Angela Butler

Simon McBurney, Theatrical Soundscapes, and Postdigital Communities

In this article, Angela Butler explores postdigital community through an analysis of Complicité's *The Encounter.* All facets of personal and civic life are permeated by the digital to such a degree that we are living through a period termed 'the postdigital'. Postdigital communities are commonly formed, and nearly always sustained, through online networks. Drawing on Jill Dolan's utopian performative and Victor Turner's communitas, the article argues that rather than acting as an ancillary commentary platform, postdigital communities are now a principal component of certain theatrical experiences. With increasingly isolated lives, there is an evident appeal to work that taps into the joy of being alone, together. Angela Butler is an independent scholar based in Dublin who works in the technology sector. Cultural transformation is the central pillar of her ongoing research. With an eye to new and future technologies, her work is concerned with posthumanism, identities in transformation, and affective encounters.

Key terms: Simon McBurney, Complicité, sound, audio, aural, affect, network, storytelling, intermediality.

IN 1975, ANDY WARHOL reflected on the virtues of virtual relationships and the alluring power of invisible connections:

> I have a telephone mate. We've had an on-going relationship over the phone for six years. I live uptown and she lives downtown. It's a wonderful arrangement: We don't have to get each other's bad morning breath, yet we have wonderful breakfasts together every morning like every other happy couple. I'm uptown in the kitchen making myself peppermint tea and a dry, medium-to-dark English muffin with marmalade, and she's downtown waiting for the coffee shop to deliver a light coffee and a toasted roll with honey and butter – heavy on the light, honey, butter, and seeds. We while and talk away in the sunny morning hours with the telephone nestled between head and shoulders and we can walk away or even hang up whenever we want to. We don't have to worry about kids, just about extension phones.[1]

Forty-five years later – May 2020 to be precise – I am at home, sitting on my couch, entering into a similar contemplation to Warhol. My computer is balanced on two cushions over my lap. I reach for my headphones, plug them in, and press play, joining a global audience watching Complicité's *The Encounter*. I am sitting in the same place, watching the same show as I did four years ago; but it's different. Amid a nationwide lockdown, most people hold a newfound appreciation of community and connection. We are dependent on the power of networks, both physical and virtual. *The Encounter* is one of those networks. It is one of those communities that requires the participant to be both alone and together. On this date, where I am, it is Day 68 of isolation.

Isolation shapes us. It changes our perception of the world. Among other factors, it brings to light our innate need for contact and the importance of community. In recent times, and particularly in the wake of Covid-19 lockdown measures, online platforms offer alternative communication channels and community networks. Virtual spaces propagate communities. Their members engage in isolated activity connected through shared digital content. Podcasts are one such space, emerging as one of the most popular contemporary forms of entertainment. This rise in popularity, known as 'the pivot to audio', can be observed in the dramaturgy and scenography of contemporary theatre. Over the past five years, an

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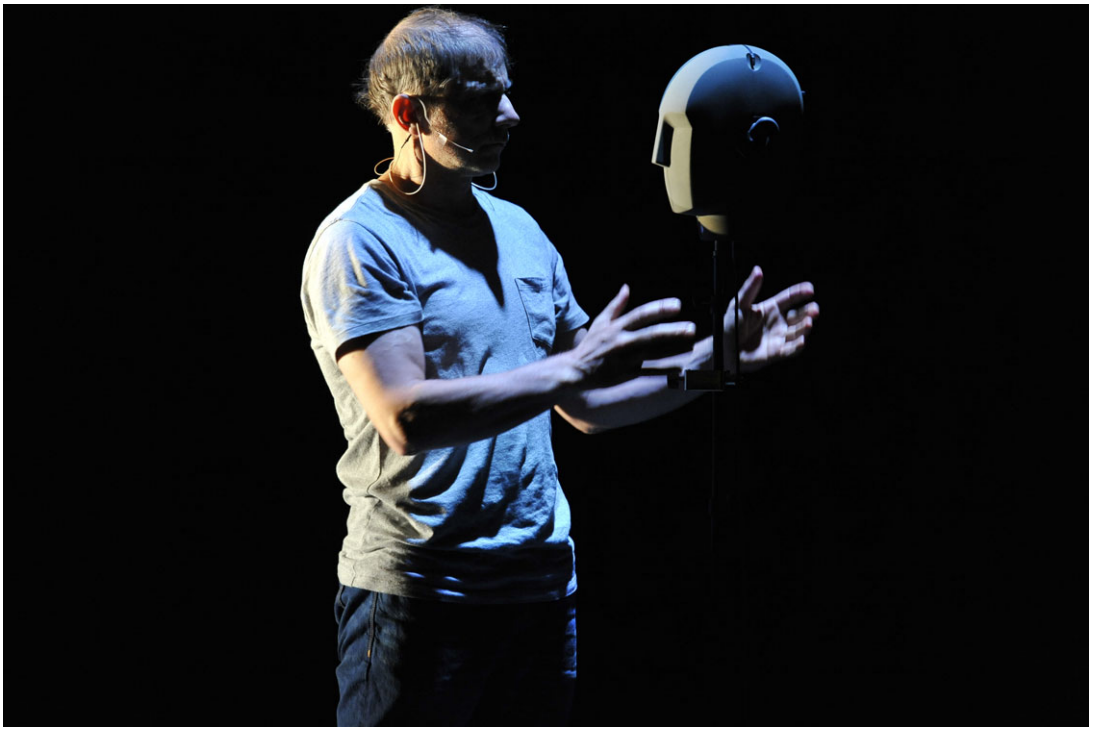

Figure 1. *The Encounter*: Simon McBurney speaking into a binaural head. Photo: Robbie Jack. Image reproduced with permission of Complicité.

increasing number of productions have incorporated aural techniques and narrative soundscapes as a grounding concept, leading Lyn Gardner to pronounce a 'big audio dynamite' explosion in 2016.[2]

Complicité's *The Encounter* is experienced through headphones and is presented as a piece of storytelling with most of the action evoked through words, sound effects, and recordings (Figure 1). I suggest that the experience of *The Encounter*'s theatrical soundscape demonstrates a recognition and emulation of postdigital communities which are defined both by their isolated activity and their connection through shared digital content. Another layer to this community emerges from Complicité's choice in 2016 to livestream one performance to an online audience. The coterminous online audience also experiences the performance through headphones. *The Encounter* transfers the solitary experience of a podcast or radio drama to a curated and communal listening space. Community takes on a new meaning in times of isolation and in the aftermath. This article explores how *The Encounter*'s immersive sound environment enables a particular kind of engaged spectatorship. It is reminiscent of closet drama and the early ambitions for radio drama, but significantly reflects its contemporary postdigital condition. The article will conclude with a reflection on what spectatorship and postdigital communities mean for theatre at a time of social distancing and sanctioned isolation.

The Encounter

The Encounter is a dramatization of Petru Popescu's 1991 book *Amazon Beaming*, which charts the 1969 journey of photographer Loren McIntyre as he travels to a remote part of the Amazon in search of the Mayoruna tribe. McIntyre wants to capture the first images of the tribe and publish them in the *National Geographic*. As the days pass, McIntyre attempts to document the tribe's nomadic life and traditions. When his camera is destroyed by an inquisitive woolly monkey, and he

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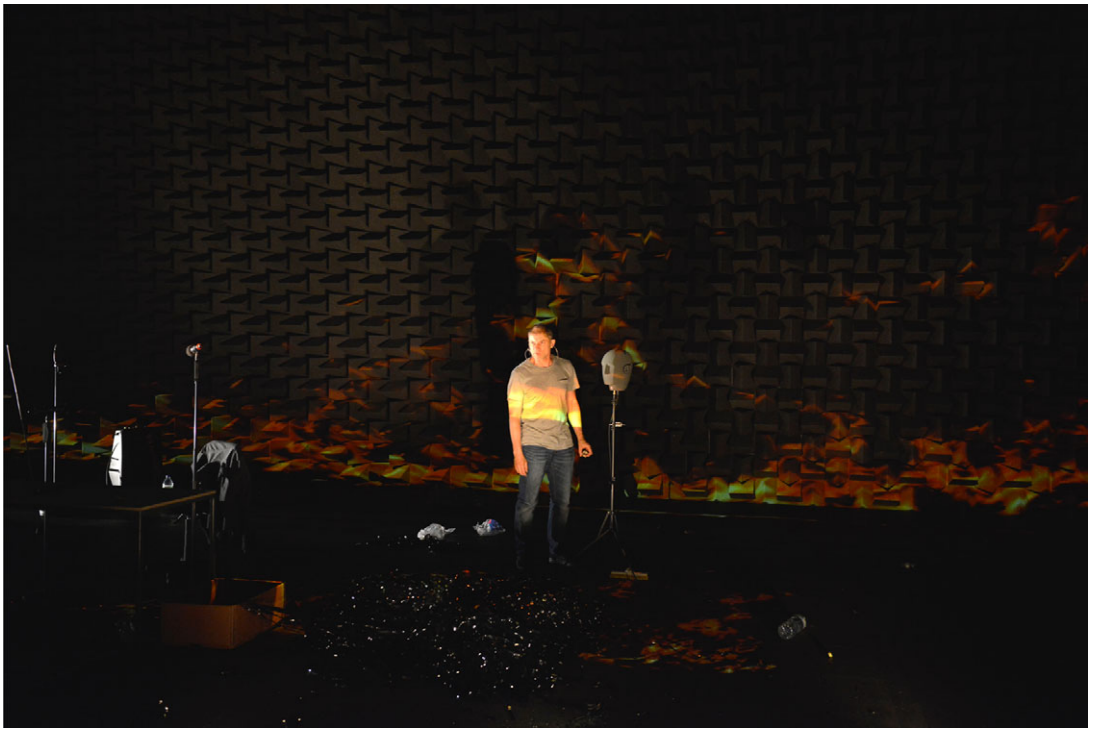

Figure 2. View of *The Encounter* stage. Photo: Robbie Jack. Image reproduced with permission of Complicité.

survives several near-death events in the jungle, McIntyre comes to the realization that his experiences push beyond the photographic or textual document. Like Popescu's book, *The Encounter* is a blend of a classic travel log and a journey of self-discovery. On a deeper level, it is a rumination about time, and acts as a profound analysis of the human's position in the natural world.

The Encounter premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2015 and toured nationally and internationally for the following three years. On 1 March 2016, during the play's run at the Barbican, Complicité broadcast a live performance of *The Encounter* on YouTube. There was an audience present at the Barbican and an audience watching the show virtually. Both audiences experienced the sounds of the show through headphones. Simon McBurney, director of and actor in *The Encounter*, remarks:

> When you put the headphones on, you get the feeling of being alone. McIntyre was . . . alone, so you have to reproduce the feeling of being alone despite being in an audience of several hundred people . . . I wanted a feeling of intimacy because I wanted people to feel a kind of . . . to examine their own empathy, and empathy and proximity are intimately connected.[3]

The Encounter's live broadcast was a one-off. It had a start time that was the same as the live performance. The broadcast could not be paused or rewinded. The recording was hosted on Complicité's channel for a week after the livestream, once more in 2018, and, as a response to demand for online programming during a Covid-19 lockdown, it was broadcast in May 2020.

The Encounter establishes several parallel and competing timelines. Popescu's account provides the narrative foundation for these timelines and Complicité's production enhances this aspect through the addition of sound technology. McIntyre's experience in the Amazon with the Mayoruna tribe deals with radical philosophical, political, and personal understandings of time from a human-made wristwatch to the rising of the sun.[4] The set for *The Encounter* is modest (Figure 2). Soundproofing apparatus,

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speakers, microphones, a binaural head, a chair, a desk, and multi-packs of water bottles appear onstage. Through Simon McBurney's embodiment of characters and multiple recordings played live, the audience is introduced to events that occurred in the 1960s during McIntyre's Amazon journey. Alongside this, at various points in the play, McBurney plays recordings of recent interviews with Popescu and his wife, writer Iris Friedman, conversations with specialists on time, environment, and tribal peoples' rights, and late-night chats with his five-year-old daughter, Noma. The livestream introduces yet another parallel timeline; another encounter.

Indeed, as much as *The Encounter* is a contemplation of time, it equally questions the human's place in the world. This occurs on two levels. First, sound is employed as a powerful immersive force in the production. Complicité demonstrate how sound can masquerade as many things (Figure 3). It performs in a very different way to visual effects. Sound effects are vaguer, more ambiguous. They depend on context. On top of this, a spectator brings their own experience to the interpretation in a more intimate manner than visual design. In this way, the spectator is perhaps more inclined to become immersed in the scenes created in *The Encounter* by way of rich description and sound effects. As Gaston Bachelard notes of poetic space,

> After the original reverberation, we are able to experience resonances, sentimental repercussions, reminders of our past. But the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface. And this is also true of a simple experience of reading. The image offered us by reading the poem now becomes really our own. It takes root in us. It has been given us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it, that we should have created it. It becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being.[5]

Through an interpretation of sound in *The Encounter*, in a distinctly intimate reception

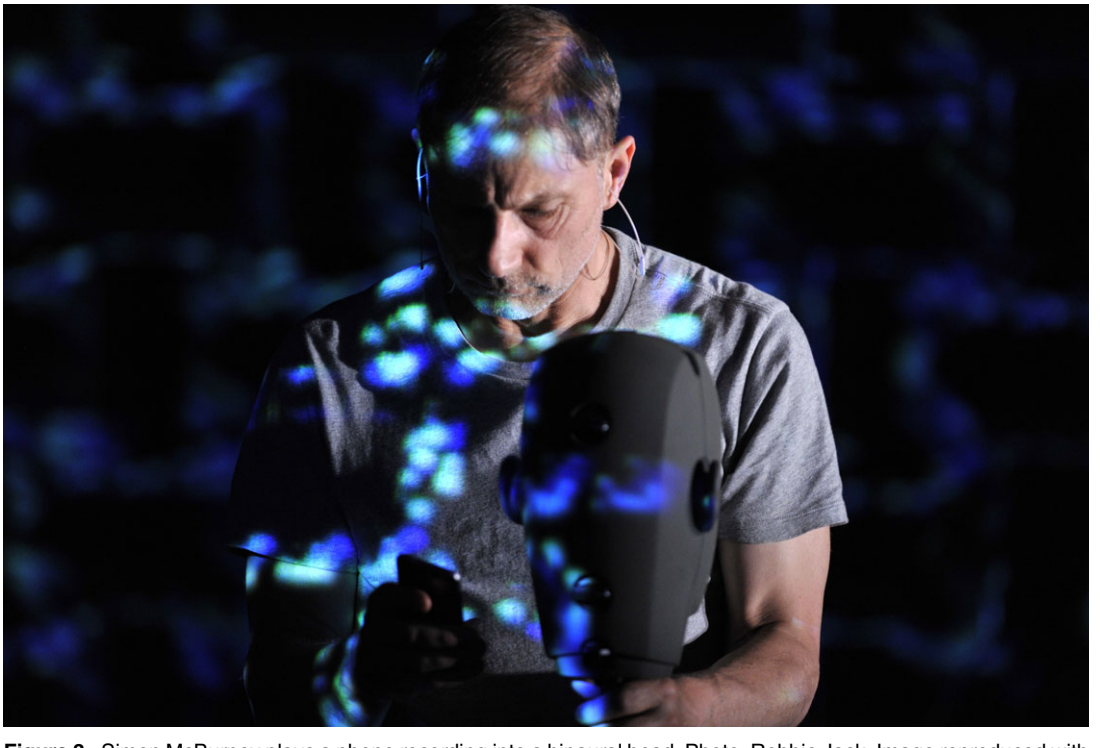

Figure 3. Simon McBurney plays a phone recording into a binaural head. Photo: Robbie Jack. Image reproduced with permission of Complicité.

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through headphones, the spectator joins the performance as it 'takes root' in the body. The immersive quality of the binaural sound compels Claire Alfree, reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph*, to remark that 'sound can't literally intoxicate, but such is this show's aural potency that at times you do wonder if you are drunk'.[6] In a performance where sound plays such an integral role in the experience of the piece, a spectator gives more of their own 'self', their own ideas and interpretations, than is usually called for. This results in an exchange that is immersive and visceral – one that 'becomes your own'.

The second level of investigation concerning the human and the world occurs within the narrative of the play. The story of *The Encounter* follows McIntyre from his descent on the Mayoruna village in the Javari Valley by plane to the final point of his journey, where he has been named as a tribesperson, trading the name McIntyre for Tayah. In a moment of intoxication and exaltation, the character of McIntyre declares, 'The forest becomes my brain and my brain the forest. I have the sensation of seeing my thoughts';[7] 'I feel like I'm turning into an animal.'[8] This concept of 'returning to nature' or, more precisely, the realization that human bodies are part of the natural world rather than above it is the core of posthumanism. As much as the character of McIntyre is coming to terms with his relationship to the environment, McBurney's many voices and recordings that run in the spectator's mind make 'you start to see somebody there, although they are not there because you hear them there and you place them in space'.[9] Consequently, the audience emerges from *The Encounter* after spending nearly two hours imagining that they are in the Amazon living with the Mayoruna tribe.

Time and posthumanism are central to the dramaturgy and scenography of *The Encounter* and are intricately related. McBurney and the character of McIntyre make observations regarding the differences between natural and human-made conceptions of time. Similarly, they note conflicting understandings of humankind as a dominating force over the environment versus humankind as a constituent of the environment. To underline these points, *The Encounter* begins and ends with reference to the apparent inextricable nature of technology, time, and memories. In the opening of *The Encounter*, McBurney takes a photo of the audience, telling them:

> ACTOR: My daughter is five. She doesn't believe I work at night, so I'm going to take a photo of you on my iPhone to prove I was really here.[10]

Given the parallel timelines of the play, the 'here' he refers to is ambiguous, as is the 'you'. During its livestream and encore online broadcasts, *The Encounter* attracted 67,500 online views in 2016. These audience members are, of course, not visible to McBurney onstage and cannot be captured by a photograph. But for reasons we will explore, they are 'here', just as the physically present audience are 'here'. At the end of the play, the tribe purge themselves of all material possessions. McBurney destroys the stage, shouting:

> ACTOR: Come on! Burning the past. This is the past! Let's destroy it, let's burn it all up! Can we destroy this? Fucking plastic . . . Let's smash this. Get rid of the past. The whole fucking thing. Fuck it . . .
> *And then the* ACTOR *sees their phone. They hold it out to the audience.*
> Okay, the big one . . . let's get rid of this. That's got all the fucking past in it.
> *The* ACTOR *places it on the broken desk and lifts the hammer.*
> *SFX: ring. . . . Onstage, the* ACTOR *remains, hammer in hand, staring at the phone on the desk. They are poised to hit it, but never do.*[11]

The Actor, McBurney, does not destroy the phone – the modern archive of memories. This scene seems to be a recognition of the unyielding connection to technology. Time and posthumanism also have implications for the type of immersive experience on offer and the form of community that is built in the context of the postdigital.

Postdigital Communities and Networked Affect

In 2001, Jill Dolan published 'Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative"', in which she asserts that 'audiences are

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compelled to come to gather with others, to see others perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangements'.[12] The world has changed immeasurably since this article was written. The ubiquity of the network across a variety of platforms, personal and professional, infuses all parts of life so that one can no longer make a meaningful distinction between the 'virtual' and the 'real'. Even individuals who are apparently off the grid are accounted for as data, performing in networks that they did not sign up to. As Matthew Causey suggests, the world is suffused by the digital to such a degree that we now think digitally, create digitally, and behave digitally.[13] This is the essence of postdigital culture: it stands not for a time after the digital but as an acknowledgement that 'the materiality of the digital is not reducible to the screen, not to software, and not even to hardware. It is a massively distributed reality that in turn conditions our perceptual realities.'[14] Accordingly, the precursors for and debates surrounding liveness in theatre have, or ought to have, transformed beyond the use of screens versus physical presence. Dolan's remarks about the longing to come together to experience theatre still stand, of course. But the way audiences come together and the definition of liveness, in everyday life and theatre, has changed enormously.

In the past five years, there has been a rise in demand for podcasts and aural forms of entertainment, distinct from music. This popularity has been characterized by various market research organizations as the 'pivot to audio' and the 'Golden Age of Audio'. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 records that in their combined country sample, 36 per cent of people said that they have listened to at least one podcast in the past month. This figure rises to 50 per cent for those under the age of 35.[15] The pivot to audio reveals a great deal about postdigital culture and its mechanisms. From a practical perspective, sound is a valuable channel to occupy and monetize in moments where other faculties and senses are required to carry out everyday tasks. Indeed, the length of most podcast episodes and radio dramas are designed to fill the average commuter's journey. From an alternative perspective, in the past ten years, isolation and loneliness have become a significant concern for many societies and governments.[16] In most regions, face-to-face contact is declining, while technology-enabled communication is increasing. Several recent studies show that while people feel isolated during everyday activities, they feel a connection through digital content. While the motivations for listening to podcasts differ across age-groups,[17] there is a case to be made in parallel to any economic analysis, that the popularity of podcasts is due to the fact that a large portion of listeners feel part of a community.

In line with the pivot to audio, theatre has been experimenting with soundscapes and sound immersion as a central dramaturgical feature. Complicité's *The Encounter* pushes further than most contemporary examples by conducting the whole performance through headphones, swapping the more common emphasis on striking imagery for the evocation of strong imagery in the mind of the spectator. Further, *The Encounter*'s one-off livestreamed performance directly mixes the apparatus and streaming style of a podcast with the live broadcast of a theatre production. McBurney and the audience present in the theatre know they are visible to an invisible audience online. Arguably, with the prevalence of smartphones and popular video platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok, this factor is a simulation of the outside world where you may, deliberately or inadvertently, be under the watch of a camera. The bottom line is that all spectators are hearing and experiencing the same sounds, thereby binding them into a type of postdigital community.

Community has many interpretations. The notion varies across disciplines and contexts. When I speak of postdigital community, I am referring to Victor Turner's concept of 'communitas', paired with a more recent theory of networked affect. According to Turner, communitas is 'a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals. These individuals are not segmentalized into roles

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and statuses but confront one another rather in the manner of Martin Buber's "I and Thou".'[18] Communitas is a spontaneous and short-lived occurrence. But in those moments of a group coming together, communitas is marked by a feeling of alignment and camaraderie. While Turner doesn't employ the term, based on his description one can say that it is *affect* that abounds during the occurrence of communitas. 'Affect' is an intensity that occurs in the present moment and is 'extra discursive'.[19] It is the capacity of a body, which is not necessarily human, to affect and be affected, or, in other words, the capacity of a body to change and be changed.

Taking the idea of communitas into the present day, we must ask the question, as with Dolan's work on the utopian performative, how communitas operates in postdigital conditions where we are connected by an invisible network. The events that once brought us together physically may now occur virtually and with asynchronous participation. Several prolific scientific studies – the study by Kramer *et al.* on emotional contagion through social networks prime among them – demonstrate the emotional and physical impact of virtual interactions.[20] Affect can be transmitted and exchanged via virtual networks. In the same way that affect in physical interactions is felt and leads to an effect or an emotion, affect can be felt through virtual encounters. Recognizing the philosophical implications of this online contagion, Susanna Paasonen describes 'our ubiquitous networked exchanges, how they circulate, oscillate, and become registered as sensations by bodies that pass from one state to another' as networked affect.[21] This networked affect is central to postdigital communities and the feeling of unity they may foment. And it is a key feature of Complicité's production that the present and online audience play a part in.

That is not to say that the physically present experience and the online experience of *The Encounter* is the same. There is a certain etiquette to be followed in a theatre that watching online does not require. Online audiences are generally encouraged to engage in commentary and tweeting during the show. But many argue this leads to distraction and a fractured experience of the performance. On the other hand, in an analysis of live theatre broadcasts, Erin Sullivan proposes that in certain circumstances 'tweeting offer[s] many spectators a way of celebrating co-present togetherness while also participating in the wider production of aliveness online'.[22]

Postdigital culture, characterized by the concept that there can no longer be a meaningful distinction drawn between the real and virtual, does not add a new dimension to the decades-long liveness debate going from Peggy Phelan to Philip Auslander and the many studies that have followed. Rather, it offers an alternative perspective: liveness can be found in material and ephemeral experiences. Indeed, this line of thought can be traced to the writings of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Elizabeth Grosz, *inter alia*, but it takes on a certain significance in the postdigital theatrical context. Postdigital community extends across the network and is composed of physical and invisible components. But how is communitas generated through a blended physical/online theatrical experience? In particular, how is sound used to reach individual listeners in a performance such as *The Encounter*, and in what ways does it engender a sense of communitas?

'It seems that empathy and proximity are connected, so I'd like to get closer to you. Can you put your headphones on?' McBurney issues this invitation to the audience in the opening lines of Complicité's *The Encounter.* McBurney follows up with a series of aural tricks, aided by the binaural microphone, to prove his hypothesis (Figure 4). For most of the production's run, *The Encounter* had a physically present audience which constitutes a network. The livestream added another set of spectators to the network via laptops and phones. In this way, *The Encounter* both uses and re-enacts the network to generate the potential for a postdigital community composed of the audience. Covid-19 uncovers new understandings of networks, the importance of them, and the opportunities presented by contamination. For Bruno Latour:

> Covid has given us a model of contamination. It has shown how quickly something can become global

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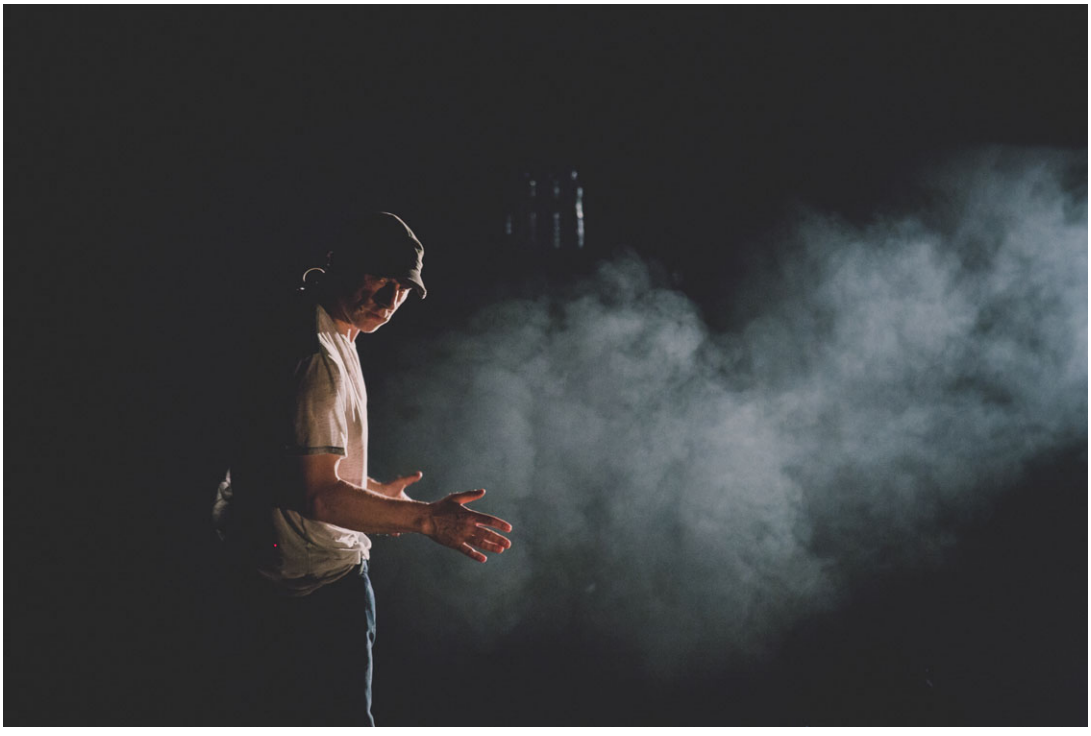

Figure 4. Simon McBurney in *The Encounter.* Photo: Stavros Petropoulos. Image reproduced with permission of Complicité.

just by going from one mouth to another. That's an incredible demonstration of network theory. I've been trying to persuade sociologists of this for 40 years. I'm sorry to have been so right. It shows that we must not think of the personal and the collective as two distinct levels. The big climate questions can make individuals feel small and impotent. But the virus gives us a lesson. If you spread from one mouth to another, you can viralize the world very fast. That knowledge can re-empower us.[23]

In the play, Barnacle – the name given to the head tribesman – speaks telepathically to McIntyre:

LOREN: I felt I was inside his head, literally thinking his thoughts.[24]

This form of communication is referred to as 'the old language' in the play. But it also mirrors the demonstration given to the audience of the trickery that is possible with the binaural microphone and headphones at the beginning of *The Encounter*:

ACTOR: Now what I would like you to do is close your eyes. I'm going to take a little walk, around your head. You should have the impression that I really am beside you. This is not digital manipulation, this is what I'm really doing. Now I'm getting a bit too close, maybe a little too intimate.[25]

It further conjures the idea of networked affect, the exchanges that occur through virtual channels that have palpable and transformative triggers in the body of the listener-spectator. The live broadcast provides a final expansion of this exchange. With a coterminous online audience, the network is in action.

For many years, the attempt to reflect the digital experience onstage through projections and screens of different kinds has largely fallen short of the real thing. It is difficult to capture something that is now so prevalent that it cannot be identified or separated from other aspects of everyday experience. Dolan asserts that the utopian performative, which is intertwined with communitas, is achieved

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through the following combination: 'in the performer's grace, in the audience's generosity, in that lucid power of intersubjective understanding, however fleeting'.[26] What is lacking in earlier theatrical representations of digital life was this combination that Dolan mentions, the lucid power of intersubjective understanding being the most important in this regard. *The Encounter* captures this aspect by promoting communitas amongst the audience in the form of networked affect. Indeed, this ambition is similar in kind to one of the anchoring points of the text, that is, posthumanism. The human body is part of a complex environment composed of human and non-human bodies, visible and invisible networks. In the words of Steven Rose, Emeritus Professor of Biology and Neurobiology, which are heard as a recording in *The Encounter*:

> STEVEN ROSE: . . . one of the problems we have is that our consciousness of ourselves, the stories we tell ourselves and the ways in which we view the world around us are so profoundly social and so profoundly shaped by technology and culture that it's difficult to think outside it.[27]

Taking this idea of the human and the world around us, my attention now turns to the role of sound and postdigital communities as a social remedy to isolation and distancing.

Imagination in Isolation: Then and Now

Social distancing measures bring to light the critical importance of community. In such times of isolation, the different forms of postdigital communities available – social media, streaming platforms, interactive video games, live theatre broadcasts, digital exhibitions, and certain radio and TV programmes – often represent the most accessible forms of community. In particular circumstances, they represent the only way to connect and be a part of a group.

During the Romantic period in England, a variety of dramatic forms prevailed, from pantomime to melodrama, from *burletta*s to live animal spectacles. In an effort to produce alternative and more 'serious' theatrical enjoyment, several Romantic poets and critics of the time opted, or in some case were redirected, to *read* dramatic texts, taking particular pleasure in the evocations produced by the written word and completed by the imagination.[28] Byron referred to this form as 'mental theatre', although it is more popularly referred to as 'closet drama'. There are numerous reasons for the shift from stage to text. The first is the restrictions brought about by The Licensing Act of 1737, and the consequent election of the Lord Chamberlain as the authority over censorship, meaning that only two theatres in London, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, had permission to stage 'legitimate drama'. As a result, the plays presented were censored, driving crowds to fringe establishments that bypassed the law by performing satirical material based on established texts, together with dance, music, and a multitude of visual spectacles. The fringe playhouses were seen by some of the Romantic poets and critics – Byron, Shelley, Keats, Lamb, and Hazlitt – as clamorous, uncivilized, and coarse places devoid of art.

The artistic restrictions dictated and shaped theatrical production in a number of ways, including the production of closet drama. A band of writers and readers developed a heightened interest in character, subjectivity, and psychology. This is reflected, firstly, in a renewed interest in reading Shakespeare's tragedies to uncover the 'inner structure and workings of mind in a character'.[29] Secondly, Byron and Shelley, in particular, committed themselves to the renewal of serious drama in England, viewing the period since the closure of the theatre by the Puritans in the 1640s as the beginning of a steep decline in artistic standards. Their solution was a dramatic text that combined action with subjective, poetic, and lyrical exposition, demonstrating the psychology of the character.

Alan Richardson, author of *A Mental Theatre: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age*, remarks the following: 'Whether condemned for his elitist pose and disdain for the public, or defended as a well-meaning but anachronistic reformer, the Romantic poet as dramatist is judged against his alleged "retreat" from the theatre, rather than for the invention of a fundamentally new form.'[30] These Romantic poets recognized the

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unique experience and the possibility of a dramatic text produced for the purposes of reading and, by association, the value of 'listening to theatre' removed from any representative visual accompaniment. For Richardson, it is important that we view the Romantic dramas of this nature, 'not as a retreat into the closet but as a foray into the minds of both dramatic character and reader'.[31]

Although there is a rich history of oral traditions and storytelling in many cultures, the idea of taking established dramatic texts written specifically for the stage and making the choice to read them and, furthermore, creating dramatic texts for the purpose of being read and not performed, is not only a significant deviation from classical theatre (a marriage of drama and theatre), but also an unlikely harbinger for the transformational possibilities of technology in theatre in general and productions that place sound at its core more specifically. Catherine Burroughs observes that:

> Because closet dramas intended for the *closet only* feature a 'spokenness' and a 'voicedness' – as distinct from the bodily and the gestural – the prioritizing of the act of reading does not so much fly in the face of theatricality as encourages alternative ways of thinking about the embodied stage and the staging of the body.[32]

We can see drama written in the Romantic period, particularly closet drama, as one of the precursors to radio plays, fiction podcasts, and contemporary theatrical soundscapes, sharing in kind the delight of words and sounds to evoke a theatre of the mind – the mind of the dramatic character and listener, to modify Richardson's idea. Closet drama was created for an individual reader to cast and perform theatre through imaginative engagement. For this reason, it is a distinctly different type of phenomenological engagement to reading a novel or poem. The readers of these plays were connected. They formed a lively community joined together through the experience of intense reading.

There are many examples of such communities emerging throughout the history of theatre and storytelling. I am compelled, however, by the possibilities that a connected history of selected closet dramas and contemporary theatrical soundscapes open up. There is a similarity here between the individual readers of closet dramas casting and producing plays in their minds, and the type of listening offered in production such as *The Encounter* from an audience that is likely familiar with the format of podcasts, audiobooks, and radio dramas. But the connection comes in the form of a networked society of readers/listeners: each represents individuals united through content, forming a network. This connection of isolated entertainment and community plays out in the context of a hypermediatized and individualized postdigital world, but is brought into special focus during a time of sanctioned social distancing measures across the world. 'Something must be lost or absent in any narrative for it to unfold; if everything stayed in place there would be no story to tell. This loss is distressing, but exciting as well: desire is stimulated by what we cannot quite possess, and this is one source of narrative satisfaction,'[33] suggests Terry Eagleton. It is this absence that connects closet drama and theatrical soundscapes: the gap that the spectator, and the network, fills. The absence has a different quality to the gap left by a novel, in that the absence is imagined with a stage and the mechanics of theatre in mind.

Postdigital culture is marked by physical isolation. Social media platforms, online games, music streaming, and podcasts are generally designed for an individual user who joins a diffused interactive community of users. Market trends demonstrate a rise in demand for audio content, which in turn offers listeners access to the aligned community. This community can be found through direct commentary and exchange on the subject, or simply through a feeling of unity and common experience. *The Encounter* is a compelling example of a play that generates this same sense of community through the individual listenership and shared experience through networks. Whether intentionally or not, the play replicates the network and taps into it through a livestream. The execution is subtle. The audience is asked to wear headphones, listen to a story, watch the actor on

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stage, and complete the story from the imagery provided by imagination. Each spectator is given an individual listening experience, while at the same time participating in a collective community of listeners, physically and virtually present.

In response to Covid-19, theatres across the world substantially adapted their business models. They released online programmes that included broadcasts of past popular productions, commissions of new work made during lockdown, and open resources that showcased the work going on behind the stage. For theatres and audience members alike, these online programmes raise a question that has long been a point of deliberation: how can such performances account for a loss of valency when broadcast in a different medium to which they were initially intended? A great deal of the debate that has centred around live theatre and recording refer to productions that are created for the stage and a live audience. Then the play is filmed, edited, and transmitted through a different medium to reach a wider audience. The result, many argue, is a loss of the very essence of theatre – being in the same room, breathing the same air, and taking part in the complete theatre experience. What is notable about *The Encounter* is that it is crafted for an individual spectator, first and foremost. Gareth Fry, sound designer for *The Encounter*, expresses the show's intention as follows:

> For us [Complicité], it has been about finding a new theatrical way to tell our story. We have developed a technique that uses technology to create intimacy, isolation and a little bit of magic, and will hopefully lift you out of your seat and take you as far away as this show has taken us.[34]

From March 2020 onwards, several major theatres began to release online programmes. The National Theatre of Scotland, in association with BBC Scotland and Culture in Quarantine BBC Arts initiatives, commissioned a series of short digital artworks named 'Scenes for Survival': 'short pieces of digital theatre remotely from their personal spaces of isolation'.[35] The Abbey Theatre in Dublin launched a digital postcard initiative called 'Dear Ireland', which involved a hundred artists – fifty writers and fifty actors – producing short, filmed monologues that sought to answer the question, 'What should Ireland write on a postcard to itself?'[36] Big Telly's *Operation Elsewhere* and The Public Theater's *What Do We Need To Talk About?* framed their performances as Zoom exchanges, one of the most utilized communication platforms during this time.

For the present analysis, BBC Radio's offering to entertainment in isolation, 'Lockdown Festival', is highly intriguing. For the festival, BBC Radio commissioned four plays that were originally written for the stage and reshaped them for a radio audience with recordings taking place in the actor's own home. This festival appears to be a recognition that transferring work from one medium to another, with very little change to the material, loses a vital part of the experience. Adapting work, and making it accessible and enjoyable for a dispersed online public, generates a sense of acknowledgement of circumstances and shared experience. The material matches the way in which most people are living: through streaming networks. This is a small selection of work being produced with online audiences in mind. In these commissions, the screen, and the network, is not just used in theatre but celebrated. The productions differ from theatre broadcasts in this regard and will form fascinating archival material for the types of cultural products created during the coronavirus pandemic.

As many commentators have noted, it is a time to imagine what the future could be; to participate in conversations and experiment with different forms of cultural expression. For Dolan, theatre is a space where these conversations can take place: 'I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one that can participate more equally, with more chances to love fully and contribute to the making of culture.'[37] It is clear that the proliferation of online programming is making theatre more accessible. It is allowing a global and diverse audience to be part of a conversation and, more importantly, a community. During the Covid-19 pandemic,

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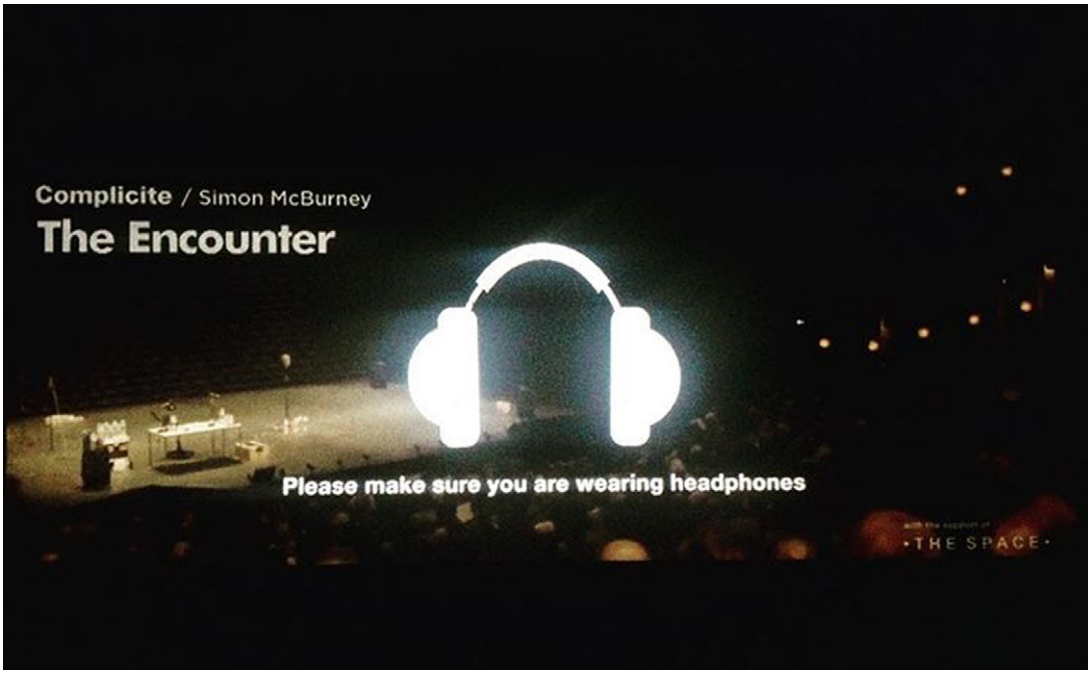

Figure 5. Screenshot of *The Encounter* livestream in 2016.

our spaces to work, play, and live were constrained to one small area or household. For that reason, online communication, workspaces, and entertainment became lifelines.

Before returning to 'normal' life, in-person interaction and no restrictions on travel, there is a chance to introduce more equitable structures and frameworks in politics, society, education, and culture. There is an opportunity to change the way we work together, live together, and imagine communities of the future. It would be naïve to state that the arts and theatre are the only answer to such issues. But, in the open-access theatre being produced for global online audiences, there is the opportunity for a sense of community, however short-lived. Employing the mechanisms of postdigital culture is key to building communities during times of isolation, whether due to a virus or the increasingly individual lives we lived before. The proposition here is for a future focus on making theatre hybrid, where artistically appropriate and technically possible performances take both physical and online audience experience into account on an equal basis (Figure 5).

Complicité announced that they were streaming *The Encounter* once again from 15 to 22 May 2020. To frame the performance in the current circumstances, McBurney formulated the following introduction:

> We are, as a consequence of this pandemic, bodily cut off from one another. Disconnected. Isolated. But perhaps this sense of our separation one from another, is simply a heightening of what we felt before this all began. We are thinking now, not only about how long this will last, but also what happens on the other side. To reconnect we need, perhaps, to learn to listen more closely. To each other. To our communities. To other cultures. To nature itself. *The Encounter* is at its heart a story about 'listening', not 'hearing' but listening; to other, older narratives which, at the deepest level, form who we are, and if we do, we can imagine how we can 'begin' again.[38]

The integration of various immersive sound elements in *The Encounter* generates a type of postdigital community that involves communal listening while retaining the individual listening experience. In the coming months, productions will undoubtedly turn to aesthetics and techniques that allow a spectator an experience that

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caters for online spectatorship. This form of theatre, similar to the experience Complicité offers in *The Encounter*, must in some way tap into the joy of being alone, together.

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