacting with the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, the Red Queen. (Their monologues are mostly Carroll-derived, with a few contemporary asides.) You can also, briefly, play a croquet-related game on your phone.”

**THE OBSERVER**

“On Zoom, comedy often turns up in a funny hat. In Creation Theatre’s reworking of Lewis Carroll, Alice: A Virtual Theme Park, the March Hare sports frighteningly active tendrils.

“Zoe Seaton’s production, which features Charlotte Keatley as guest writer, is a series of merry episodes intended to be watched by families. Once down the intestinal-looking rabbit hole, the audience guide themselves through a series of stories by touching different icons. The Dormouse wears grey shorts. Tweedles Dum and Dee are one actor amusingly got up like duplicate early cyclists or circus performers in striped onesies and handlebar moustaches: they are the opposite of the traditional apple shape, perhaps because nowadays apple-shaped looks not so much jolly as a possible cause for anxiety.”

“You could argue that the more jovial, the less Carroll-like. Yet while writing this, news of yet another postponement – the King’s Edinburgh Sleeping Beauty – arrived. This Alice may be the nearest many will get to a panto this year.

**THE STAGE**

“While many theatre companies are making the switch to digital in lockdown, few are doing so with the same relish as Oxford-based Creation

Theatre, with the next project an ambitious AI version of Alice in Wonderland.

“Hosting its shows on Zoom allows an interactivity with the audience that has always been at the heart of Creation’s work. When you watch, your camera is on and your mic is under the control of the company.

“Working online has given the company a new understanding and approach to accessibility. ‘There are a lot of audience members [for whom] physically going to a theatre is a barrier,’ Askew says, explaining how the company is thinking about the use of digital performances beyond lockdown. ‘We’re in conversations about getting better access in schools, prisons and old people’s homes. There are a lot of opportunities, as this type of work might be more accessible for many.

“Zoom theatre has opened up new educational opportunities, too. Before any of the shows, Creation’s first step was to convert all of its drama clubs for kids into Zoom interactive experiences. ‘The most significant thing we’ve discovered is it’s not worth trying to do a drama class as you normally would,’ Askew says of Creation’s classes for five to 16-year-olds. ‘It’s much more a Zoom theatre class. We do a lot of playing with the joy of going on and off the screen, playing with scale and holding different textures and puppets to the camera.

“Isolation has altered every step of the process of making the show, from the rehearsal room to the way the audience engages. In rehearsal, Seaton has noticed that actors are braver in smaller Zoom rooms than larger ones. She keeps rehearsals to 90 minutes and only calls relevant cast members so as to avoid exhaustion.”

**STAGE DOOR**

“You might say that Oxford’s Creation Theatre and Northern Ireland’s Big Telly have had a good shut-down. While others were rushing to fling whatever they had in their archive online, these two companies have together pioneered live interactive storytelling using Zoom that has provided rollicking family entertainment and made it feel as the audience is not an afterthought but essential. Just as we are in a physical space. The latest takes audiences down a rabbit hole for a digital version of Lewis

Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland relocated to a theme park. Zoe Seaton adapts and directs but one scene – The Mad Hatter’s Tea Party—has been written by Charlotte Keatley who wrote one of the most revived plays of the second half of the last century, My Mother Said I Never Should.”

**LOVE LONDON LOVE CULTURE**

“Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland is a story in which creatives are able to allow their imaginations really run away with them – as this ambitious and fun new digital production from Creation Theatre proves.

“It is a lively and playful adaptation that really captures the quirkiness of the original story.”

“ambitious and fun... a lively and playful adaptation that really captures the quirkiness of the original story”

**REV STAN**

“Creation Theatre has taken online live performance to a whole new level with its latest family show. It is imaginatively brought to life in the style of an old-fashioned fairground with a combination of high-tech wizardry, including AI and good old-fashioned theatre craft and entertainment... taking online performance to a whole new level”

**THEATRE WEEKLY**

“Alice | A Virtual Theme Park is a multidimensional, professionally prepared experience, with actual costumes, wonderful instrumental soundtrack and graphic designs perfectly capturing the original spirit of Alice.

“An innovative take on Lewis Carroll’s classic novel... perfectly capturing the original spirit of Alice”

**WITHIN HER WORDS**

“An online, interactive, family-friendly ‘theme park’ which takes one of the most adapted stories on the planet – Alice in Wonderland – and one of the most unexpected winners of 2020 – Zoom – and exploits both for all their boxes of tricks are worth.

“Considering how well-trodden Alice in Wonderland is, there was a real thrill in having no idea what to expect beforehand, and being repeatedly surprised. Plus, as someone who

now holds a world-weary pride in my Zoom expertise, I found the technological sleights-of-hand that this show pulls off genuinely jaw-dropping. Part of the delight of Alice is the surprise element, so I won’t say too much, but some savvy tech magician (credited as Illusionist Paul McEaney) has clearly fallen through a Zoom hole into a video conferencing wonderland. It’s very much in these moments of tech magic that the game of the production lies.

“an entertaining spectacle with mirrors, make-up and madness.”

**OUGHT TO BE CLOWNS**

“There’s rarely a dearth of opportunities to visit Wonderland, Lewis Carroll’s ever-popular source material a frequent presence in theatres but with Alice – A Virtual Theme Park, there’s a very much 21st century take which works surprisingly well. And given Covid-19, it isn’t a play but rather a multiplatform, multiple choice experience.

“Let the Cheshire Cat guide you through your Zoom settings and listen to Leda Douglas’ inquisitive Alice as she takes us down the rabbit hole, and the scene is then set for an inspired, interactive and family-friendly journey with these familiar characters, effectively curated by Creation Theatre.

“Zoe Seaton’s adaptation, aided by guest writer Charlotte Keatley, does an excellent job of blending technical innovation with live theatre, meaning that as audiences make their own way through the various vignettes, there’s plenty of amusing surprises at every turn and click of the button.

“an excellent job of blending technical innovation with live theatre”



## FINANCIAL GUIDANCE – OPENLY SHARING BEST PRACTICE

### INNOVATEUK GRANT

The three co-production companies – Charisma.ai, Creation Theatre Company and Big Telly Theatre Company – all agreed to green light Alice, but then were successful in a funding bid from InnovateUK which allowed for greater creative ambition and more budget to be allocated to the show.

The grant of £48,000 covered the production costs for a four-week run – August 2020 – with two performances per day in a five-day working week.

### RETAIL PRICE POINTS AND CHALLENGES

Tickets for the show retailed at £20 per device, meaning that a household could view the full performance together for the cost of one ticket. This was key for fostering audience engagement and bringing together families for a collective experience.

Alice | A Virtual Theme Park launched as a summer family play during a global pandemic with various stages of lockdown in various countries. During the run, UK pandemic restrictions were lifted to allow people to go on holiday during the school break, and the weather warmed to an uncommon 32C for the country. This affected ticket sales as audiences took the opportunity to get outdoors and away from screens.

### DIGITAL PARAMETERS

The Zoom software had a capacity of 120 participants in each show, which with 12 cast and creatives made for a full house of 108. In reality, we had around 30-40 logins each performance, many of them families. So, each performance would have an average audience of 80-100 people.

The InnovateUK grant enabled us to perfect the integration of the audiences' Zoom video feeds into the Unity 3D games engine which was developed by Charisma.ai. It also enabled the production to licence a multiplayer hedgehog game for the croquet scene, which the younger

members of the audiences especially enjoyed but took people out of the video Zoom environment to their mobiles and distracted somewhat from the overall performance.

Digital productions can, and should, be seen as revenue generating as opposed to free-to-consume marketing. To create an additional revenue stream for theatres, a sustainable ticket price needs to be attached to a performance that can create an income for the production company, cast and crew.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### COMBINING THE DISCIPLINES IS ENTIRELY POSSIBLE

Guy's theory is that "immersive theatre and interactive storytelling are close cousins because of the proximity to and involvement of the audience. This live, online project opportunity was about testing whether that theory was right. And it is."

"Both interactive media and immersive theatre present the same storytelling issues around what happens when the audience interrupts, and how you handle it when audiences can influence the storyline. What we all love is the thrill of live, it's very much a common ground – the nerves, the adrenaline that kick in on it."

Sinead notes, "We had a woman in America talk to us in a Q&A after a previous show and she got really teary and said, 'please don't stop doing things like this'. She wasn't able to leave the house so hadn't seen theatre in a really long time. We were just trying to make something and didn't realise the impact it was going to have on people. To be able to bring theatre into people's homes who mightn't have been able to go see it, it's nice to be able to do that through Zoom. I don't think we should do only Zoom theatre but maybe a few times a year, or somebody should continue to do something with it."

One of the Alice cast remembers a particularly special audience encounter, "We had a guy from America who's autistic, whose carers looked for a show for Alice | A Virtual Theme Park because he saw a video of Alice crying in the Disney film. They found us and we had a chat with him after. I think it's really important that

what we do keeps continuing for that reason. Someone once told me, you can't change everyone's life but if you can affect one life, that's a reason for doing theatre."

#### BUT IT'S TOUGHER THAN IT LOOKS

Members of the cast reflect on how difficult the process can be, "You don't realise how much work goes into it. I saw a show before I joined the company and it looked so easy. But it's only when you're doing the show that you realise how much work goes into it."

"During rehearsals, motivating myself was tough – that motivation to get up and start thinking about the show at a certain time, start playing with ideas when you're just at home. You could just so easily procrastinate for a lot of the time. I'm always really excited about performing jobs, but when I'm in the house alone it's not letting those voices get into your head of 'you could just stay in your pyjamas!'"

#### RESPECT THE PACE OF CHANGE AND THE DIFFERENT WAYS OF WORKING

Both within individual styles and the different ways of approaching the various media, it's vital to make your peace with how quickly the show will change in the earlier stages.

Guy observes, "There is an angle of the technology industry that is closely allied to architecture. You can't change the architecture of a building just after you've finished building it. And yet in theatre you can because you can move sets and actors around. It's a different way of working."

"When you've got the setup as a theme park rather than a play, if you close down a ride, where are all the people going to go and how are they going to get there? Your pathways change."

Charisma constructed a digital platform that allows a theatre production to morph and change in a very flexible way even while it's live. The pace of change after the show began playing to live audience was agile and tangible.

#### IND THE WORKING AND HOME LIFE BALANCE

Members of the Alice cast found it particularly hard to establish boundaries, "When you're working from home, your downtime space becomes your working space. It's difficult to put a line between the two."

"A really important thing that you have to do when you're working on this is to let things go, keep them within the 90 minutes you're in the room but not let it fester or take it with you for the rest of the day. You have to let things sit and not carry it all or it can be exhausting."

"One of the struggles for me is I'm in my bedroom not a spare room. I've got a parachute duvet cover that covers the floor. I've wallpapered my wall – you do it because you want to make work. It's invasive to a degree but I think the company was clear about that off the bat."

#### HAVE CONFIDENCE IN YOUR ABILITY TO ADAPT

One Alice cast member fell back on their ability to flex and change, "I feel like I'm in the swing of it all, it becomes routine. I don't think I would have envisioned that – I assumed it would always be a bit alien, a bit weird, to go upstairs and perform in my bedroom. But it's become this new normal. It's funny how quickly we adapt."

#### OPENLY SHARE YOUR METHODS

Guy remembers one of the overarching objectives for this project, "We always wanted to be able to publish what we'd learnt out of this. That initial thought means that you're always thinking about how this might be repeatable and how it might be able to be used by someone else – there's no point documenting something that no one else can use. Everything we're doing had that extensibility in mind."

Lucy adds the importance of learning from other industries to enhance this one, "In the tech world there is enormous generosity about what you've learnt. If you know how to make something work in Zoom, you do not hold that to yourself – you put it on every forum you can, you support everyone you can to make that work. It's accessible to make digital work because people are so generous at sharing

what they've done. There's a precedent here – we need to extend that generosity; we need to do what we can in theatre as well."

#### A REVENUE STREAM FOR THEATRE COMPANIES AND VENUES

Guy comments, "Part of the purpose of this project to offer a bifurcation of the stream – now you have a tributary which is another revenue stream that can exist and top up the base. Then there is a core question, 'Does that change the product itself? Does it change the way you write a theatre play?'"

"I think there is a model where theatres put on shows that run to 50% capacity and then sell tickets for people to watch it on YouTube. Or treat it as a new medium. The ideas that I've got are networking theatres – a play performed in multiple locations with minimal in-person audiences and with people at home."

Lucy adds, "I can see us down the line doing physical/ analogue shows. There's a portion of the audience that will always prefer that. But I think there will always be digital work happening as well, as well as projects where the two integrate – a physical show where you do the digital version a weekend afterwards."

#### KNOW YOUR WORTH

As a producer, Lucy was adamant that everyone be paid for their contribution and that the audience be charged to experience the production, "It's a principle of everyone valuing their own worth – you deserve to be paid for your work. These are ticketed events – they cost money to make and we're paying people to do it. Even if there are people who want to work, if we can't afford to pay them, they're not working on the show."

A stumbling block came at the outset of the pandemic for Guy in this vein, "Most of the larger theatres put their catalogues online for free during pandemic. What they've done is educate the entire market that online theatre is free. That's a head slap moment if ever there was one – this has been obvious for decades of online retail."

Lucy adds, "I think it's very important for the legacy of live theatre returning that people are used to having a product that is bought, that has value." Even the request for donations at the end of a production is a risky idea, "If you're just waiting for donations at

"I think there is a model where theatres put on shows that run to 50% capacity and then sell tickets for people to watch it on YouTube. Or treat it as a new medium."

"It's a principle of everyone valuing their own worth – you deserve to be paid for your work. These are ticketed events – they cost money to make and we're paying people to do it."



the end, it's very unpredictable."

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF 'LIVENESS' IN ONLINE WORK

There is a spectrum in online theatre with audience participation, in exactly the same way as in live performance, notes Lucy, "The importance of the audience – the audience being seen, the audience seeing each other and the audience interaction – are the key thing that makes our shows different in relation to what a lot of people have been doing. It's very difficult to create 'liveness'. I think there's so much more we can explore and unpick with those dynamics and how they translate digitally."

"The audience being seen, the audience seeing each other and the audience interaction, these are the key things that makes our shows different."

#### RETHINK ENTRENCHED AND UNFAIR THEATRE BEHAVIOURS

Lucy finds it hard to believe we've operated in such a bizarre way for so long, "We've done ridiculous things in the industry for years. Like performers in digs – it just seems a mad idea that these professionals have to spend half their time in the spare bedroom of some house they don't know. Now they can just be at home! Give over an area to green screen, but apart from that [be at home]."

"Most people over 65 have worked on computers their whole life. We're judging them like they're our grandparents, but they are pretty tech savvy."

#### ENGAGE WITH THE FULL AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHIC

As a producer, Lucy notes the wide age demographic of those who tuned into the show, "There's a perception that older people are excluded from digital experiences – that's not what we're finding at all. You would not believe how many single over-65s come and watch and stand on a chair and pretend to hit a mouse, and dance and pretend to do musical statues, and interact with everything. The accessibility is far greater too. Most people over 65 have worked on computers their whole life. We're judging them like they're our grandparents, but they are pretty tech savvy."

"We can spend a lot of time navel-gazing over technical details that don't matter to the audience."

#### FOCUS ON THE WOOD, NOT THE TREES

Thinking back over the process, Lucy comments, "We can spend a lot of time navel-gazing over technical details that don't matter to the audience, such as the decisions about how you're using the various available online platforms. What matters is that you give the audience an incredible experience."

TOP: THE FULL TEAM IN REHEARSALS  
BOTTOM: THE 3D ZOOM EXPERIENCE BEING BUILT BY CHARISMA.AI



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