

**THEATER GOES ONLINE: TELEMATIC PERFORMANCE  
DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN TURKEY**

by  
DAMLA ÇAMUR

Submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences  
in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Sabancı University  
September 2022

**THEATER GOES ONLINE: TELEMATIC PERFORMANCE  
DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN TURKEY**

Approved by:

Assoc. Prof. Hülya Adak .....  
(Thesis Supervisor)

Assoc. Prof. Ashı İıkizozđlu Erensü .....

Assoc. Prof. Emine Fişek .....

Date of Approval: Sep 13, 2022

DAMLA ÇAMUR 2022 ©

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### THEATER GOES ONLINE: TELEMATIC PERFORMANCE DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN TURKEY

DAMLA ÇAMUR

CULTURAL STUDIES M.A. THESIS, SEPTEMBER 2022

Thesis Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Hülya Adak

Keywords: theater, telematic performance, liveness, co-presence, COVID-19

The latest coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak forced theater venues across Turkey to shut their doors, just as it has been in the rest of the world. The closure of the physical venues suspended on-site theater activity all over the country, including rehearsals and public performances, yet brought a surge of new, or newly expanded, interest in telematic performances. With a specific focus on the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey, this study considers the lockdown measures an eliciting factor that crystallizes the limitations and potentialities of telematic performances in recreating theater's alleged conventions, namely liveness and co-presence. It seeks to understand how conventional understandings of liveness and co-presence is challenged by and is challenging telematic performances. To elaborate on the antagonism intrinsic to these two standpoints, a qualitative research design is implemented throughout the study. As the main qualitative approach, ten semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews have been conducted with independent theater professionals. The first part of the analysis tries to understand challenges and benefits of telematic performance practice concerning liveness and co-presence on the part of theater professionals. Taking this analysis one step further, two locally produced telematic performance pieces, namely *Murder of the Male* by Nadir Sonmez and *Walkthrough: Istanbul by tibia x fibula*, have been selected and analyzed. The second part of the analysis tries to demonstrate how these two specific pieces generate a different kind of liveness and co-presence.

## ÖZET

### ÇEVİRİMİÇİ TİYATRO: COVID-19 KARANTİNASI DÖNEMİNDE TÜRKİYE'DE TELEMATİK PERFORMANS

DAMLA ÇAMUR

KÜLTÜREL ÇALIŞMALAR YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ, EYLÜL 2022

Tez Danışmanı: Doç. Dr. Hülya Adak

Anahtar Kelimeler: tiyatro, telematik performans, canlılık, biraradalık, COVID-19

Son koronavirüs (COVID-19) salgını, tüm dünyada olduğu gibi Türkiye’de de tiyatro salonlarını kapılarını kapatmaya zorladı. Fiziksel mekanların kapatılması, provalar ve halka açık gösteriler de dahil olmak üzere ülke genelinde yerinde tiyatro faaliyetlerini askıya alırken telematik performanslara dair yeni veya yeni genişleyen bir ilgi yarattı. Türkiye’deki COVID-19 salgınına odaklanan bu çalışma, karantina önlemlerini, telematik performansların tiyatronun mevcut canlılık ve biraradalık geleneklerini yeniden yaratmadaki sınırlamaları ve potansiyellerini belirginleştiren bir faktör olarak ele alıyor. Geleneksel canlılık ve biraradalık anlayışının telematik performanslarla nasıl meydan okunduğunu ve telematik performanslar tarafından nasıl zorlandığını anlamaya çalışıyor. Bu iki bakış açısına içkin olan karşılıklı detaylandırmak için, çalışma boyunca nitel bir araştırma tasarımı uygulanmıştır. Temel nitel yaklaşım olarak, bağımsız tiyatro profesyonelleriyle on yarı yapılandırılmış, açık uçlu derinlemesine mülakatlar gerçekleştirilmiştir. Analizin ilk bölümü, telematik performans pratiğinin tiyatro profesyonelleri açısından canlılık ve biraradalık ile ilgili zorluklarını ve faydalarını anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Bu analizi bir adım öteye taşıyarak, Nadir Sönmez’in Erkek Cinayeti ve tibia x fibula’nın Walkthrough: İstanbul adlı yerel olarak üretilen iki telematik performans eseri seçilmiş ve analiz edilmiştir. Analizin ikinci kısmı, bu iki yapının nasıl farklı türde bir canlılık and biraradalık ürettiğini göstermeye çalışmaktadır.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor Hülya Adak for listening to my thoughts while they were in a very early stage of blossoming and encouraging me to explore my academic interests.

I would like to thank my jury members Ash İkizoğlu Erensü for her solid advice and motivating comments during the manuscript process and Emine Fişek for her constructive criticisms that motivated me to do better.

I am indebted to my research participants, who genuinely shared their experiences with me. I am most indebted to Nadir Sönmez and the co-founders of tibia x fibula, Fatih Gençkal and, Cansu Pelin İşbilen, who contributed to this thesis with their inspirational artworks.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my beloved friends Can, Çağla, Çağıl, and Havle for their constant support and encouragement during the process. I would not have been able to be here without their lifelong friendships. I especially owe much to my dearest friend Havle who revised the text.

I am also grateful to Damla for her beautiful love, care, and comradeship during this difficult process of my life and beyond.

Lastly, I would like to thank myself for doing all this hard work.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1. The Story of the Research .....	1
1.2. Research Question and Objectives .....	5
1.3. Structure of the Study .....	6
<b>2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.1. Data Collection Methods: Semi-Structured In-depth Interviews and Participant Observation .....	8
2.2. The Selection of Performances .....	10
2.3. Researcher’s Positionality and Reflexivity .....	11
2.4. Critical Reflections on Methodology and Research Limitations .....	13
<b>3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b> .....	<b>15</b>
3.1. Introducing the Conceptual Toolset of the Study.....	15
3.2. A Brief History of Media Technology in Performing Arts .....	17
3.3. A Closer Look at the Emergence of Digital Performance and Telem- atic Performance .....	19
3.4. Changing Ontology of Performance: Liveness and Co-Presence under Scrutiny .....	21
<b>4. SETTING UP THE CONTEXT OF THE EMPIRICAL SITES OF STUDY</b> .....	<b>25</b>
4.1. A Brief Overview of the Impact of COVID-19 on Turkey’s Theater Industry.....	25

4.2. An Overlook of Telematic Performances During the Pandemic .....	29
<b>5. UNDERSTANDING LIVENESS AND CO-PRESENCE THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN TURKEY .....</b>	<b>34</b>
5.1. Motivations of the Theater Professionals in Transitioning into Telematic Settings .....	35
5.2. Not Here, Not Now: Concerns and Obstacles Regarding Telematic Performances .....	38
5.3. (Re)Definition of Liveness and Co-Presence: Potentialities of Telematic Performances .....	52
<b>6. UNDERSTANDING LIVENESS AND CO-PRESENCE THROUGH THE LENSES OF TWO TELEMATIC PERFORMANCES .....</b>	<b>57</b>
6.1. Murder of the Male by Nadir Sonmez .....	58
6.1.1. Murder of Male in the Context of COVID-19 .....	61
6.1.2. Group Liveness .....	62
6.2. Walkthrough: Istanbul by tibia x fibula .....	64
6.2.1. Walkthrough in the Context of COVID-19 .....	66
6.2.2. Digital Liveness .....	71
<b>7. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>APPENDIX A .....</b>	<b>79</b>



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1. The synoptic presentation of the research participants.....	9
Table 4.1. The synoptic analysis of telematic performances produced during COVID-19 lockdown in Turkey .....	31

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Interface of Murder of the Male on WhatsApp.....	3
Figure 4.1. The number of performances and audiences by season year, 2005-2020 .....	26
Figure 4.2. The number of theater venues by season year, 2005-2020 .....	27
Figure 6.1. A series of stickers received by spectators throughout the per- formance that are made from the photographs of porn stars who com- mitted suicide like Arpad Miklos, holding the year of birth and death on them .....	59
Figure 6.2. Interface of Walkthrough: Istanbul on Zoom Webinar, per- formers located in Ferikoy Antique Bazar, Sisli, hold a picture in front of the camera asking the audience to choose between the two avatars .....	65
Figure 6.3. Interface of Walkthrough: Istanbul on Zoom Webinar, Tib is in front of the tallest hotel block Hilton in Bomonti, Sisli .....	70
Figure 6.4. Interface of Walkthrough: Istanbul on Zoom Webinar, Fib is in front of the Notre Dame de Lourdes Catholic Church in Bomonti, Sisli .....	71

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>IFF</b> Istanbul Fringe Festival .....	1
<b>MCT</b> Ministry of Culture and Tourism .....	28
<b>MOM</b> Murder of the Male .....	1
<b>TPA</b> Theater Producers Association .....	27
<b>TurkStat</b> Turkish Statistical Institute .....	25

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Story of the Research

When I first saw the announcement on social media that the Istanbul Fringe Festival (IFF) will be taking place online in September 2020 due to measures taken in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, I was partly surprised and partly frustrated.<sup>1</sup> I felt elated at first that a festival like IFF, which has become one of the most important components of Istanbul’s independent theater scene as early as its first launch in 2019, will be taking place despite the uncertainty regarding performing arts at the time of the global pandemic. Yet at the same time, I felt disenchanted that I lost the opportunity to be in person in the festival place surrounded by a global community of performers, audience, and volunteers, which was for me the “real” festival experience. So even though the unique situation of attending an online festival did not make me as happy as I could be simply because I missed the live experience of a theater event, one of the live performances adapted to the Covidien physical isolation measures attracted my attention. This was *Murder of the Male* (MOM), written and performed by Nadir Sonmez, an Istanbul-based artist producing works in the fields of theatre, performance art, and cinema. Part of this attraction had to do with the platform through which the performance would be taking place.

Both the announcements on the IFF 2020’s digital brochure<sup>2</sup> and the artist’s web-

---

<sup>1</sup>The Istanbul Fringe Festival (IFF) is a one-week international performing arts festival that is known for showing independent works in the fields of theater, performance art, and dance from Turkey and abroad. The festival takes place annually in September. IFF 2020 was the first theater festival in Turkey that adapted online screening of performative works due to lockdown measures in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. It broadcasted 15 different pre-recorded performances and dance shows on the festival’s YouTube channel and hosted various online workshops, panels, and artist talks on Zoom as well as on Instagram Live. For more information on IFF 2020, please visit <https://bit.ly/3B8iQyj> (last accessed October 2021).

<sup>2</sup>For IFF 2020’s digital brochure, please visit <https://bit.ly/3PPtMVH> (last accessed November 2021).

site<sup>3</sup> referred to the piece as a “WhatsApp Performance”, but what a performance on WhatsApp entails was not provided. How could a theatrical performance happen through a multimedia messaging app? Will I be called by phone during the performance? Or would I be in any way expected to participate in the performance - which is one of the things I fear the most at the theater hall? If so, shall I interact by chatting through the in-app messages? I was preoccupied with these questions when I emailed my phone number associated with my WhatsApp account to IFF’s support mail. The performance was free of charge, yet I needed to add the phone number through which the performance will be broadcasted into my contact list on WhatsApp.

On the day of the performance, I received the first message around noon, from a user registered under the nickname *Erkek Cinayeti* (Murder of the Male in English). What I received was a screenshot of the *Türk Dil Kurumu’s* (Turkish Language Association) website, showing the meaning of the word *şehvet* (lust in English). I was quite surprised and found myself wondering what would come next. The second message was sent around 12:06 p.m., and it was a YouTube link to a video entitled Arpad Miklos. I clicked the link and was redirected to YouTube where I watched the video introducing Arpad Miklos, a Hungarian porn star who committed suicide in 2013.<sup>4</sup> It was only with the third message that I received around 12:25 p.m., I encountered a textual narrative. So I was becoming part of a hypermedia storytelling experience.<sup>5</sup>

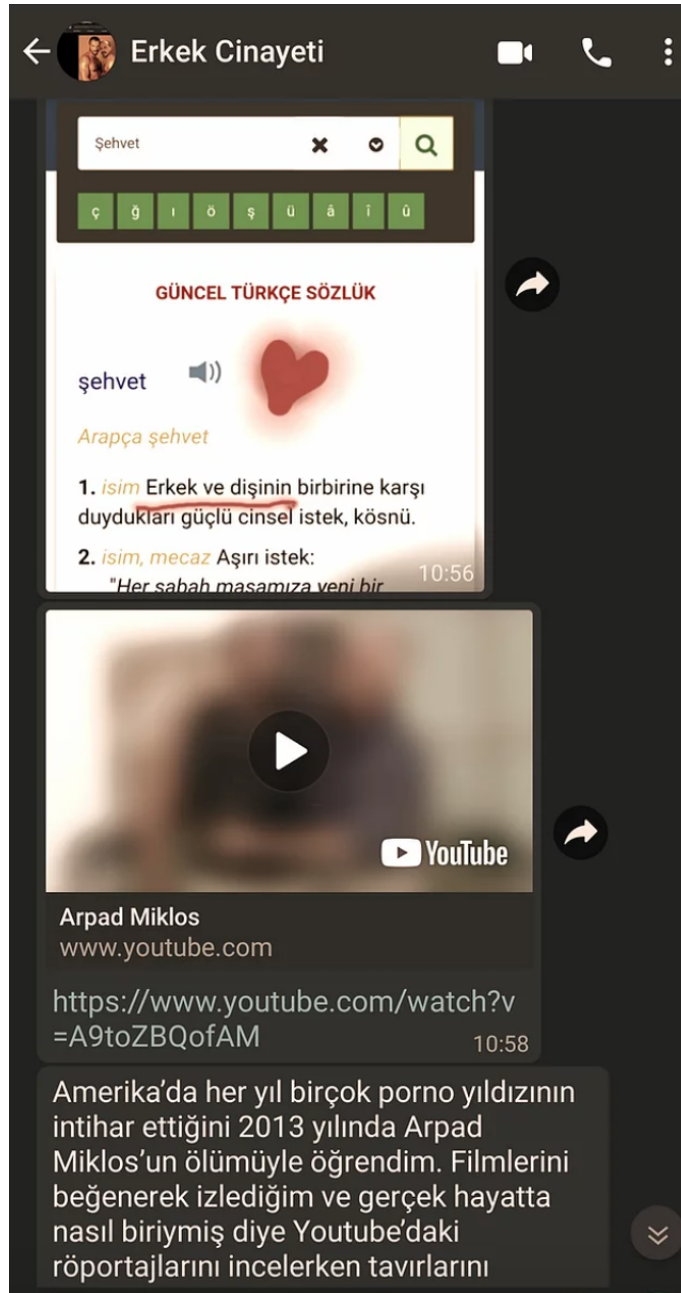
---

<sup>3</sup>For more details on the performance on the artist’s website, please visit <https://bit.ly/3ITwXcA> (last accessed November 2021).

<sup>4</sup>For the video, please visit <https://bit.ly/3v9zQQL> (last accessed June 2021).

<sup>5</sup>Theodor Holm Nelson first used the term “hypermedia” to designate the interconnection of the texts, pictures, and sounds via hyperlinks or simply links (see Salihbegović 2013, 65). I used the term “hypermedia storytelling” to simply refer to the “media-saturated” (Marranca 2010) narrative of Murder of the Male that is made of audio, videos, and text messages that are connected through links across multiple media platforms including WhatsApp, YouTube and SoundCloud.

Figure 1.1 Interface of Murder of the Male on WhatsApp<sup>6</sup>



As I kept getting more in-app text/voice messages, screenshots, and videos, I found myself fully immersed in a situation where I wondered even more about what would come next. However, I had a question on my mind: Should I follow the messages synchronically throughout the performance? I knew that it spread over twelve hours which made it difficult to commit to such a situation. Besides the timeline of messages, I had the urge to continue my daily life activities while also being a part of a half-day-long solo experience, which otherwise would be a high degree of commitment for myself. So the performance occurred amid my real life and blurred the

<sup>6</sup>Resource: <https://bit.ly/3ITwXcA> (last accessed November 2021)

fine line between art and life. The stream of the messages I received throughout the performance merged into other in-app messages from friends and family, and consequently, equated the artistic performance to instant messaging for me.

This was my first experience of attending a theatrical performance in the comfort of my home, on September 27, 2020, almost six months into the lockdown caused by COVID-19 in Turkey. So, is this the “new normal” of theater? Can theatrical experience, which is for me the one supreme experience of human nature, fit on the screen of a cell phone? Does reading WhatsApp messages in private on my mobile phone count as attending a performance? How can I approach this new timeframe of performance which takes twelve hours to complete, yet at the same time can be completed in an indefinite run anywhere as long as one gets a smartphone and connects to the Internet? This new online theatrical experience startled in me a curiosity and drove me to search for the interplay between media technologies and performing arts. This is how the first seeds of my interest in “telematic performance” were planted.

In this study, I address telematic performance as a type of online performance that applies telecommunication technologies to performance art. More specifically, it incorporates a computer and/or mobile phone connected to the Internet to conjoin the performers with the remote audience on a live show. It takes place whether on stage or the virtual interface as in the case of MOM. Before the advent of the Internet, this type of connection was hosted via satellites. However, the Internet is widely used today to host remote connections in cyberspace. While the suspension of on-site theater propagated such a surge toward telematic performance, it is crucial to note that implementing digital media technologies into performance art existed elsewhere well before the COVID-19 pandemic (Berghaus 2017; Blake 2014; Causey 2016; Dixon 2007; Giannachi 2004; Parker-Starbuck 2011; Salihbegovic 2013). Furthermore, despite the growing trend of telematic performance during the global lockdown measures, theater performance mostly became an on-site event after the governments eased the pre-existing coronavirus restrictions. As the key theorist, Steve Dixon who is known for pioneering works in the field of digital performance said it may well be true that this new trend of digitally mediated telematic events was just “a stopgap measure” (Dixon 2020). However, looking at the era of coronavirus lockdown beyond Dixon’s narrative drives me to examine how a global health crisis compels the default definitions of theater performance to be revised.

## 1.2 Research Question and Objectives

The default definition of theater performance is that it is a live event that happens in the presence of performers and audience within the temporally and spatially defined, and corporeally shared setting. In such definition, concepts of *liveness* and *co-presence* can be deemed as constructive elements.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the emergence of new forms of theater performances happening through media technologies (e.g. telematic performances via telecommunication technologies) challenges this conventional definition by generating new possibilities for performance-making and performance-attendance, meaning, new forms of *liveness*, and *co-presence*.

Many theater performances that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic can be defined as telematic performances as they develop a different kind of *liveness* and *co-presence* by using telecommunication technologies. Taking this momentum as a starting point, in this study, I try to understand how the conventional definition of theater performances is challenged by and is challenging the new forms of theater performances, namely telematic performances. Throughout the study, I try to explore the following questions:

1. How did theatre professionals respond to the recent shift theater has gone through in the wake of a pandemic?
2. How and why do they engage themselves in non-telematic and telematic performances distinctively? What motivates them in engaging such performances?
3. How did they conceive the challenges and benefits of translating and maintaining *liveness* and *co-presence* using telematic technologies?
4. What skill sets and support mechanisms do they need to take part in telematic platforms?

To answer these questions, I conducted an empirical study on telematic performances that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey context. By doing so, the abstract discussion on *liveness* and *co-presence* in the field of performance studies is empirically grounded through empirical examples. In such an endeavor, the COVID-19 pandemic is considered a factor that elicits the necessary conditions to focus on such an abstract discussion.

The empirical universe of the study is twofold. First, I conducted ten semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews with theater professionals from various

---

<sup>7</sup>For a comprehensive outlook on these two concepts, please see Section 3.4.



plays during COVID-19. Through these interviews, I aim to explore how theater professionals experienced the transition to telematic performances during the lockdown. Analyzing their particular experiences, challenges, and gains through performing telematic pieces help me to scrutinize the heated discussions on *liveness* and *co-presence*. Second, I focus on two specific telematic performances, namely the above-mentioned *Murder of the Male* (MOM) by Nadir Sonmez and *Walkthrough: Istanbul* (Walkthrough) by tibia x fibula. The purpose of such focus is to zoom in and exemplify how conventional theatrical schemes of *liveness* and *co-presence* are (re)defined concerning the implementation of telematic technologies. As a data collection method, just like in the first section, I conducted three semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews with the theater professionals from these two performances. While doing the interviews, I try to understand their particular experiences in recreating *liveness* and *co-presence* in their telematic performances. Additional qualitative field data comes from the participant observation method which has a complementary role in comprehending the real-life experiences of the theatre professionals. The methodological reasoning of the study as well as my main motivations in selecting these performances are explained in section 2.2. and in section 2.3.

### 1.3 Structure of the Study

In this section, the general structure of the study is depicted. Following the introductory chapter, the second chapter presents the methodological framework of the study. In section 2.1., I exhibit an overview of the main data collection methods I implemented to examine the main problematique of the research. Section 2.2. explains my main motivation in selecting particular performance pieces. In section 2.3, I critically scrutinize and reflect upon my positionality in the research. Throughout section 2.4., I reflect upon the general methodological framework of the research to critically examine the potential limitations. The third chapter demonstrates an overview of the theoretical framework of the study. First, throughout section 3.1. the descriptive conceptual lexicon the research is grounded upon is introduced to set up the conceptual elements of the study. While 3.2. provides a brief history of media technology in performing arts, section 3.3. tells the story of the emergence of digital performance and telematic performance to set the context steering the current contemporary debates. In the last section of this chapter, I demonstrate a brief overview of the two main theoretical standpoints revolving around the changing ontology of performance, namely Peggy Phelan's ontological claims and Philip Auslander's intervention of these claims through his context-specific insights. In this

section, I attempt to sharpen the main tenets of these two standpoints, namely the concepts of *liveness* and *co-presence*. The fourth chapter depicts the empirical frame of the study. While in section 4.1., I look into the overall impact of COVID-19 on Turkey's theater industry, in section 4.2., I specifically locate the telematic performance practices in such a context. Throughout the fifth and sixth chapters, I finally deliver the main discussion of the study. In the fifth chapter, I focus on the telematic performances and general experiences of theater professionals from various theater stages and troupes by also locating these experiences in the COVID-19 context in Turkey. In the sixth chapter, I focus on two particular telematic performances that took place during the COVID-19 lockdown. This chapter aims to provide a closer look into the experiences of theater professionals specifically by zooming in on two examples of telematic performances. The chapter also demonstrates the two particular contexts of COVID-19 lockdown peculiar to each performance. All in all, the fifth and sixth chapters together present the main research findings by connecting the conceptual agenda and the empirical data coming from a) experiences of theatre professionals from various plays and b) experiences of theatre professionals from two particular telematic performance pieces. The analysis part follows the concluding chapter in which the general overview of the research findings is presented.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter looks into the methodological framework of the study. While section 2.1. provide a brief theoretical grounding on the primary data collection methods, the section 2.2. summarizes the main reasons behind including two particular telematic performance pieces in the analysis. Section 2.3 critically examines my positionality in the research, while section 2.4. demonstrates the potential methodological limitations of the study.

### 2.1 Data Collection Methods: Semi-Structured In-depth Interviews and Participant Observation

This study looks into the telematic performance shift the Turkish independent theater scene has gone through in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of theater professionals. To do so, I mainly implemented a qualitative research design, with the methods of in-depth interviewing and participant observation. My research journey has begun with a telematic performance experience I participated in as a spectator, which I mentioned in section 1.1. in detail. This experience as a spectator helped me to shape the preliminary stage of the research and reach out to the research participants in a comparatively easier way.

As the main qualitative approach, I conducted ten semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews with independent theater professionals within a period of about a month from March 30 to April 26, 2021. As we were still living through a pandemic, nine interviews took place on Zoom, while one of them was held in person in an open-air setting. Overall, each interview lasted about an hour, which was decided on purpose as virtual meeting makes it difficult to focus and pay attention for long hours.

As a sampling method, I used snowball sampling to find my interlocutors. As a first

step, I reached out to the theater professionals of telematic performances I participated in as a spectator. Afterward, those professionals with whom I interviewed referred me to others in the field. My main concern while selecting the theater professionals was the profile of the theatre professionals to be as diverse as possible, especially in terms of their areas of work and experience levels in the theater sector. The demographic data based on their occupation in the field of performing arts, age, preferred pronoun, where they live and their engagement with digital tools or multimedia devices in their performances before the pandemic are presented in Table 2.1 below. For confidentiality reasons, I introduce each of my interlocutors with a pseudonym and do not mention the name of their troupe and/or productions in which they take part.

Table 2.1 The synoptic presentation of the research participants

Participant	Occupation	Age	Pronouns	City	Engagement with digital tools
Cansu	Actor/playwright	38	she/her	Istanbul	no engagement
Ekrem	Actor/playwright/director	43	he/him	Istanbul	no engagement
Sirin	Director/dramaturg	58	she/her	Istanbul	no engagement
Rifat	Actor/playwright/director	48	he/him	Berlin/Istanbul	virtual reality headset
Deniz	Playwright/dramaturg	43	she/her	Berlin	no engagement
Baris	Playwright	39	he/him	Istanbul	no engagement
Oguz	Actor/director	37	he/him	Istanbul	no engagement
Nedim	Actor/playwright/director	33	he/him	Istanbul	no engagement
Zehra	Istanbul Fringe Festival employee	31	she/her	Paris	no engagement
Asli	Playwright/dramaturg	41	she/her	Berlin/Istanbul	virtual reality headset

As it is seen on the table above, the interviewees had different relations with digital or multimedia devices in their former performances before the pandemic emerged. Amongst the ten interviewees, two had previously experienced the use of a virtual reality headset in performances, while the rest were only familiar with analog approaches to performance-making. The participants have different backgrounds in their profession and experience levels in the field of performing arts. Two are actors, two are directors, three are playwrights, two are dramaturges, and one is an employee of the IFF. Half of the interviewees are established artists in the sector, while the others are newly emerging ones. As one of the limiting qualities against the diversity of the participants, all participants are based in the metropole cities of Turkey or abroad. One of the participants is Paris-based, one is Berlin-based, two are based in both Berlin and Istanbul, and six are Istanbul-based. Lastly, amongst ten participants, four participants are cis-males, the other four participants are cis-females, and two participants are LGBTIQ+.

As the starting point of the interviews, I focused on the impacts of the shift from on-site performance to digitally mediated telematic platforms. My aim was to explore the practical challenges that such a venture posed for theater practitioners. The analysis of the interviews reflects on how theatre professionals experienced the

telematic performance transition during the lockdown measures in Turkey, what skills and support they needed to take part in the switch to telematic platforms, and in general what they encountered as pros and cons concerning telematic performances. These interrogations were very useful to scrutinize the experiences of theater professionals regarding various forms of *liveness* and *co-presence* to be more precise. The interviews provided me with important tools to point out and elicit their experiences, thoughts, and feelings interplaying with the main problematique of the research.

In addition to this inquiry, I included MOM and Walkthrough in my analysis which are two telematic performances produced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of such analysis was to zoom in on the concepts of *liveness* and *co-presence* to see how they work in the empirical world and how they operate in real-life experiences. Since this research aims to scrutinize how the conventional definition of theater performances is challenged by and is challenging telematic performances, conducting the analysis on the content of the two telematic performance pieces per se was not sufficient. In this respect, just like in the first inquiry, I conducted semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews with the creators of these two pieces, namely, the playwright and the performer Nadir Sonmez of MOM, and the creator-performers Cansu Pelin İsbilen and Fatih Genckal of Walkthrough.

Besides, as a researcher seeking to gain first-hand knowledge, I have also engaged in the actual practice of the telematic performance through which I conducted participant observation. I have been involved in the IFF 2021's volunteer team, which took place in a hybrid format hosting both on-site shows and telematic performances. Throughout the Walkthrough's two screenings on September 25-26, 2021 within the scope of the festival, I assisted the performers in the streets of Sisli where they performed on Zoom by means of a phone. Through this practice-led experience, I developed an in-depth understanding of the application of telematic tools to performance and gained embodied knowledge of this specific genre. Like other theater professionals who experienced challenges to adapt a telematic approach to performance-making, I experienced difficulties in adopting new sets of skills to effectively use telematic tools.

## 2.2 The Selection of Performances

The rationale behind the choice of MOM and Walkthrough is based on their distinctiveness from pre-COVID-19 performance-making and performance-attendance that

necessitate a corporeal presence of the performers and spectators within the same, shared, physical space of the performance. The performance pieces are selected based on the manifestation of new modes of performance-making and performance-attendance that destabilize the traditional categories of *liveness* and *co-presence*. The performances fit into the scope of this study because they have their own ways to generate interaction with the audience, which directly led us to question various possible forms of *liveness* and *co-presence*. While MOM takes place on the multimedia messaging app WhatsApp, Walkthrough takes place on the video-conferencing platform Zoom. Both performance pieces happen through the interface of these two telecommunication tools which have become an integral part of individuals' daily lives to stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond; thus creating a specific form of *liveness* and *co-presence* intrinsic to each platform.

Having said that, it is worth noting that the selection of performances is affected by the criteria of availability and accessibility of documentation. It is also worth noting that my main motivation in selecting these two performance pieces is highly affected by my positionality as the researcher, which I explain in the next section in detail.

### **2.3 Researcher's Positionality and Reflexivity**

While I was conducting this research, I had an embodied knowledge about theatrical performance both as a spectator and also as an actor since I have been acting on an amateur stage for years. However, I was only familiar with an on-site approach to performance-making and spectating; hence, I was exposed to only conventional forms of *liveness* and *co-presence*. Consequently, I perceived telematic works that circulated on the Internet during the COVID-19 pandemic as contradicting the idea of theater that I have in my mind. I started my investigation with the assumption that performance art is supposed to involve a corporeal presence of the performers performing in front of a live audience. I was presuming that physical congregation within a specific time frame and place setting are unassailable characteristics of what defines this artistic form. Therefore, I realized that my first motivation in digging into this subject matter was coming from an instinct to "prove" that telematic performances that I have been participating in since the first lockdown are actually not "real" performances.

While proceeding with the preliminary stages of my research, I had to engage in the literature more and more to be able to answer some of the fundamental questions

in my mind. As a result of such intense exposure to the discussions on both theory and the practice of performance arts, which heavily sets the main pipelines of contemporary debate, I started to realize that the existing technological developments have been acceleratively changing what we understand from the concepts of *liveness* and *co-presence*. Attending a dozen telematic performances during the global coronavirus lockdown and discovering how the use of telematic technologies might potentially (re)define theater conventions with regards to *liveness* and *co-presence* strongly affected my personal perspective and leveled it up to a more objective and analytical level. Hence, I put a special effort to define telematic performance by its own capacity rather than defining it based on its contradiction with a conventional understanding of theatre as I have known it traditionally.

Considering the selection of the two performance pieces analyzed in this study, it is possible to see a path leaning on feminist and queer theater approaches. As I am personally interested in such approaches as well as engaged with these subject matters in my undergraduate thesis intensely, my engagement has expectedly certain implications and influences on the selection of the performances. Although the performances at stake are not necessarily defined by their creators as feminist or queer per se, I myself relate the two performances to feminist and queer registers which, in turn, affected, to be more precise, increased my motivation to select them. For instance, MOM can simply be regarded as a solo autobiographical performance piece, but when we zoom in on its intricacies, we can conceive it as a performance that recites the gendered personal experiences of its playwrights while also unsettling sociopolitical norms around gender and sexuality, although it is not specifically designed to do so. Walkthrough, on the other hand, can be regarded as a participatory intervention to the public space. Simply put, the whole performance is based on the idea that the participation of those who cannot be physically together in a real public space come together in a virtual space, which is yet led by imaginary avatars in a real public space. When we try to evaluate this idea from a feminist perspective, we can envision that the performance enables us to imagine inclusivity and equality in terms of the right to participation in a public space. Especially considering the fact that women, queers, and other disadvantaged groups of people experience unequal participation when it comes to the public space all around the world, albeit to different degrees, the performance enables the audience to question various possibilities of equality and inclusivity beyond existing social roles.<sup>8</sup>

As one of the strategies to cope with my own prejudices and personal opinions based

---

<sup>8</sup>It is worth noting that one of the leading performers in Walkthrough represents a female avatar. As this female avatar has less physical strength, slower and more talkative than the male avatar, which falls into the existing social categories of gender; we can also make a feminist reading solely based on such qualities of the represented subjects.

on my past and present engagements with theatre and feminism, I have been keeping a fieldwork diary. The diary that I have been writing during the data collection and coding processes helped me very much to critically evaluate the presuppositions and implications and effects of my positionality as an actor and a feminist. The challenges posed by various conceptualizations and points of thought I encountered during my data collection process and scrutinizing those challenges from a vantage point helped me to understand and reflect upon my own thought processes and decisions in a multidimensional way. This, in turn, increased the trustworthiness and reliability of the research as the possible effects of my own personal prejudices and preferences were reduced as much as possible. The fieldwork diary also helped me to remember some of the significant details and intricacies that I normally would not keep in mind easily due to the overwhelming amount of data I have been receiving from the interlocutors and the field. This, in turn, helped me to interpret the data with less logical fallacies and more robustness. It certainly helped the interpretation to better represent the ideas and feelings of my interlocutors.

## 2.4 Critical Reflections on Methodology and Research Limitations

One of the most significant limitations of the study is related to the accessibility problem to significant quantitative data concerning the telematic performances that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. Especially having the data that provides us a precise outlook on the number of telematic performances, the number of actors engaged in telematic performing, and the number of spectators would have a great impact on the capacity of the research in understanding the scope, popularity, attainability, thus, the actual effect of telematic performances more thoroughly on the theater scene in Turkey.

Besides, this research does not look into the subject matter specifically from the perspective of the audience. As the spectator is the other fundamental subject of *liveness* and *co-presence* in the theater performance, including the spectator's perceptions and thoughts would provide much more comprehensive and elaborated insights on how *liveness* and *co-presence* work in the empirical world. Conducting a focus group study with the spectators of the two selected telematic performances or conducting one-to-one interviews could not only widen the scope of the empirical repercussions of *liveness* and *co-presence* in real life but also contribute to our comprehension of the limits and capacities of these two concepts.

Considering the more technical limitation of the study, it is worth noting that the



results of this study cannot represent a wider pool of people as it is conducted with a limited number of interlocutors. They cannot be replicated as well as they are simply the input created through the researcher's interpretation as well as the interlocutors' responses, which might be dependent on various factors such as their mood during the interviews, the level of engagement, and desire to share information as well as other abilities and capacities. Besides, as this study was conducted within a period of only a month, it lacks engagement with the field for a longer period of time, which would otherwise increase the reliability of the results. In order to overcome this limitation, I was extra careful in ensuring the validity of the information I gather from the interlocutors by putting special efforts to understand the contributions coming from them. I sometimes asked my questions multiple times or reword them when it was necessary. I also asked for further clarifications from the interlocutors especially when certain information pieces are not clear and transparent on my side.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework the research is built on. Section 3.1. gives a brief definition of the terms that are used throughout the study such as “telematic”, “performance”, and “telematic performance”. It can be said that during the coronavirus pandemic telematic performance practice started a heated discussion on performance’s immediacy in the sense of its capacity for generating authentic and “real” experience (Berger 2020). The main theoretical debate behind this discussion concerned mediation with regard to performance’s immersion into digitally mediated telematic platforms. Originally, performance is seen as an unmediated art form experienced directly without any technological means. However, since the late twentieth century digital technologies have penetrated almost every sphere of performing arts. In section 3.2., the interplay between media technology and performing arts is reviewed. Relatedly, section 3.3. examines the emergence of digital performance and telematic performance in relation to the evolution of performing arts with technological developments. The transformation of technological mediation or the destabilization of the notions of *liveness* and *co-presence* is at the core of a long-lasting debate within contemporary performance studies and wider cultural theory. Similarly, they have been discussed widely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the media studies-oriented theories, section 3.4. reviews the literature on *liveness* and *co-presence* and the transformation of their meanings.

#### 3.1 Introducing the Conceptual Toolset of the Study

Firstly, it is crucial to define the word telematic which has gained a wide range of usages in the contemporary world. Teleinformatics, or simply telematic, derives from the combination of the Greek prefix *têle* which means “afar, far off” (Dictionary 1989), and the word informatics. It is often used in the plural form that refers to telecommunication technologies that enable communication over long distances. The

Dictionary of Media and Communications defines telematics as follows: “technology that allows for the exchange of computer data through a telephone line” (Danesi 2014, 286). It is used in singular and plural forms interchangeably, and with the advent of the Internet, it pertains to the remote form of communication through fiber optic connections.<sup>9</sup>

As one of the core concepts used in the study, the word performance shall also be highlighted here. According to the Routledge Dictionary of Contemporary Theatre and Performance, the word performance presents an ever-expanding field of practice as it refers to: “1) an action carried out, including on stage; 2) performance art, since the 1960s; 3) the notion, in linguistics and philosophy, of performance/performativity” (Pavis 2016, 158). In the thesis, it is used broadly to refer to the live theatrical event regardless of the particular genre of performing arts. Telematic performance is a type of performance that uses telecommunication and/or videoconferencing technologies in the production and broadcasting stages. It is referred to elsewhere as “networked performance”, implying the conjunction of broadband networks with live performance (Riel and Thorington 2005). The telematic performance or networked performance incorporates broadband networks to conjoin the remote locations of performers and the audience. It is also in line with Fahrudin Nuno Salihbegović’s definition of the term “CyberTheatre” which refers to a performative work where “performer and spectator are placed in separate and remote places, but still can visually, sonically, and physically communicate with each other via computer technology” (Salihbegovic 2013, 89). But telematic performance is more specifically defined as a performance piece that is staged with and/or captured through telematic technologies where these technologies play a key role in the production and the delivery of performance. But telematic performance is more specifically defined as a performance piece that is staged with and/or captured through telematic technologies where these technologies play a key role in the production and the delivery of performance.

Telematic performance emerged in the 1980s with the proliferation of broadband communication, which has been made available for everyday use and artistic pur-

---

<sup>9</sup>If we look at the brief history of the Internet, the first public packet-switched computer network ARPANET which is the precursor of today’s global Internet was established by the Advanced Research Project (ARPA) of the United States Department of Defense. In 1969, ARPANET hosted connections and exchanged data between remote computers from the University of California, Los Angeles, and Stanford Research Institute (Dixon 2007, 457-458). In 1981, the United States National Science Foundation launched the Computer Science Network (CSNET) which aims to interlink U.S. computer science departments across the country (458). Many different networks were developed during the 1980s, and the protocols for network-to-network connection are standardized through TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) - commonly known as the Internet protocol suite, from where today’s global term Internet was originally coined (ibid). In 1984, alphabetic domain names of the Internet were translated into the numeric Internet Protocol (IP) addresses with the advent of the Domain Name System (DNS) that functions as a phone book of the Internet, which directly affects its higher-level functionality. The World Wide Web (WWW), commonly known as the Web, was developed in 1989, and hosts people-to-people connections in cyberspace, it marked a turning point in the history of the Internet (ibid).

poses (Dixon 2007, 87; Pérez 2013, 4). The potential of this performance genre expanded with the evolution of video conferencing technologies that enable remote visual connection (Dixon 2007, 420). It concerns itself with the new forms of spectating as it does not require the presence of a performer or audience within the corporeal space of the performance, namely traditional categories of *liveness* and *co-presence*. It generates what Naomi P. Bennett (2020) refers to as “telepresence”, a particular kind of *co-presence* between performers and the audience via telecommunication technologies. It also redefines the traditional category of *liveness* which can be referred to as *group liveness* (Couldry 2004) and *digital liveness* (Auslander 2012), two concepts that will be reviewed in section 3.4. in detail. Due to the use of network technologies, telematic performance might also be described, although not necessarily, as an interactive performance art form. For the last two decades, the use of computer technology in performance has indeed generated changing modes of performer-performance-audience interaction in cyberspace (Salihbegovic 2013, 24). In the context of telematic performance, the use of networks involves various levels of performer-audience relationship and is related to the possibility of disembodied yet simultaneous interactivity that is generated with the help of technology.

### 3.2 A Brief History of Media Technology in Performing Arts

The use of media technology in performing arts dates back to the early twentieth century, the context in which there has been an industrial transformation in society. A closer look at the beginnings of the incorporation of media technology in theatrical performance would reveal the importance of the early twentieth century avant-garde movements, especially the Futurism of the 1910s (Dixon 2007, 47-71). Truly exalting the “machine”, futurists of the early twentieth century attempted the “marriage” of art and technology, an attempt that led to the manifestations of multimedia performance practice in performing arts in the 1910s (Dixon 2007, 47).

In other respects, the origins of the idea of multimedia staging can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Wilhelm Richard Wagner is the founding father, as his concept *Gesamtkunstwerk* introduces the notion of “the union of different arts, and the union of art and technology” (Salihbegovic 2013, 23). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, applications of multimedia technology varied with regard to dramaturgy or scenography of the performance which followed a wide-scale of examples: from theater director Georges Méliès’ first experiment of “filmed theater” in Europe as early as 1904, to theater producer Erwin Piscar-

tor's documentary screening on stage; theater professional and playwright Bertolt Brecht's adaptation of Sergei Eisenstein's film montage theory into theatrical performance and, scenic designer Josef Svoboda's "psychoplastic space" in the late 1950s that accompanied live action on stage with projected film and photo materials on a big screen (Bilgin 2021, 75-76; Dixon 2007, 73-85; Salihbegovic 2013, 35-36; Şeyben 2016, 25-38).

Despite the contemporary usage of the term drawing mostly on the idea of mixing live performance with digitally mediated forms, multimedia performance embraces the integration of mixed media within the stage, whether it is electronic or digital, or neither of the two (i.e. films, videos, 2D projection, 3D holograms, CD-ROMs, computer games, mobile phone apps, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality, etc.). Since the 1960s, variation of media technologies throughout time has been reflected on the terminology of mixed-media performance. Companies such as The Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, Blast Theory, and performance artists such as Robert Lepage are among those who produced the most celebrated experimental mixed-media works using various technologies (Dixon 2007, 104).

As Steve Dixon observes, in addition to the early twentieth century avant-garde movements and mixed-media performances in the 1960s, there is another break in the brief history of mixed-media staging: "experiments linking performance and the computer during the 1990s" (Dixon 2007, 87). Since the 1990s, computer technologies became widespread and gained a wide variety of usage in performing arts. Contemporary theorists address the use of developing technologies in theater performances not only through their appearance on the stage throughout the course of history but also through the evolution of theatrical performances to accommodate various technologies. In this respect, Fahrudin Nuno Salihbegović suggests that multimedia (mixed-media) staging incorporates the most vital characteristic of theater: "its ability to absorb all other media, in other words, its totality and multimediality" (Salihbegovic 2013, 16). With the development of media-oriented theories in performance studies since the 1990s, the theater is indeed considered a medium that is "composed of various media, varying in number and kind" and, in this respect, is seen "as a mobile configuration of media in its various historical appearances" (Pavis 2016, 134). The most known example is Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, which laid the material basis for the mass production of printed theater scripts. Similar to the use of printing technology in theater, media technology penetrated into the stage, refashioning theater as the most vivid example of "multimediality" (Salihbegovic 2013, 16).

To sum up, theatrical performance integrated various media and media technolo-

gies over the ages, and, in the media-oriented literature in performance studies, the ability of the performance to accommodate these technologies is addressed with the notion of theater’s “multimediality” (Salihbegovic 2013). Each period introduced new forms of performance practice with regard to developing technologies, as in the case of multimedia staging of the early twentieth century, mixed-media performance of the 1960s, and computer arts since the 1990s (Dixon 2007, 37-111). As we entered a new age of telematics, cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality, contemporary theorists categorized the use of new media technologies in performing arts within the broader framework of digital performance.

### **3.3 A Closer Look at the Emergence of Digital Performance and Telematic Performance**

Aforementioned performing arts scholar Steve Dixon, who studied the incorporation of new media technologies into performance, conceptualized digital performance as “an extension of a continuing history of the adoption and adaptation of technologies” into performing arts (Dixon 2007, 40). A wide variety of performance genres can fall under the category of digital performance; for instance, Dixon conceptualized telematic performance within the broad phenomenon of digital performance.<sup>10</sup> He used the term to refer widely to the use of computer and digital media technologies in live performance, including theater and dance, and sensor-based interactive installations and, suggested six categories: robots, cyborgs, telematics, virtual and mixed reality, online performances, and video games (Dixon 2007, 271-621).

“We define the term “digital performance” broadly to include all performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms. This includes live theater, dance, and performance art that incorporates projections that have been digitally created or manipulated; robotic and virtual reality performances; installations and theatrical works that use computer sensing/activating equipment or telematic techniques; and per-

---

<sup>10</sup>What the term digital performance entails is somewhat problematic. Steve Dixon (2007) noted that part of the problem concerns the application of the word digital which “has become a loose and generic term applied to any and all applications that incorporate a silicon chip” (x). Digital is derived from Latin *digitus* which means finger, the oldest tool used to count numbers (Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edn. Volume 4). The Dictionary of Media and Communications defines the word as follows: “1. any medium that operates by means of a digital system; 2. any form of transmission in which a signal is sent in small, separate packages (in contrast to analog)” (Danesi 2014, 94). In a general sense, digital pertains to producing, storing, or processing the data in the form of digits 0 (absent) or 1 (present).

formative works and activities that are accessed through the computer screen, including cybertheater events, MUDs, MOOs, and virtual worlds, computer games, CD-ROMs, and performative net.art works.” (Dixon 2007, 3).

Telematic performance differentiates itself from digital performance in that it particularly incorporates telecommunication technologies to host the simultaneous connection between performers and the audience. Introduced by Helen Varley Jamieson, the term “cyberformance” refers to the “live performance that utilizes internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real-time, for remote and/or proximal audiences” (Jamieson 2008, 34). In a similar vein, the term is also used to address telematic performance. Prior to Jamieson’s cyberformance, Joanne Green, Helen Thorington and Michelle Reil (2005) used the term “networked performance” to stress the network-enabled nature of this particular performance genre. Here, the multiplicity of the terms can be explained by the differences in scholars’ and theater professionals’ approaches to particular performance practices. For instance, the term cyberformance consists of the words “cyberspace” and “performance”, implying that the performance in question “is ‘situated in cyberspace’, and thus the traditional stage is replaced with a cyberstage” (Selim 2020, 57). The networked performance does not accentuate the replacement of performance into cyberstage, but it stresses that the performance disperses geographically by means of network technologies that conjoin two or more remote places together at a single theatrical event. This thesis builds on these different terms, but the telematic performance framework is applied as a meta-framework in the study and adopted in the title as well.

The first known example of telematic performance traces back to the late 1970s before the advent of the Internet when the video-keying techniques enabled artists Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz to bring remote dancers together into a single image at a live event via satellite (Dixon 2007, 420; Sermon et al. 2021, 3). This project is followed by Internet video conferencing that establishes a high-resolution remote visual connection between remote spaces of the performers and the audience, which is “experienced at the moment of creation or reception” (Riel and Thorington 2005). From the early days of the application of satellite to the contemporary usage of the Internet in live theatrical performance, telematic performance encompasses two different kinds:

“One is high-tech; it uses teleconferencing to connect full-body perform-

ers in two or three dimensions, has high resolution, and is expensive and cumbersome; so technically complex that it needs to be mounted in a fixed location. The other version applies low-tech, domestic technologies such as Skype, has low-resolution, is cheap and pervasive; technically so simple that it can be used anywhere.” (Pérez 2014, 3).

In this thesis, I analyze theatrical performance works that fall under the last category, which are the low-tech telematic performance works that incorporate Internet video conferencing and mobile phone applications into live performance.

### 3.4 Changing Ontology of Performance: Liveness and Co-Presence under Scrutiny

As a practice, theater performance produced and delivered via telematic technologies (re)defines the theatrical event as it is known conventionally; theater becoming remote and online surpasses face-to-face *liveness* and physical *co-presence* that is believed to make a performance what it is. The main theoretical debate behind this discussion concerns theater conventions regarding *liveness* and *co-presence* because performance is perceived as happening on-site without any technological means. For the former, contemporary performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan defined the present tenseness of the performance as idiosyncratic and stressed the ephemeral nature of the performance as its greatest strength (Phelan 2003).

“Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.” (Phelan 2003, 146).

Phelan’s ontological claims on the ephemerality of performance’s *liveness* established the performance’s ontological premise based on it being an unmediated art form. Phelan further argued that performance escapes the logic of reproduction. In other words, she claimed that live performance, unlike other artistic systems of representations that necessitate technological mediation such as photography or film which leaves a “copy” behind them, “disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control” (Phelan 2003,



148). Phelan's ontological claims on the ephemerality of the performance privileged the live art forms over the mediatized ones (e.g. telematic performances) and allied with the ideological position which is taken in response to the technological reproduction of the artwork (Auslander 2008, 51). Philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin was the emblematic theorist of this approach asserting the widely accepted idea that technological mediation and/or reproduction dilutes the aura of an artwork:

“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin 1935, 21).

To declare the authenticity of the artwork, Benjamin defined its unique entity in time and space as the essential characteristics. Following Benjamin, it can be asserted here that a performance's authenticity has to do with the “hereness” and the “nowness” of the performance. The ontological claims on the performance's *liveness* indeed pivot around the here-and-now condition of the performance which is also associated with the generalized assumptions on live performance such as “spontaneity, community, presence, and feedback between performers and audience” (Auslander 2008, 63). However, technological mediation in this equation manifested the transgression of the here-and-now condition of the artwork, and therefore, the dissolution of “the magic of live theater” (Auslander 2008, 2), or in other words, of its aura.

Having said that, the rapid development of technology in recent years has led to the revision of the concept of liveness. Philip Auslander was emblematic of this approach as he contradicted Phelan's ideas that, according to him, make “clear-cut ontological distinctions between the live forms and the mediatized one” (Auslander 2008, 4). He revised the notion of *liveness* and argued that in our mediatized world, it is an effect of technological mediatization (Auslander 2008, 56). Furthermore, he asserted that “like liveness itself, the desire for live experiences is a product of mediatization” (Auslander 2008, 55).

“I propose that, historically, the live is actually an effect of mediatization, not the other way around. It was the development of recording technologies that made it possible to perceive existing representations as “live.” Prior to the advent of those technologies (e.g., sound recording and motion pictures), there was no such thing as “live” performance, for

that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility. The ancient Greek theatre, for example, was not live because there was no possibility of recording it.” (Auslander 2008, 56).

Performance studies scholars and cultural critics took different positions on the liveness debate. I will not attempt to analyze and summarize the total debate as that is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is crucial to note that Auslander made his statement at a time when televisual *liveness* was the main medium of *liveness*. Different types of *livenesses* have emerged with the proliferation of the use of the Internet which enabled opportunities for connecting people in real-time. Media, communications, and social theory professor Nick Couldry described the *liveness* in the age of the Internet as a “continuous connectedness” to the world, or to the peer group with whom we communicate ongoingly (Couldry 2004, 360). He proposed two new categories of *liveness*, which are *online liveness* and *group liveness*. Couldry described *online liveness* as follows:

“(...) social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major Websites, all made possible by the Internet as an underlying infrastructure.” (Couldry 2004, 356).

According to him, what differentiates *online liveness* from the “existing category of liveness” which originally belongs to the medium of radio and then of television, is that it is not distributed through “an institutional “center” of transmission”, yet it often overlaps with traditional categories of *liveness* (Couldry 2004, 356-57). *Group liveness*, on the other hand, does not “overlap at all with traditional liveness”, and is described as the “liveness of a mobile group of friends who are in continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting” (Couldry 2004, 357). Based on Couldry’s proposition, in his later writings, Auslander revised his conception of *liveness* and proposed a different kind of *liveness*, that is *digital liveness*, which is defined as a “real-time response and interaction or an ongoing connection” with and through a “technological artifact—a computer, Website, network, or virtual entity” (Auslander 2012, 9). Auslander’s designation does not specifically refer to performer-performance-audience interaction with regards to *liveness*, but it is worth noting while trying to decipher the experience of *liveness* that is mediated by a technological intermediary in the context of telematic performance. Such a performance experience does not necessarily require the conventional forms of physical *co-presence*

to designate the real-time interaction of performer-performance-audience as live.

Having said that, performance's immediacy is believed to reside in the common assumption of "being there"; "being" as in appearing in person, and "there" as in subsisting at the place where the performance happens. In line with this statement, Peggy Phelan asserted that "[p]erformance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward" (Phelan 2003, 149). However, telematic performance applies telepresence techniques that allow "presence across long distances" (Bennett 2020, 246) while also disrupting such spatiotemporal limitations of the performance. The debate of telepresence epitomizes the long-lasting discussion that audiences perceive and connect to the performance in real-time without necessarily being physically co-present with the performers. The use of telematic technologies in performance shapes the ways in which audiences relate to the performance, ways that have already changed considerably due to developing technologies.

## 4. SETTING UP THE CONTEXT OF THE EMPIRICAL SITES OF STUDY

This chapter sets up the context of the empirical sites of study. Section 4.1. gives the overall impact of COVID-19 on Turkey’s theater industry, while section 4.2. locates the telematic performance practices in such a context.

### 4.1 A Brief Overview of the Impact of COVID-19 on Turkey’s Theater Industry

The Ministry of Health confirmed the first COVID-19 case in Turkey on March 11, 2020 (McKernan 2020). Following the statement, a series of countermeasures were taken by the government to prevent the spread of the virus. The Ministry of the Interior issued a circular that put severe restrictions on social life including the field of arts and culture as of midnight March 16, 2020.<sup>11</sup> These restrictions suspended theater operations across the country and profoundly affected the theater industry. Theaters stayed closed nearly for two seasons in Turkey between the period of March 2020 to March 2021, except for short periods of re-openings in low-risk provinces where only a limited number of spectators were allowed in the theater buildings, which, taken together with the people’s avoidance of indoor activities, appeared to be an obstacle for theater businesses to operate functionally.<sup>12</sup>

Turkish Statistical Institute’s (TurkStat) “Cinema, Theatre, Operas, Ballets, Orchestras, Choirs and Groups Statistics, 2020” gives an understanding of the pandemic’s impact on the Turkish theater industry (TurkStat 2021*a*). The statistics revealed that the number of theatrical performances performed in theater venues

---

<sup>11</sup>For the Ministry of the Interior’s circular, please see <https://bit.ly/3B7ChqQ> (last accessed November 2021).

<sup>12</sup>For a detailed timeline of theater operations in Turkey during COVID-19 pandemic, please see Appendix A.

fell by 40.4 percent compared to the 2018-2019 season and was 20 thousand 175 in the 2019-2020 season while the number of theater audiences decreased by 43.1 percent in the 2019-2020 season compared again to the previous season and reached 4 million 492 thousand 293.

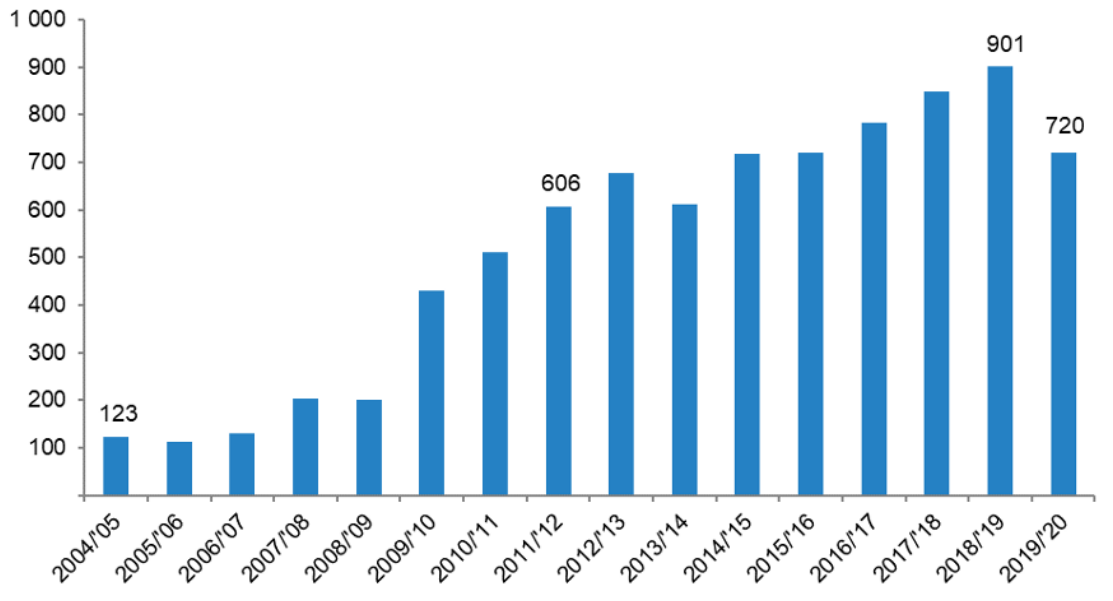
Figure 4.1 The number of performances and audiences by season year, 2005-2020<sup>13</sup>

Sezon yılı Season years	Gösteri sayısı Number of performances			Seyirci sayısı Audiences		
	Toplam Total	Telif Original	Çeviri Translated	Toplam Total	Telif Original	Çeviri Translated
2004/'05	11 453	8 626	2 827	2 716 251	2 110 523	605 728
2005/'06	9 520	6 832	2 688	2 161 537	1 519 852	641 685
2006/'07	10 289	7 574	2 715	2 419 262	1 701 291	717 971
2007/'08	17 410	13 177	4 233	3 380 214	2 466 373	913 841
2008/'09	18 803	13 548	5 255	4 320 729	3 067 727	1 253 002
2009/'10	25 378	18 912	6 466	5 248 226	3 854 341	1 393 885
2010/'11	23 361	17 632	5 729	5 385 588	4 059 860	1 325 728
2011/'12	25 043	17 695	7 348	5 621 066	4 023 018	1 598 048
2012/'13	28 359	21 553	6 806	6 244 821	4 739 078	1 505 743
2013/'14	28 877	23 134	5 743	6 076 128	4 909 012	1 167 116
2014/'15	28 257	22 551	5 706	5 853 445	4 579 412	1 274 033
2015/'16	26 816	20 551	6 265	6 016 762	4 575 551	1 441 211
2016/'17	31 690	24 625	7 065	7 006 410	5 470 095	1 536 315
2017/'18 <sup>(r)</sup>	33 772	26 333	7 439	7 841 353	5 894 114	1 947 239
2018/'19 <sup>(r)</sup>	33 835	26 253	7 582	7 899 547	5 903 438	1 996 109
2019/'20	20 175	15 247	4 928	4 492 293	3 300 768	1 191 525

The coronavirus pandemic also resulted in the permanent closure of theater venues across the country. According to TurkStat, the number of theater venues in the 2019-2020 season decreased by 20.1 percent compared to the 2018-2019 season and reached 720 (TurkStat 2021a).

<sup>13</sup>Resource: <https://bit.ly/3cxcE8J> (last accessed November 2021)

Figure 4.2 The number of theater venues by season year, 2005-2020<sup>14</sup>



The statistics encompass a broad range of scenes from publicly funded municipality theaters and state-subsidized theaters to amateur university clubs, non-governmental organizations, private, and other kinds of professional and independent theaters. In this respect, the decrease in the number of theater venues in the 2019-2020 season (Figure 4.2) fails to reflect how harsh was the pandemic for non-funded professional theaters. As the Ministry’s circular was not tailored to the needs of different types of venues, it was the small-scale independent and alternative theaters relying on ticket sales that faced substantial challenges. Theater Producers Association’s (TPA) report “We Are Monitoring Violations of Theater Workers’ Rights” indeed revealed that small-scale producers were expected to shoulder expenses including the rent, taxes, and insurance premiums of the employees without any income, which consequently resulted in the permanent closure of many boutique venues (Gurer Arslan, and Topaloglu 2021). TPA’s report also uncovered a severe unemployment rate among theater professionals showing that of the 150 participants who took part in the survey, 73.3 percent lost their job while 71.6 percent did not earn a regular income during the lockdown (Gurer Arslan, and Topaloglu 2021). TurkStat’s “Cultural Economy and Cultural Employment Statistics, 2020”, on the other hand, claimed that the number of employees included in the cultural field represented a small decrease of 6.2 percent in 2020 compared to 2019 (TurkStat 2021*b*). So it can be hard to discern the full scale of the unemployment in the field of theater and the challenge partly results from the diversity of the occupations included in TurkStat’s report regarding the scope of cultural employment. Moreover, theater

<sup>14</sup>Resource: <https://bit.ly/3cxcE8J> (last accessed November 2021)

workers are mostly hired on a project basis, and/or work unregistered on a daily basis without any contract, which encompasses many theater workers in the scope of disguised unemployment as well as not allowing them to benefit from short-time work allowance. Highlighting the economic precarity that backstage workers suffered even before the pandemic, Cansu, one of the research participants I conducted an interview with, validated that the coronavirus crisis exacerbated the pre-existing economic difficulties.

“Theater workers; the lighting designer, the costume designer, the assistant stage manager, the ticket agent, etc., unfortunately, most of these people are unregistered workers. They are not recognized by the state. So, they were unable to receive short-time work support and their job prospects ended indefinitely. Hundreds, thousands of people were unemployed.”<sup>15</sup>

Having said that, members of labor organizations such as Theater Cooperative and Actors’ Union held a meeting with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT) to collaborate on a bailout package that favors private and independent theater businesses during the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> MCT announced afterward that it would provide state subsidies to private theaters which turned out to be a project-based support package.<sup>17</sup> According to the TPA’s report, “390 registered private theaters applied to receive this support; of those, 328 projects were supported whereas 62 were denied support without any explanation” (Gurer Arslan, and Topaloglu 2021). Meanwhile, many theater companies were unable to apply for MCT’s support as they had difficulty meeting the application criteria which requires being debt-free regarding the taxes and the social security premiums of the employees preceding the pandemic. The Ministry’s attempt was widely criticized as it did not respond to the needs of small-scale independent theaters.<sup>18</sup> The failure of the MCT and local governmental agencies to meet the needs of the theater industry was also reflected in the interviewees’ comments. Ekrem, another participant of the survey with whom I conducted

---

<sup>15</sup>“Tiyatro emekçileri; işte ışıkçısı, kostümcüsü, reji asistanı, gişede bilet kesen insan falan, maalesef genellikle kayıt dışı çalışır. Devlet nezdinde tanınmaz. Dolayısıyla, onlar kısa çalışma ödeneği de alamadılar ve işleri de belirsiz bir zamana kadar sona erdi. Yüzlerce insan, binlerce insan işsiz kaldı.”

<sup>16</sup>For Theater Cooperative’s article on “About the Emergency Measure and Support Package Prepared for the COVID-19 Pandemic”, please visit <https://bit.ly/3cvbhHy> (last accessed November 2021).

<sup>17</sup>For the Ministry of Culture and Tourism’s Final Provisions regarding Regulations on the Support Made to the Private Theaters’ Projects, please visit <https://bit.ly/3OIZKaV> (last accessed November 2021).

<sup>18</sup>For Let Our Theater Alive Initiative’s notice criticizing the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, please see <https://bit.ly/3RSGXXC> (last accessed November 2021).

an interview, said the following lines when asked about the support mechanisms during the pandemic.

“What we need is not individual donations, but consistent support. The Kadıköy Municipality wouldn’t go bankrupt by paying a couple of months’ rent for a theater. Keeping the theaters from going bankrupt is much more crucial.”<sup>19</sup>

Criticizing the central and local government’s policies regarding the support mechanisms, the aforementioned research participant Ekrem was of the opinion that labor organizations led efforts to get theater businesses out of the crisis while official agencies failed to provide support.

“During the pandemic, the aid that independent theaters received from the government, due to the efforts of the Theater Cooperative, was only enough to cover a month’s rent. But these theaters have other expenses besides rent: there are electricity and water bills, there are the people that work on these stages and people with work insurance. The rehearsals have a cost.”<sup>20</sup>

In brief, the insufficient support by the official representatives doubled the devastating effect of the pandemic. The uncertainty regarding how long the suspension will last and how and when the theatre professionals will be meeting the audience again compelled them to set up new strategies. The operational transition of the performances to a telematic setting is widely considered one of the survival strategies.

## 4.2 An Overlook of Telematic Performances During the Pandemic

Amid the crisis where theatrical performance was bound to physical distancing, a wide range of local and global productions circulated on the Internet. When we

---

<sup>19</sup>“Tek tek yardımlar değil, gerçekten sürekli bir destek gerekli. Kadıköy’de zor durumda olan bir tiyatronun üç kirasını belediye ödese, belediye batmaz. O tiyatronun batmasından daha önemli değil.”

<sup>20</sup>“Tiyatro Kooperatifinin çok büyük çabaları ile pandemi döneminde ancak bir kira ödeyebilecek kadar yardım alabilmeyi başardı bağımsız tiyatrolar devlet tarafından. Halbuki kira değil sadece bu sahnelerin masrafı; bu sahnelerin elektriği var, suyu var. Bu sahnelerde çalışan insanlar var, sigortalı olan insanlar var. Bu provaların bir bedeli var.”



look into these pieces, we can refer to at least three types of categories: (1) streaming of pre-recordings of stage productions; (2) live streaming of stage productions that are performed and broadcasted in real-time; (3) telematic performances taking place by means of telecommunication tools (e.g. video conferencing software Zoom, multimedia messaging app WhatsApp and social media platforms Instagram and Facebook).

As for the first category, especially in the first months of the global lockdown, “theater archives” of earlier stage productions that circulated on the Internet can be considered as kind of a gesture that theater venues made for their audiences.<sup>21</sup> This archival content was subsequently followed by streaming the pre-recorded stage productions in times of quarantine. The videos of stage productions circulated on free-streaming platforms such as Youtube and Vimeo. A wide-known example in Turkey is Zorlu Performing Arts Center’s series titled “Digital Stage” which is streamed on the venue’s YouTube channel.<sup>22</sup>

The second category includes the adaptation of the stage productions to Covidien stay-at-home orders by live streaming the stage to remote audiences. In this category, performers perform in real-time on a physical stage before the camera and spectators join this live show by ticket-per-device price via their digital device. While the suspension of on-site theater intensified the simultaneous broadcast of stage productions, pioneering companies such as Britain’s National Theatre were using cinematic live-streaming long before the COVID-19 pandemic (Carson 2008; Cho 2021; Sullivan et al. 2018). In Turkey, plenty of theater companies and venues which have not been able to stage their performance works due to public health-related restrictions offered the simultaneous Internet broadcast using online platforms that are affiliated with different theater companies and venues such as Moda Stage Theater’s “sahneden naklen”, (live broadcast from the stage), DasDas Stage Theater’s “DasDas online”, K! Cultural Performing Arts’ “online screening” and online ticket selling platform Jet Guichet’s “Jet Guichet Dijı” and “Jet Guichet Live”. While such enterprises were named within the broad framework of digital performance, live broadcast, or online performance, they rather imply the digitalized delivery of the stage productions to remote audiences in real-time during the lockdown measures.

---

<sup>21</sup>During the pandemic, theater companies put pre-recordings of earlier stage productions to open access on the Internet. The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts compiled a list of local and global productions and programs, and announced it under the name “Stay At Home, Don’t Stay Away From the Stage”. For the list, please visit <https://bit.ly/3Ppfye1> (last accessed November 2021). This is followed by other lists circulated on the web. For more information, please visit <https://bit.ly/3aUhzQu> (last accessed November 2021).

<sup>22</sup>For Zorlu Performing Arts Center’s Digital Stage, please visit <https://bit.ly/3cxWf3S> (last accessed November 2021).

The third category includes what I call telematic performance practice which makes use of telecommunication services. What differentiates them from the previous categories is that they do not necessitate a physical stage as they use the virtual interface of the tools that are in use. During the lockdown measures, video conferencing software Zoom, multimedia messaging app WhatsApp, and social media platforms Instagram and Facebook have been widely used. Telematic performances engaging in these different telematic tools are designated under different names such as “Zoom performance”, “Zoom theater”, “WhatsApp performance”, “WhatsApp theater”, “Live performance on WhatsApp”, “Facebook live performance”, “Instagram live performance”. These online platforms are not formerly designed for performance art purposes; repurposing the interface of the tools that are in use for live performances, in turn, refashions the conventional stage components, and it (re)defines traditional categories of *liveness* and *co-presence*. The synoptic analysis concerning the prominent examples of telematic performances produced by independent theater professionals during COVID-19 lockdown measures in Turkey is presented in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 The synoptic analysis of telematic performances produced during COVID-19 lockdown in Turkey

<b>Performances</b>	<b>Premier Date</b>	<b>Creator(s)</b>	<b>Medium and Performance Structure</b>
Corona and Juliet	2020	Fuat Mete	A performance piece taking place on WhatsApp. The performance is structured in a closed form in which spectators witness the dialogues between the characters in a live WhatsApp group chat.
Deserted Shores // Negative Photographs	2020	Galata Perform/NewPerform	A multi-site performance taking place at online channels. Spectators first watch the pre-recorded play on NewPerform’s website. They visit afterward the installation which is placed on-site. They can also participate in a virtual tour of the installation through a 3D video on YouTube.

Map to Utopia	2020	Platform Theater and Fringe-Ensemble	A gamified theater experience adapted to Zoom. It is an interactive performance piece that is grounded on spectators' role-playing. To participate in the performance, spectators use a mobile phone application that is specifically developed for the performance.
Murder of the Male	2020	Nadir Sonmez	A solo performance piece adapted to WhatsApp. Throughout the performance, spectators individually receive in-app messages over the course of twelve hours. They can reply to the messages, yet such an interaction does not influence the flow of the performance.
Read Subtitles Aloud	2020	Onur Karaoglu and Kathryn Hamilton	A pre-recorded video content streamed on YouTube to which spectators participate by reading the subtitles aloud.
Such Things Only Ever Happen In Movies	2019 (on-site) & 2020 (online)	Pinar Goktas and Sule Ates	A solo performance piece adapted to Zoom meeting. The performance taking place in real-time at the performer's house is structured in an open form in which spectators participate in interacting through Zoom's chat function. Spectators can see who else is in attendance on the Zoom meeting window.
White Wings	2021	NewPerform and Theater Now	A dramatic theater piece taking place on Zoom webinar. The performance is structured in a closed form. Spectators only see performers on screen that substitutes the classical fourth wall.

Meteor	2021	Begum Nil Kutluay, Bugra Ozurul, Efe Akercan, Mert Algin and Selin Hasar	A performance piece applying hypermedia storytelling practice using WhatsApp group chat, Instagram accounts of the characters, and phone calls throughout the performance. It is structured in both closed and open forms.
Somewhere Only We Know	2021	Ekin Tunceli	A telematic dance performance on Zoom using video keying techniques through Open Broadcaster Software.
Walkthrough	2020	tibia x fibula	A site-specific performance work that combines elements of first and third-person adventure games and immersive performance experience. The performance consists of two performers who are physically situated at the site where the performance happens, and remote audiences who are connected to this site via Zoom. Through this telematic connection, the audience participates in a promenade experience across the city.

In this study, the performances of the independent theater professionals I conducted interviews with are involved in the third category, falling into the pool of telematic performances. Through the main discussions based on these interviews, I try to understand how theatre conventions concerning *liveness* and *co-presence* are challenged by and are challenging the new forms of theater performances, namely telematic performances.

## 5. UNDERSTANDING LIVENESS AND CO-PRESENCE THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN TURKEY

Telematic approaches to performance-making are proliferated by the suspension of on-site theater activity in Turkey, just as it has been in the rest of the world (Acikdeniz 2020; Aydogan, and Aydogan 2021). This surge started, in turn, heated discussions among theater professionals, theorists, and enthusiasts. Some welcomed telematic performance practice as a temporary situation until conditions allow them to return to in-person performance (Dixon 2020), while others have seen it as a threat disrupting theater's prominent features of *liveness* and *co-presence* (Berger 2020). On the one hand, telematic technologies have been applied to performance to experiment with new artistic forms regarding the conventions of *liveness* and *co-presence*; on the other hand, they were only used as a broadcasting vehicle to cope with the suspension of on-site theater activity. Originally attributed to the idea of theater as being an unmediated art form, such applications crystallized the interplay between media technologies and performing arts concerning *liveness* and *co-presence*. Based on the ten semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews conducted with independent theater professionals, this chapter illuminates how theatre professionals have experienced the transition from on-site theater activity to telematic platforms in the first year of the global pandemic.

Regardless of whether telematic technologies have offered a lifesaver for the survival of theaters during the public health-related restrictions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic or an opportunity for a new artistic take, opposing positions were taken among theater professionals towards telematic performances. These opposing positions couple with challenges and benefits of telematic performance practice on the part of theater professionals. While section 5.1. manifests the main motivations of theater professionals in transitioning into telematic settings during the lockdown, section 5.2. demonstrates the limitations they experienced concerning *liveness* and *co-presence* on telematic platforms. The section also reveals certain

obstacles theater professionals have gone through while transitioning to telematic settings. Lastly, section 5.3. exhibits the potentialities of telematic tools to generate a different kind of *liveness* and *co-presence* while also demonstrating the benefits of such potentialities.

### 5.1 Motivations of the Theater Professionals in Transitioning into Telematic Settings

The theatre professionals and theorists who have studied the interplay between media technologies and performing arts claim that the implementation of such technology into performance is an avant-garde movement, and as such offers an experimental take (Berghaus 2017; Blake 2014; Causey 2016; Dixon 2007; Giannachi 2004; Parker-Starbuck 2011; Salihbegovic 2013). The interviews revealed that theater professionals' motivations behind the shift to telematic performance practice during the COVID-19 lockdown are manifold. One of the most recurring motivations is related to the financial burden that COVID-19 has brought about. As Ekrem points out, the shift to telematic performance practice was a survival strategy to keep theater venues alive in a time of unpredictability concerning public health-related restrictions.

“Our main purpose in doing this [telematic performance] is not experimentation or feeling good about ourselves. We are trying to keep the theater company afloat, and trying to somehow pay the rent through the ticket sales.”<sup>23</sup>

Deniz also designates this journey as an existential necessity to overcome the uncertainty stemming from the closure of the theater venues in Turkey.

“I do theater on digital platforms today for an existential necessity. The purpose is to sell tickets to the plays and to keep theater companies alive.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>“Bunu [telematik performans] yapmadaki en temel amacımız ne deneysellik, ne işte kendimizi iyi hissetmek. Sahneyi ayakta tutmak, bilet paraları ile bir şekilde kiranın ödenmesini sağlamak.”

<sup>24</sup>“Bugün dijital mecrada tiyatroyu çok olgusal bir gerekçe ile yapıyorum. Amaç o oyunlara bilet alınsın ve sahneler hayatta kalsın.”

She clarified elsewhere in our conversation that the main reason she felt the need to produce telematic works was to find ways for the Turkish independent theater scene to survive and to show solidarity with them.

“Why am I still putting on plays in this period? Because theater companies shutting down gives me strong feelings of anxiety and restlessness. Theaters shouldn’t close down. Oh no! I write plays for digital platforms because I want theater companies to survive. Because I want them to be aware that there are still plays being written. Because I want to be able to put on plays in Turkey through independent companies, and for my friends to also be able to create things there.”<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, some interviewees noted that their motivation behind the shift to online work was to create experimental and innovative artistic forms through the implementation of technology. Sirin referred to this shift as follows:

“When the pandemic started, we were unable to perform plays. We used to do workshops, and they also became impossible. I started thinking about what I could do through online platforms. It was the start of the pandemic lockdown, so we were unable to leave our houses. I started thinking about what could be done without having to leave the house. During that time, people had started to broadcast their previously recorded plays online, or they did online storytelling, etc. I wanted to see if anything further than these was possible. We did a video-performance series to see whether a theatrical aesthetic could be created through video art.”<sup>26</sup>

Rifat similarly stated the following lines:

---

<sup>25</sup>“Neden bu dönemde hala oyun yapıyorum? Çünkü tiyatroların kapanıyor olmasının bende yarattığı çok ciddi bir anksiyete ve tedirginlik hali var. Tiyatrolar kapanmasın. Aman ha! Dijital için oyun yazıyorum çünkü tiyatroların yaşamasını istiyorum. Çünkü oyun yazarlığının devam ettiğini bilmelerini istiyorum. Çünkü Türkiye’de tiyatro yapabileceğim bağımsız tiyatroların varlığını ve arkadaşlarımla orada beraber üretim yapabilecek olmalarını çok önemsiyorum.”

<sup>26</sup>“Pandemi başladığında oyunlarımızı oynayamaz olduk. Atölyeler yapıyorduk, onları da yapamaz olduk. Ben online neler yapabilirim diye düşünmeye başladım. Pandeminin çok başlangıcıydı, evden çıkamıyorduk. Evden çıkmadan neler yapabiliriz bunun üzerine düşünmeye başladım. O dönem herkes kayıtlı oyunlarını online yayınlamaya başlamıştı ve hikaye falan okuyorlardı online bir şekilde. Bundan başka ne yapabiliriz ona bakmak istedim. Video sanatı üzerinden teatral bir estetik yaratmak mümkün mü ya da ne kadar mümkün falan bunu araştırmak için bir video-performans serisi yaptık.”

“I had an aesthetic pursuit when adapting plays to digital platforms. How can I reenact the theater discipline in a digital setting, and what kind of language expression and video techniques does this require? It’s not a film shoot, not a video content, it doesn’t present a plan; it comes with questions concerning how the [theater] discipline can be conveyed. It’s an aesthetic pursuit that comes with many questions that concern not only the relationship between these two disciplines [theater and video art], but also the existence of theater and its purpose in our present position in time.”<sup>27</sup>

Baris considered telematic performance practice through an artistic take as well:

“In the year-long process of lockdown when everything was on hold and we didn’t even know when we would see each other face to face again, while we were contemplating where art could be placed in all of this or how theater could still be pursued, I wanted to put on a play through completely digital means. I was in search of a new language that was suitable for digital platforms, and that would bring the techniques of theater and the digital resources together.”<sup>28</sup>

All in all, the main motivations of theatre professionals vary greatly from survival matters to providing solidarity with theater venues that are under threat of shutting down as well as experimenting with new artistic forms. These findings reveal that all theater professionals relate their motivations to the harsh conditions the COVID-19 pandemic brought about regardless of what these motivations are. Even though some theater professionals are actually motivated to engage in telematic performance by their interest in experimental and artistic forms, their interest is engendered by the limiting consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown in the first place. Thus, we can conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as a significant eliciting factor bringing the static discussions on various forms of *liveness* and *co-presence* to the surface. Considering the main problematique of this research, the COVID-19

---

<sup>27</sup>“Oyunları dijitale adapte ederken estetik bir arayışım vardı. Dijital mecrada tiyatro disiplinini nasıl bir anlatım diliyle ve nasıl bir video çekimiyle tekrardan kurabilirim? Bu çekim bir sinema kaydı değil, bir içerik değil, bir plan sunmuyor; gerçekten de [tiyatro] disiplinin nasıl aktarılabilceği ile ilgili sorularla birlikte geliyor. Bu iki disiplinin [tiyatro ve video sanatı] birbiriyle ilişkisi kadar gerçekten tiyatronun varlığı ve tiyatronun varlığının bugün geldiğimiz noktada gerekçesi gibi bir sürü soruyla beraber gelen bir estetik arayış.”

<sup>28</sup>“Her şeyin bittiği, bundan sonra yüz yüze ne zaman görüşeceğimizin belli olmadığı bir senelik devam eden süreçte sanat bunun neresinde ya da dijital olarak tiyatroyu nasıl sürdürebiliriz derken ben de tamamen dijital olanakları kullanarak bir oyun yapmak istedim. Tiyatro tekniği ile dijital olanakları birleştirerek tamamen oraya [dijital mecraya] uygun yeni bir dil arayışında oldum.”



pandemic is a useful tool that makes such discussions on *liveness* and *co-presence* an urgent, dynamic, and relevant debate.

Against this backdrop, the next section demonstrates the main concerns and obstacles that theater professionals experienced regarding *liveness* and *co-presence*.

## 5.2 Not Here, Not Now: Concerns and Obstacles Regarding Telematic Performances

In the article “The Forgotten Art of Assembly Or, Why Theater Makers Should Stop Making”, theater artist and writer Nicholas Berger criticizes the shift of live performance to digitally mediated telematic platforms during the global health crisis (Berger 2020). He propounds that theater professionals should stop making online works motivated by the restrictions of social gathering since such works attack the essential promise of the theater, the congregation of performers and the audience at the place where performance happens, namely the *co-presence* of the two parties. His thoughts epitomize the predominant belief shared among a group of theater professionals who tend to dismiss the current trend toward digitally mediated telematic performances in the pandemic era.<sup>29</sup> He argues that the fundamental property of theater is physical *co-presence*, a fact ignored by proponents of its digitalized counterpart. Interviews with theater professionals were indeed aligned with the idea that on-site theater preceding the pandemic and telematic performances during the lockdown measures are seen as contradictory. Sirin shared her thoughts on newly emerged telematic performances as follows:

“There was such a strong reaction to the idea of doing things online. Putting on plays through digital platforms was seen as an acceptance of the death of theater. Carrying all forms of art onto digital platforms was viewed badly. There was such a reaction.”<sup>30</sup>

For Rifat, the digitalized output of theatrical works was considered as a rival to the theater:

---

<sup>29</sup>For a detailed outlook on theater professionals’ affirmative and dissident comments on Nicholas Berger’s article, please see <https://bit.ly/3oo7IFI> (last accessed July 2022).

<sup>30</sup>“Çok tepkisel bakıldı online şeyler yapılmaya. Dijitalde bir şey yapmak böyle sanki tiyatrunun yok oluşunu kabullenmekmiş gibi anlaşılıyordu. Her şeyi dijitalde taşımak çok kötü karşılanıyordu. Öyle bir tepki vardı.”

“People had a very strong reaction to it [digital theater]. Being closer to the digital world was seen as a rejection of the existence of theater, or it was viewed as a big threat to it.”<sup>31</sup>

In a similar vein, Baris mentioned that theater was thought to be at odds with the digital:

“There was a prejudice against digital theater. Nobody thought that a digital platform suited theater. People couldn’t conceive how the two [digital and theater] could come together.”<sup>32</sup>

Theater professionals’ impulse to see on-site and telematic performances in a relation of opposition is not a new phenomenon. In his book “theatre and the digital”, Bill Blake associates this antagonism with the long-established idea propagating general assumptions on “theater’s specialness” (Blake 2014). Digital media where telematic performances happen is believed to lack “live interaction, genuine intimacy, real presence, and bodily expression” (Blake 2014, 4). Following a similar argumentation, the opposition between on-site and telematic performances concerning the assumed superiority of the former manifests itself when I asked the interviewees how they define telematic performances produced during the pandemic. Deniz answered the question with a deep sigh:

“When I think on the subject of digitalized plays, it always brings the word imitation to mind. When I’m talking about it or chatting with someone about it, ‘imitation’ is the word coming out of my mouth. Like a counterfeit... That’s the feeling it gives me. I feel as though it is an imitation: looks like a pseudo-theater”<sup>33</sup>

Although Deniz emphasized elsewhere that she does not want to discard telematic works altogether by designating them as inferior to their unmediated counterparts

---

<sup>31</sup>“Çok tepkiliydi insanlar. Sanki dijitalle yaklaşmak tiyatronun varlığını reddetmek ya da onu tehdit eden bir şeymiş gibi algılamıyordu.”

<sup>32</sup>“Dijital tiyatroya çok böyle bir önyargı vardı. Kimse yakıştırmıyordu tiyatroya dijitalliği. Dijitalle tiyatro yan yana nasıl gelir ki diye düşünülüyordu.”

<sup>33</sup>“İmitasyon kelimesini çok düşünüyorum dijitalde oyun meselesini düşündüğüm zaman. Konuşurken, sohbet ederken, dilime gelenin hep imitasyon kelimesi olduğunu düşünüyorum. Yani imite etmek... Benim yakaladığım his bu. Ben imitasyon hissi yaşıyorum: tiyatro görünüsü...”

(e.g. on-site performance works) in terms of value, she described the works in question as a kind of “pseudo-theater”. For her, experiencing and/or producing theater through digitally mediated telematic platforms creates a sense of imitation. She discerned in such digitalized performance pieces a depreciation of realness and withering of authenticity compared to in-person performance. Cansu, too, designated the journey of theater on digital media as “play-like”, clarifying her resistance to online outputs of telematic works at the beginning of the pandemic:

“When the pandemic started and plays or play-like things were started to be streamed across digital platforms, a lot of people told me to perform my play online. I resisted it for a long time because I thought that the connection you build on stage cannot be replicated online. I still have doubts about it.”<sup>34</sup>

These comments are related to Walter Benjamin’s argument of technological mediation having diluted the aura of an artwork (Benjamin 1935). The main debate behind the discussion of “pseudo-theater” is indeed about technological mediation because the ontological entity of theatrical performance and that of technological mediation are seen in contrast with each other. As discussed in the section 3.4., Phelan was a successor to Benjamin’s thoughts in the field of performance studies who harbored the unmediated experience of live performance as the unique ontology of performing arts (Phelan 2003). Phelan’s designation of theatrical performance as a technologically unmediated art form remains the dominant narrative within a group of theater professionals. Rooted in the same tradition, in his blog “Notes on the Performing Arts” Semih Firincioglu classified performing arts in the category of “direct arts” (Firincioglu 2021). He identified “indirect arts” as the use of any kind of technological intermediary, including the networked computer technology that transports the digitalized entity from the “presenter” to the “receiver”. I encountered similar thoughts in the narratives of the interviewees indicating that the screen is an intermediary eliminating the direct interaction between performers and spectators in telematic performances. Baris expressed such concerns by asking whether connecting through the screen sparks the same “energy” and “magic” as on-site theater performance is believed to do.

---

<sup>34</sup>“Pandemi başladığında ve bu dijital alanda bir takım oyunumsu ya da tiyatromsu şeyler paylaşılmaya başlandığı zaman bir sürü insan bana da söyledi oyununu online yap diye. Ben baya direndim çünkü şey geliyordu bana, o sahnede kurduğum etkileşimin ekran üzerinden sağlanamayacağını düşünüyordum. Hala bununla ilgili soru işaretlerim var.”

“The audience engages with the actors through their computer screens. The actors also engage with each other through their computer screens. So neither the audience nor the actors can touch each other. Can we grasp the emotions through the screen? Can the magic of theater, its energy, be conveyed through the screen?”<sup>35</sup>

Besides disrupting the performance’s assumed authenticity, the interviews demonstrated that the majority of the theater professionals perceived the screen as a diminishing factor for the expression of emotions. Regarding the screen’s interference with the supposed intimate theatrical experience, Oguz stated:

“We argued a lot while enacting the play on digital platforms. We thought a lot about whether we could express the emotions through the screen as we did on a stage.”<sup>36</sup>

Nedim shares a similar position to those envisioning theater’s transition to digitally mediated telematic platforms as “pseudo-theatre”. He mentioned the resentment he felt on coming together with the audience over the screen:

“Personally I was wary about doing online plays. I wasn’t very interested in the idea of putting on a play or watching one through digital platforms. Because the way we connect to the audience through online means leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I can’t help but wonder if what we’re doing is theater. Because it’s not, not really... After all, you can’t use the usual tools like liveliness or reciprocity. These are the kinds of things that make theater what it is.”<sup>37</sup>

For him, the screen dilutes the experience of *liveness* and *co-presence* with the

---

<sup>35</sup>“Seyirciler bilgisayar ekranından bağlantı kuruyor oyuncularla. Oyuncular da birbirleriyle bilgisayar ekranından bağlantı kuruyorlar. Seyirciler de oyuncular da birbirine değemiyorlar. Peki ekrandan o duyguyu, o hissi yakalayabilir miyiz gerçekten? Tiyatroda o büyü dediğimiz, enerji dediğimiz şey ekrandan da olabilir mi?”

<sup>36</sup>“Oyunu dijitalde oynarken çok tartıştık. Gerçekten aktarabilecek miyiz o duyguyu ekran üzerinden, sahnede canlı izlendiği gibi olacak mı falan diye çok düşündük.”

<sup>37</sup>“Ben kendim çok mesafeliydim dijital bir şey yapma düşüncesine. Çok ilgi duymuyordum dijital bir şey yapma ya da izleme fikrine. Çünkü biz şimdi seyircilerle böyle ekran üzerinden bir araya geliyoruz ama insanın içinde böyle buruk bir his bırakıyor. Bu tiyatro mu ama şimdi diye düşünmekten alıkoyamıyorum kendimi. Pek de değil... Sonuç olarak sahnede kullandığın araçları kullanmıyorsun canlılık, karşılıklılık gibi. Onlar da tiyatroyu tiyatro yapan şeyler birazcık.”

audience. Rifat, similarly, claims that the corporeal *co-presence* of performers and audience within temporally and spatially shared settings are the most important strength for fostering the sense of *liveness*. He reinforced the idea that the screen is weakening the experience of immediateness.

“Standing in front of the audience and sharing the same space and time with them is the biggest power of theater. So the idea in everyone’s minds is that when a play is performed through the screen, it loses its spiritedness and dies.”<sup>38</sup>

While the discussion of *liveness* is one of the most contested and revised topics of both performance and communication studies (Auslander 2008, 2012; Couldry 2004), the alleged quality of liveness that belongs to the spatio-temporal *co-presence* makes the theatrical experience particularly important for theater professionals. Furthermore, I see in the following comments that they place a significant value on the unmediated experience of *liveness* in performance:

“The audience watching live without any montage and witnessing everything that happens on stage in person, seeing the transformation of the actors throughout the play’s plot... We can never make that happen through a screen.”<sup>39</sup>

“Theater needs to be live. I think the feeling of liveliness is very important. When it’s done through a computer screen that feeling can be lost.”<sup>40</sup>

Both Ekrem and Baris similarly highlighted the importance of *liveness* and stated that the screen as intermediation risks loosening the characteristic of immediateness. In addition to focusing on the immediate nature of live performance, the

---

<sup>38</sup>“Tiyatronun en büyük gücü aslında seyirci ile karşı karşıya olmaktan ve aynı fiziksel mekanı ve aynı zaman dilimini paylaşmaktan geçiyor. Bu yüzden herkesin düşündüğü şey, ekran olduğu zaman bir şey canlılığını yitiriyor ve ölüyor düşüncesi.”

<sup>39</sup>“Seyircinin hiçbir kurgu olmadan canlı olarak izlemesi ve mesela o oyuncunun sıfır ter ile başlayıp ter içerisinde kalmasına baştan sona canlı bir şekilde tanık olması... Bunu ekran önünden asla sağlayamayacağız.”

<sup>40</sup>“Canlı olması lazım tiyatronun. Canlılık hissi çok önemli bence. Mesela ekran devreye girdiği zaman bu canlılık hissi kaybolabiliyor.”

interviews with theater professionals align with Firincioglu’s classification of performing arts, designating live performance in the category of “reciprocal events” in which instantaneous “give-and-takes” happen between performers and the audience. Their thoughts correspond to Firincioglu’s emphasis on the reciprocity of performance (Firincioglu 2021). Firincioglu asserts that the reciprocity in performing arts is not limited to in-person interaction. However, narratives of interviewees reveal that gathering virtually over the screen loosens the performer-audience feedback loop. Nedim emphasized the direct counter-response from the audience as an element feeding his performance throughout, stating that this is lost in telematic events:

“Of course, online theater playing takes some things away from the experience; being face to face, breathing in the same air, I don’t know, hearing them giggle, or hearing them sigh when they don’t like it, etc.; it definitely takes away some things.”<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, telematic connection with the audience provokes a feeling of transgressing the long-established convention(s) of theater performance. Cansu stated that seeing the audience even remotely on the screen contributes to the sense of being watched. However, the lack of being able to watch faces in video conferencing generates a sense of uncertainty:

“All in all, plays are performed so that people can watch them. As an actress, there is an unspoken agreement between you and the audience that’s like ‘I’m here right now, and you’ll watch me’. I don’t know, when you do it online sometimes the audience will turn off their camera, and it makes you doubt whether they’re actually watching. So, for me there’s that kind of uncertainty in online platforms.”<sup>42</sup>

For Cansu, the disembodied nature of cyberspace damages the instantaneous interaction between performers and audiences. Besides, the screen, as an element of intermediating *co-presence*, elicits an intense feeling of doubt concerning the audi-

---

<sup>41</sup>“Yani evet çevrim içi oynamak bir şeyleri götürüyor; birebir olmak, aynı mekanda aynı havayı solumak, işte ne bileyim kıkırdamalarını duymak, beğenmiyorsa “aayh” diye iç geçişlerini duymak, vs. açısından kesinlikle bir şeyleri götürüyor.”

<sup>42</sup>“Sonuçta tiyatro birileri izlesin diye yapıyor. Oyuncu olarak ‘ben şimdi buradayım ve siz de bana bakın’ gibi aslında sözsüz bir anlaşma yapıyorsun seyircilerle. Ne bileyim yani kamerasını kapatıyor insanlar ve sana böyle ‘ulan acaba izliyorlar mı beni’ duygusu geliyor. Dolayısıyla böyle bir belirsiz bir şey var benim için online platformda.”

ence presence. Together with Baris' following comments, it can be asserted that the experience of physically being in the same place where the performance happens with the fellow spectators (e.g. *co-presence*) is an unquestionable element of theatrical expression and experience for theater professionals:

“We build the experience of a play based on the encounter in the theater, the collectivity. It's a very physical thing actually. Which is why it feels so wrong for us. We are doubtful about watching a play through a screen.”<sup>43</sup>

A dominant tendency among the theater professionals is the authentication of the theatrical experience by means of a physical *co-presence*, as shall be seen from Deniz's comments:

“I mean, I'm not trying to compare the worth of the two [telematic versus on-site performances] but I suppose experiencing a play together [as actors and the audience] is what makes theater what it is.”<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, Oguz prioritized the experience of corporeal *co-presence* over virtual gathering while also enunciating this presence convention as the authenticity of the performance:

“In theater, our sense of reality is built on going there, sitting in the seats and watching the play being acted out on stage. That's how our reception works, that's how we're used to it. So watching a play through a screen feels weird.”<sup>45</sup>

The theater professionals' narratives I have presented above adopt quite similar standpoints concerning the reluctance about moving on-site theatrical performance

---

<sup>43</sup>“Tiyatro deneyimini biz o mekanda yaşanan karşılaşmaya, biraradalığa yönelik bir şey olarak kuruyoruz. Çok fiziksel bir şey aslında. O yüzden bize çok ters geliyor. Ekrandan oyun izlemek mi olur diye düşünüyoruz.”

<sup>44</sup>“Yani bir değer münakaşası içerisinde asla değilim ama galiba tiyatro deneyimini beraber tecrübe ediyor olmamız tiyatroyu tiyatro yapıyor.”

<sup>45</sup>“Bizim tiyatrodaki gerçeklik algımız tiyatroya gitmek, koltuklara oturmak ve sahneden oyunu izlemek üzerine kurulu. Alımlamamız o şekilde çalışıyor, öyle kabul etmişiz yani. O yüzden de değişik geliyor ekrandan oyun izlemek.”

to digitally mediated telematic platforms. They expressed concerns regarding the use of telematic technologies as a medium of performance-making. They have experienced telematic connection as a limiting factor to generate performance's alleged conventions of *liveness* and *co-presence*.

Different than general concerns regarding these conventions, theatre professionals also mentioned that there are certain concrete obstacles they encountered on telematic platforms. Simply put, the interviews confirmed that adapting a performance into telematic formats using digital media devices was difficult. At least three major difficulties have been found in the present study: (1) *digitalization of performance*: additional telecommunication technologies as well as high-speed Internet connection are required; (2) *lack of ad-hoc telematic platforms*: available channels are not designed for performance art purposes, and as such, intrinsic challenges to the experience of liveness and co-presence with audiences appear; (3) *lack of IT-skills and IT-related trainings*: adapting an telematic approach to performance-making requires new sets of skills and training for theater professionals. Based on these three obstacles, following part of this section examines the limitations of telematic performance transition for the theater professionals during COVID-19 lockdown measures in Turkey.

First of all, I would like to open up the *digitalization of performance*. Hosting telematic performance events relies on the possession of at least a computer and/or smartphone, and on a stable Internet connection. In addition to possession of such domestic technologies, these technologies should also be available to the audience. In line with such a necessity, this study reveals that performers needed additional props and equipment on telematic platforms (e.g. specific lighting or green screens to design virtual backgrounds on Zoom for their performances). Even though all these technologies and equipment can be considered low-tech and low-cost requirements, one cannot assume that everyone has equal opportunities such as access to Internet or to any types of equipment. Specifically, uneven distribution in access to a reliable Internet connection across the world accentuates the digital differences between theater professionals on a global scale to effectively implement telematic performance-making practices. This argument is supported by the study "Culture, the Arts and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Five Cultural Capitals in Search of Solutions", which explores different cultural hubs of the Global North, namely Berlin, London, New York, Paris, and Toronto. The authors showed that the implementation of new digitally mediated telematic frameworks for the fields of culture and arts during the pandemic was mainly dependent on the pre-existing digital infrastructures in these cities (Anheier, Merkel, and Winkler 2021).



As for the *lack of ad-hoc telematic platforms*, it seems that the telematic approaches to performance-making becomes difficult since the existing platforms do not serve well specifically for performance-making activities. This practical obstacle causes two severe challenges: a) the *lack of exact synchronicity* (e.g. *liveness*): an exact synchronicity between performers and audiences is almost impossible to achieve since digital latency is an integral part of telematic encounters; b) the *lack of embodied social dynamic* (e.g. *co-presence*): a sense of togetherness is undermined by the lack of an embodied social dynamic in telematic platforms.

Concerning the *lack of exact synchronicity*, it should be noted that the ability of telematics to simulate simultaneity depends on the speed of the Internet connection. The journey of the live image and sound on the Internet is always subject to delay across networks as it takes time for the data to travel from one presenter to one or multiple receivers. In this respect, it becomes impossible to achieve the synchronicity between remote devices that is as convenient as the technologically unmediated experience of *liveness*. For instance, the duration of a digital delay over Zoom is dependent on Internet speed (Aebischer and Nicholas 2020, 47). According to Ookla’s “Speedtest Global Index” issued in February 2022, Turkey has one of the lowest fixed broadband speeds across the world, ranking 102<sup>nd</sup> among 180 countries. It also ranks 58<sup>th</sup> among 138 countries in mobile broadband with 31.93 Mbps, which is the lowest cellular speed in Europe except for Slovakia with 31.91 Mbps (Ookla 2022). Oguz, who used Zoom in his performance, mentioned both the low bandwidth in the country and lagging as elements affecting the synchronicity during the performance.

“Turkey is one of the countries with the lowest Internet connection speed in the world. Of course, this problem with speed affects the plays. For example, sometimes we have disconnections through the play.”<sup>46</sup>

At a time when high-speed and well-established network access becomes the priority to implement a safe telematic meeting, Rifat similarly addressed the disconnections he and his troupe experienced during their performance as an element damaging to the immediacy of the experience:

“Of course, the quality of the Internet connection is essential to the play. It can cause disruptions, which we experienced during a play. It is a big

---

<sup>46</sup>“En düşük internet hızlarından birine sahip Türkiye dünyada. İnternet hızının düşük olması oyunu etkiliyor tabii ki. Kopmalar oluyor mesela oyun esnasında.”

problem for live plays.”<sup>47</sup>

Concerning the *lack of embodied social dynamic*, it should be noted that the ability of conventional video-conferencing tools such as Zoom to generate a sense of being in assembly is limited when compared to on-site performance. While the sense of coexistence has become a relative concept with the advent of telecommunication technologies, the two-dimensional paradigm of the visual in videoconferencing formats seems to be a challenge to the performer and the audience’s alleged embodiment. Moreover, most web-conference formats limit the full-body interactivity to a rigid “boxed-in head-and-shoulders” visuality, (Sermon et al. 2021, 6) making retaining a sense of *co-presence* even more difficult.<sup>48</sup>

Thirdly and lastly, the *lack of IT-skills and IT-related trainings* as a concrete obstacle also poses significant challenges for theater professionals. Simply put, adapting to a telematic format requires new technical and aesthetic skills for theater professionals. As compared to directing on-site, Oguz described difficulties for directors in setting up the stage on a video-conferencing tool through his experience on Zoom.

“A traditional stage is like a frame, and you direct what happens in that frame. But on Zoom it feels like you are directing multiple frames at once. There’s a box here, and another one there, and you have to control what’s happening in both of them simultaneously. It’s like directing multiple stages. You bring two different worlds together, and you have to make sure they are harmonious with each other. It’s very hard to synchronize the two.”<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup>“Tabi ki internet bağlantısı çok temel bir şey. O kesintiye uğrayabiliyor. Onu yaşadık bir oyunda. O çok ciddi bir sıkıntı oluyor canlı oyunlarda.”

<sup>48</sup>“However, some theater professionals used alternative methods to increase participants’ sense of connectedness in remote encounters. For example, Zehra mentioned the role of online post-performance discussions in creating a sense of togetherness: “We had online artist talks to create that theater feeling. Even if they weren’t face to face, it helped us come together and think collectively on the work we’re doing. I mean, we tried to achieve that collective feeling online, and we received some positive feedback. Both the artists and the audience said that they felt unified and more motivated.”

“O tiyatro deneyimini yaşatmak için artist talk’lar yaptık online’da. Yüz yüze olmasa da bir araya gelme ve yapılan iş üzerine beraber düşünmeyi sağladı. Hani bir araya gelme durumunu biraz online’da yakalamaya çalıştık. Bununla ilgili güzel geri dönüşler aldık. Hem seyirciler hem sanatçılar o beraber olma durumunu hissettiklerini, moral ve motivasyon bulduklarını söylediler.”

While the ability of telematics to create a sense of *co-presence* during the performance is limited, Zehra’s quote reveals that one can also consider this feeling as an extended phenomenon which should not be intrinsic to the moment of the performance. As reviewed in the article “A hefty dose of lemons: the importance of rituals for audiences and performers at the online Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2020”, post-show discussions have a vital role for audience members to feel connected (Piccio et al. 2022, 158). In this respect, holding an online post-show discussions is a strategy theater professionals might adopt to prolong the feeling of connection which is beyond both the moment of the performance and the medium used for the performance.

<sup>49</sup>“Çerçeve sahnede bir çerçeve vardır ve onun içini yönetirsin. Ama Zoom’da birkaç tane sahneyi aynı anda yönetiyormuşsun gibi bir his var. Şurada bir kare var, burada bir kare var ve o iki karenin de içinde

He continued by adding another challenge in terms of guiding the performers through telematic setting:

“Another thing is that when you’re directing on a traditional stage, it’s easier to connect to the actors. You can make eye contact on online platforms too, but I guess what I’m talking about is a more intangible thing. Sometimes you radiate an energy when you’re describing an emotion, and it’s not easy to convey that emotion through a screen.”<sup>50</sup>

Sirin, another director participant of the study, mentioned that the overall infrastructure of Zoom needs to be improved for live streaming performance purposes.

“Zoom’s infrastructure needs to be improved. We considered getting in touch with the company, to ask them for certain updates, but who are we supposed to talk to about this? Most of the time we don’t even know if Zoom has features that correspond with our needs, and our imagination is limited to what we already know.”<sup>51</sup>

In fact, there are third-party programs that can be integrated with web-conferencing tools that enable one to screencast live streaming. Oguz mentioned one of them, namely OBS,<sup>52</sup> which he recently started to learn.

“For example, there’s a software called OBS Studio that has useful features. We are slowly learning about these kinds of services, but there isn’t anyone in Turkey who uses them, so we are trying to figure them out on our own. Maybe in five years these Zoom plays will be com-

---

neler olduğunu yönetmek zorundasın. İki tane çerçeve sahne yönetiyormuşsun gibi bir şey. İki tane farklı dünyayı bir araya getiriyorsun aslında ve sonra da o farklı dünyaların birbirleriyle ahenk içerisinde çalışıyor olmasını sağlamalısın. O iki kare arasındaki bağlantıyı ve senkronizasyonu kurmaya çalışıyorsun falan, çok zor.”

<sup>50</sup>“Bir diğer şey de işte canlı canlı sahnede yönetirken oyuncu ile bazen temas etme şansın daha kolay oluyor. Burada da göz göze bakabiliyorsun ama bahsettiğim şey galiba tinsel bir enerji. Bazen bir duyguyu tarif ederken bir enerji yayıyorsun. O enerjiyi de dijital ekran arkasından yayabilmek her zaman kolay olmuyor.”

<sup>51</sup>“Zoom’un alt yapısının kendi içerisinde gelişmesi gerekiyor. Bunu yazalım Zoom’a, isteyelim onlardan, özelliklerini artırırsınlar diye düşündük ama yani kime yazacağız. Çoğu zaman Zoom’un alt yapısında bizim ihtiyaçlarımıza yönelik şeyler var mı yok mu onu bilmiyoruz ve hayal edebildiklerimiz, yalnızca bildiklerimizle sınırlı kalıyor.”

<sup>52</sup>OBS or Open Broadcaster Software is a free, open-source cross-platform tool for live streaming, screen-casting, and video recording. It offers many useful features to streamers, including gamers and performing arts professionals.

pletely transformed, but in the meanwhile we need to catch up with technological advancements and acquire the necessary tools.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to new technical resources and the skills to use these resources, the interviews also reveal that multitasking is an important requisite to live stream, especially for performers. They are assigned to conduct technical operations throughout the performance while also enacting their roles. Oguz mentioned in his speech the technical tasks that performers need to operate simultaneously in a telematic performance as compared to an on-site performance:

“Normally, the actor’s only responsibility is to learn their lines, and to act them out according to the director’s instructions. But here, they not only have to play, but to continuously check whether their mic is on, etc. So there are a lot of technical things going on at the same time.”<sup>54</sup>

Besides requiring multi-tasking technical operations, performers also need to adopt new sets of skills to perform in a telematic setting. As a technologically mediated performance style, performers must perform in most cases by means of a camera in video conferencing platforms. As a result, Oguz mentioned that performers must learn how to adjust their performance style to the webcam. He designated it as being a hardship compared to on-site performance:

“It’s a tricky situation to navigate for the actors too. Acting in front of a camera is different from acting on stage. When there are a lot of movements it becomes much harder to manage, but when there is too little movement it loses its ardor. You’re not supposed to be dull, so you need to find a balance between the two.”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup>“OBC diye bir program var mesela Zoom’da canlı yayın yaparken başka imkanlar sunuyor sana. Öyle programlar var yani, kullanmayı da öğreniyoruz yavaş yavaş. Ama işte mesela OBC kullanan insan yok Türkiye’de. Biz kendimiz böyle biraz kendi başımıza öğrenmeye çalışıyoruz. O yüzden beş sene sonra bambaşka bir şey olabilir muhtemelen bu Zoom tiyatrosu meselesi ama o arada da teknolojik öğrenme ve malzeme edinme hali gerekiyor.”

<sup>54</sup>“Oyuncunun normal sahnede yapacağı tek şey repliklerini ezberlemek ve yönetmenden aldığı direktiflerle oynamak. Ama burada hem bunu oynamak hem mikrofonu kapalı mı açık mı vs. bunu kontrol etmekle mükellef. Yani bir sürü teknik şeyle uğraşiyor aynı zamanda.”

<sup>55</sup>“Oyuncu açısından da baya zorlayıcı bir deneyim. Kamerayla oynamak tiyatro sahnesinde oynamaktan biraz farklı. Yani çok fazla hareket yaptığında çok büyüyor mevzu. Ama işte daha minimal kaldığında da çok küçük oluyor falan. Ee donuk da olmaman lazım. Onun ikisi arasında bir yerde oynaman gerekiyor.”

Oguz’s above-mentioned quote is in line with the “Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study Digital Toolkit” report as the authors of this study similarly encountered with the adaptation of the performance style to videoconferencing formats as being a hardship for actors (Aebischer and Nicholas 2020, 35). Similarly, many other interlocutors mentioned that they do not feel at ease in using cameras in performances because as a technological means it lacks an unmediated theater experience which is intrinsic to the on-site one. Deniz mentioned this point as follows:

“When you’re performing a play digitally, other instruments such as camera angles have to be considered. Which director can perfectly capture my experience for me? The director will have their own perspective, their own point of view. One of the beauties of theater is that you get to look wherever you want on stage. But when a camera is involved, you have to look wherever the cameraman, or the director wants you to look.”<sup>56</sup>

In the same vein, Baris said the following lines:

“When we take the play off the stage and put it in a house setting, the camera’s limitations become our own. The eye that sees the stage and the audience’s eye becomes one. There is something interesting about that, because normally in a theater you either sit in the front, or the back, or the middle, and you watch the play from different angles. Because of their seats, every person in the audience has a different experience. But on the screen, everyone sees exactly the same thing.”<sup>57</sup>

On another note, Cansu pointed out different aspects of the hardship of performing with technological means:

“Of course, it’s very tense, different crises can be faced. It’s very possible.

---

<sup>56</sup>“Dijitalde oyun sergilerken kamera açıları falan başka bir aracı giriyor işin içerisine. Şimdi hangi yönetmen benim deneyimimi bana verebilir ki? Onun kendi perspektifi var, kendi açısı var. Tiyatronun güzelliklerinden bir tanesi de sen sahnede nereye bakmak istersen oraya bakarsın. Ama kamera girdiği zaman işin içerisine, kameraman ya da yönetmen nereye bakmak istiyorsa biz oraya bakıyoruz.”

<sup>57</sup>“Biz oyunu sahneden alıp eve koyduğumuzda bizim sınırlarımız kameranın sınırlarına dönüşüyor. Sahneyi gören göz ve seyircinin gözü birleşiyor burada. Yani burada daha değişik bir şey var çünkü siz bir tiyatro salonunda ya önde oturursunuz ya arkada ya da ortada oturursunuz ve açılarınız farklı olur. Sahneyi farklı konumlardan görürsünüz ve her koltukta oturma deneyimi farklı olur. Ama ekranda böyle olmuyor. Herkes aynı şeyi izliyor.”

For example, during our second performance, my fully charged phone turned off by itself before the play, and it took a long time to turn back on. When that happened, I didn't know what to do, it was a very 'God what am I supposed to do now' kind of moment. Because I have no other way to join the play. Things like this can happen. Or even if your phone is fine, there can be issues with the Internet or stuff. Since there's always the possibility of something going wrong, it always feels more tense."<sup>58</sup>

The pervasive feeling that something might go wrong can be thought of as a prerequisite for any kind of live performance, whether mediated or unmediated. However, as Cansu pointed out, technological mediation makes live performance more fragile. Asli exemplified this point through the backstage process, of which she made a comparison between telematic and on-site behind-the-scenes in her experience:

"During the play it was pretty insane backstage. There was this crazy traffic. It was about a hundred times more adrenaline filled than it normally is during on-site plays."<sup>59</sup>

Based on all these interview excerpts, it could be concluded that theater professionals lack the motivation to use technological means. Simply put, many professionals do not feel at ease in using these technologies in their performances due to reasons related to difficulties in *digitalization of performance*, the *lack of ad-hoc telematic platforms*, as well as the *lack of IT skills and IT-related trainings*. Besides, many professionals feel the need to improve their crisis management ability to overcome the problems related to the unpredictability of what might occur in telematic settings. Considering that telematic performance management is already technical, which necessitates a certain level of IT skills and knowledge and relevant resources, a lack of crisis management ability adds to the challenge of transiting in telematic settings.

However, some theatre professionals also acknowledged that telematic performance practice (re)defines theater conventions by implementing a different kind of *liveness* and *co-presence*. In the following section, I look into the potentialities of telematic

---

<sup>58</sup>"Tabi ki şey çok gergin, çok farklı krizler yaşanabiliyor. Buna çok açık. Mesela bizim ikinci oyunda, normalde şarjı full olan telefonum, böyle oyuna çok az kala kapandı. Uzun süre açılmadı. Ben orada böyle hani Allah'ım ne yapacağız diye kaldım. Çünkü başka bir yolu yok oyuna bağlanmamın. Bunun gibi krizler oluyor. Ya da işte sonuçta telefon çalışsa bile İnternet'e bir şey olabilir. Böyle hani her an bir şey olabilir gibi bir durum var. O da sizi tedirgin ediyor."

<sup>59</sup>"Oyun sırasında çok acayip bir sahne arkası vardı. Sahne arkasında deli bir trafik vardı. Normal tiyatrodaki sahne arkasındaki adrenalin yüz katıyla falan çarpılmış hali gibiydi."

tools to generate different kinds of theatrical experience with regards to *liveness* and *co-presence* on the side of theatre professionals.

### 5.3 (Re)Definition of Liveness and Co-Presence: Potentialities of Telematic Performances

In her article “Canlılık ve Karşılıklı Etkileşim: Tiyatronun Dijitalleşmesi ve Seyir Rejimi Üzerine Ontolojik-Tarihselci Bir Soruşturma”, based on the analysis of two performance pieces, namely *Map to Utopia* by the collaboration of Platform Theater and Fringe-Ensemble and *Read Subtitles Aloud* by Onur Karaoglu, performed in the 2019-2020 theater season in line with Covidien-stay-at-home-orders, Melike Saba Akim argues that the use of telematic settings in these pieces as site of performance-making offers a disembodied possibility of spectating regarding the conventions of *liveness* and *co-presence* (Saba Akim 2021, 41). The interviewees sharing thoughts on the possibility of the use of network technologies in the performance adopted a similar approach to Akim. For instance, Rifat stated following arguments:

“Even through a virtual environment, the actors and the audience coming together and the actor playing in front of them in real time of course has a theatrical feeling. Yes, it’s a virtual place, but they’re still together. I’ve observed that this really has an effect on the audience, and that this also becomes sort of a theatrical experience.”<sup>60</sup>

According to Rifat, gathering in cyberspace, where people from remote places can join the performance, promotes an effect of *co-presence*. While he acknowledges that participating in a cyber event is certainly different from an unmediated and immediate theatrical experience, he contends that the latter is not superior to the former. For him, telematic works that take place in cyberspace have equal status and authenticity to the on-site performance. He stated as follows:

“Actually it [network technologies] creates a kind of connection that you can’t replicate in real life. Because in real life, you can only come

---

<sup>60</sup>“Oyuncuyla seyircilerin arasında sanal bir mekan da olsa karşı karşıya gelmeleri ve oyuncunun canlı olarak onların karşısında bulunması tabii ki bir yerde teatral etkiye sahip bir şey. Evet, sanal bir mekandalar ama yine birlikteler. Seyircinin ben bundan gerçekten etkilendiğini ve bunun da bir nevi teatral bir deneyime dönüştüğünü gözlemliyorum.”

together with the people that live in your country, who bought a ticket there. But virtually, you can form new connections with people from different places.”<sup>61</sup>

Rifat’s narrative reflecting on how telematic performance works (re)configure theater conventions is particularly interesting because it reenacts *liveness* and *co-presence* by emphasizing real-time interaction and being together, albeit virtually. On another note, his comments stress the role of network technologies in connecting to a wider audience. For him, such a connection surmounts the geographical constraints of an on-site performance. Hence, by (re)inventing theater performance’s *co-presence* convention, telematic performances democratize emerging performers’ access to reach a wider audience on national and international levels. Nedim shared his thoughts as follows:

“Before doing this, I had a negative outlook on the digital performance business, and I didn’t feel like doing it. Afterward, as I was forced into it by the circumstances, I realized things that I hadn’t been able to see before. Digital plays really broaden your interaction area. Normally the plays I write are shared with a much more limited audience. Through this, I felt brave enough to share my work with a wider audience. For example, I plan to translate my work into English so that I can present it to an English-speaking audience next.”<sup>62</sup>

In an environment in which the high costs of traveling and accommodation are always a burden for independent artists, telematic performances lay the groundwork for theater’s dissemination (Compton 2021, 200). Similarly, Cansu mentioned that the digitalized delivery of her performance work enabled her to congregate with a far larger audience from other cities, who would otherwise be unable to attend her show if it had taken place on-site. She explained this point as follows:

“The digital platforms allowed my work to reach people who normally

---

<sup>61</sup>“Aşlında şöyle bir birliktelik oluyor, sizin onu reel mekanda yapamayacağınız bir birliktelik. Çünkü reel mekanda, ancak kendi ülkenizde o işe bilet almış bir seyirciyle bir araya gelebiliyorsunuz. Ama bu şekilde başka coğrafyalardan insanlarla yepyeni birliktelikler elde edebiliyorsunuz.”

<sup>62</sup>“Bunu yapmadan önce çok daha negatif bakardım dijital performans işine çünkü içimden gelmezdi. Biraz hani böyle şartlar gereği yapmak durumunda kaldım. Yapınca da öncesinde göremediğim şeyleri fark ettim. Senin böyle etkileşim alanını genişleten bir şey. O yüzden hani benim için en büyük avantajı şey oldu, normalde bu tarz metinler yazıyorum ama daha kısıtlı alanlarda paylaşıyorum. Mesela bundan sonra şeye de cesaret buldum, bunları biraz daha geniş kesimlere ulaştırmaya. Şu an hani mesela böyle bir niyetim var, oyunu İngilizce’ye çevirip belki biraz daha böyle İngilizce bilen audience’a sunmak gibi.”



wouldn't get to see it. Especially people who live in other cities. . . Normally it would be much harder to reach them, since they're not in Istanbul. But thanks to this they were able to watch it.”<sup>63</sup>

Asli expressed that telematic connection not only allows performers to come together with a larger community of people, but also empowers participants to globally connect with others who participate in the performance:

“This [telematic connection] not only allowed people from many different parts of the world to see the play, but it also allowed the audience to experience the way theater brings us together with people from other places.”<sup>64</sup>

Based on these comments, one of the possibilities framing the debate on telematic performance work is its potential to democratize the field of performing arts. This argument is indeed supported by the study “Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study Digital Toolkit”, which reflects on British theater companies Creation Theater and Big Telly's transformation of their 2019 on-site production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* into Zoom during the lockdown measures in 2020 (Aebischer and Nicholas 2020). Based on a comparative analysis of the play's on-site and online showings through geographical data of the audience, the authors showed that Zoom adaptation enabled the companies to reach a far larger audience from abroad (Aebischer and Nicholas 2020, 66).

On another note, the interviewees also reflect on how broadcasting a performance makes the theatrical performance attendance less elite and contributes to a globalized landscape. Rifat expressed this point as follows:

“The rising need for digital content that came along with the pandemic made it easier for the audience to access theater. I started to think that being able to watch plays online is a right, especially considering the technology we have today. I started to view the idea that theater can only be accessed in person to be elitist. Considering the current political

---

<sup>63</sup>“Yani sahnede olsa izleyemeyecek olanlar takip ettiler, öyle bir avantajı oldu dijitalin. Başka şehirlerde yaşayan insanlar özellikle... Normalde çok daha zor olacak bir şey, İstanbul'da olmadıkları için. Ama bu sayede izleyebilenler oldu oyunumu.”

<sup>64</sup>“Bu [telematik iletişim] sadece aynı anda dünyanın pek çok yerinden oyunun izlenmesi gibi bir şey değil de, seyirci açısından da tiyatrodaki bir aradalık fikrini başka coğrafyalardan insanlarla birlikte deneyimleme olanağı getirdi.”

climate between Turkey and Europe, there has been a decrease in our cultural exchange too, and digital platforms made it easier to remedy that.”<sup>65</sup>

The argument regarding the potentiality of telematic performances to reflect a rather democratized landscape for performance attendance is made clear by Asli as follows:

“In a time period where films premier through digital platforms, and where all this online content is easily accessible, the theater audience started to ask themselves: ‘why can’t I do the same with theater?’ What kind of privilege does theater have that I actually have to be there in person?”<sup>66</sup>

Based on the interview excerpts presented above, telematic performances enable theater professionals to (re)imagine theater conventions with regard to *liveness* and *co-presence*. As one of the significant consequences of creating new forms of *liveness* and *co-presence*, interviewees emphasize that live broadcasting of performances by means of telematic technologies widen access to reach a far larger audience and makes the attendance of theater performance more democratic.<sup>67</sup>

All in all, the fifth chapter demonstrates not only the main concerns and obstacles of theater professionals towards telematic performances, mainly concerning *liveness* and *co-presence* but also their thoughts on the potentialities of telematic tools in redefining *liveness* and *co-presence*. In light of these findings, the next chapter aims to provide a closer look into such experiences of theater professionals specifically by

---

<sup>65</sup>“Pandemi ile beraber dijital içeriğe olan ilginin artması seyircinin tiyatroya ulaşımını da kolaylaştırdı. Bir oyunu bu süreçle beraber artık online’da izleyebilmenin bu kadar dijital unsurların geliştiği noktada bir hak olduğunu düşünmeye başladım. Tiyatronun artık sadece canlı ulaşılabilen bir şey olmasını biraz elitist bulmaya başladım. Üstelik Avrupa’yla olan bağımızın, oyunların gidip gelmesi anlamında, politik olarak geldiğimiz nokta itibariyle, tıkanmış olmasına iyi bir alternatif oluşturdu dijitalleşme diyebiliriz.”

<sup>66</sup>“Bütün sinema filmlerinin artık dijital platformlarda prömiyer yaptığı, bütün bu online içeriğe hızlıca ulaşıldığı dönemde seyirciler şu soruyu sormaya başlamışlardı; ‘Ben tiyatroya niye ulaşamıyorum?’ Tiyatronun ne gibi bir ayrıcalığı var ki illa oraya gitmek gerekiyor?”

<sup>67</sup>Needless to say, one can argue that the democratization of performance by means of network technologies remains a contested issue simply because most telematic works are not open-access on the Internet. Besides, technological devices are not accessible to all in the same manner. As Zehra emphasized, there are certain limitations against such a democratizing effect. The theater work on the Internet may not necessarily make the performances more accessible to the wider audience:

“If we’re talking about the digital, of course, it increases accessibility significantly; it lets people living in other cities, or even other countries watch it. I do think that it helped with theater’s expansion, but it’s important not to mistake this for something it’s not: the Internet is not this super-democratic place where everything is accessible to everyone, because it’s not.”

“Dijital açımdan da konuşuyorsak, evet tabii ki erişebilirliği büyük ölçüde artıran bir şey; farklı şehirlerde oturan insanlar da ulaşabiliyor, farklı ülkelerdeki insanlar da izleyebiliyor. Biraz öyle bir genişleme yarattığını düşünüyorum ama bence şeyin yanılışına da düşmemek lazım, hani internette diye bir şey süper demokratik ortam, her şey açık, herkesin erişimi aynı diye düşünmemek lazım. Değil çünkü.”

zooming in on two examples of telematic performances.

## 6. UNDERSTANDING LIVENESS AND CO-PRESENCE THROUGH THE LENSES OF TWO TELEMATIC PERFORMANCES

This chapter is grounded upon two locally produced performance pieces in the 2020 and 2021 theatre seasons, written and performed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey: *Murder of the Male* (MOM) by Nadir Sonmez and *Walkthrough: Istanbul* (Walkthrough) by tibia x fibula. Predominantly, since the 1990s, “more affordable hardware and “user-friendly” software; digital cameras; the home PC; and [...] the World Wide Web” (Dixon 2007, 87) has penetrated increasingly into performance art. The computer-mediated performances generated new modes of performing and attendance that destabilize the traditional categories of *liveness* and *co-presence*. Accordingly, MOM and Walkthrough point to a new, or newly expanded, performance-making and performance-attendance, namely a telematic performance, an online and remote performance practice that applies telecommunication technologies to live performance. They manifest different practices within the field; MOM uses WhatsApp messages to meet its audience through their phones, while Walkthrough applies telematic connection over the video-conferencing tool Zoom. Since the default definition of performance is that it is kind of a live event in which the performers and spectators are physically and temporally co-present to one another, namely *liveness* and *co-presence*, these two performances destabilize existing definitions of such conventions. This chapter, by analyzing the two performances produced during the COVID-19 pandemic, discusses how telematic performances potentially generate a different kind of *liveness* and *co-presence* between performers and the audience.

## 6.1 Murder of the Male by Nadir Sonmez

The performance MOM, written and performed by Nadir Sonmez who is an Istanbul-based artist producing works in the fields of theatre, performance art, and cinema, is a one-man piece grounded on Sonmez's investigation of Arpad Miklos' death, a Hungarian pornographic actor who committed suicide in 2013. It is dedicated to mourning the death of the actor, who had been known for gay adult movies. The performance piece portrays Miklos' suicide as a case through which the playwright and performer inquire about the socio-political ramifications of heteronormativity and sexual morality in society and the objectification of the human body in the porn industry. In his search to find the reasons that prompted the famous porn star's decision to end his life and its resonance with him as a gay artist, Sonmez incorporates various themes into the piece such as grieving, melancholia, sexuality, body, and intimacy as well as censorship in the contemporary art scene in Turkey.

MOM is a half-day-long solo performance happening through in-app messages on WhatsApp starting at 12 p.m. and lasting until midnight. Except for the duration, the spectators/participants were not informed in advance of either the format or the timeline of the messages. Hence, the performance imitates an ordinary interaction on WhatsApp that could happen at any time as long as one stays connected to the Internet. The messages are sent approximately in twelve to thirteen minutes and are composed of text/voice messages, screenshots, stickers, videos, and links that direct spectators to multiple digital platforms, including YouTube and Soundcloud. Videos that are shared sporadically via Youtube links vary from those of Arpad Miklos to celebrities like Jane Fonda's interview on gay rights and to instructive content regarding porn studies and the right to offend.<sup>68</sup> The videos and other media components are not related to each other and suspend the continuity of the storyline in a progressive manner. The making use of such media components intends not to deepen the story, but rather contribute to visualizing the fictional narrative.

---

<sup>68</sup>Videos shared throughout the performance are respectively as follows:

1. <https://bit.ly/3v9zQQL> (last accessed November 2021).
2. <https://bit.ly/3RRij9E> (last accessed November 2021).
3. <https://bit.ly/3zpPv15> (last accessed November 2021).
4. <https://bit.ly/3v64WJa> (last accessed November 2021).
5. <https://bit.ly/3IXrNMG> (last accessed November 2021).
6. <https://bit.ly/3J3SS0Q> (last accessed November 2021).
7. <https://bit.ly/3B63xWP> (last accessed November 2021).
8. <https://bit.ly/3oiewou> (last accessed November 2021).
9. <https://bit.ly/3PqkGi5> (last accessed November 2021).
10. <https://bit.ly/3Py8zzS> (last accessed November 2021).

Figure 6.1 A series of stickers received by spectators throughout the performance that are made from the photographs of porn stars who committed suicide like Arpad Miklos, holding the year of birth and death on them<sup>69</sup>



The performance adopts a layered plot composition that is structured through multiple stories enacted through the performer's soliloquies. There is no particular play set, nor dialogues between characters. The performer uses a first-person narrative and recites the performance in the form of a personal dialogue with the audience. While Arpad Miklos' suicide is the founding narrative in this solo performance piece, two other stories are articulated into the main story as well. The first one pivots

<sup>69</sup>Resource: <https://bit.ly/3ITwXcA> (last accessed November 2021).

on the artist’s visit to Diyarbakır, Turkey for “*daire*” (“circle” in English) Artist-in-Residence Program, where he produced a short text named *Kahır Fetiş*. The second one focuses on the censorship in regard to the text Slut-Honoring within the scope of an art institution referred to under the pseudonym *Periah Sanat Günleri* (Periah Art Days in English).<sup>70</sup> Thinking through the decision to loosely piece together different plotlines, any attempt to frame the performance within a linear plot composition is obligated to fail. Together with the fact that the performance is streamed using WhatsApp messages that are sent in an intermittent manner, only the temporal structure progressing in the course of twelve hours gives the spectators a linear and progressing logic. The play ends with the fictional suicide of the artist. In the epilogue message, which is a suicide letter, the title Murder of the Male takes on a new meaning implying not only the death of Arpad Miklos but also that of the artist.<sup>71</sup>

Encompassing different media forms in the audiovisual narrative, including text messages, voice messages, screenshot images, stickers, and videos, as well as happening via the multimedia instant messaging platform WhatsApp, the “media-saturated” (Marranca 2010, 16) composition of the performance is visible. Similar to Marranca’s mediaturgy, the use of media contents in the text harbor characteristics of “technotexts”, a concept Seda Ilter proposed to understand the “changing ontology of text in mediatized theater practice” (Ilter 2018, 70). Related to Ilter’s proposition of technotext, which she referred to elsewhere under a broader concept called “mediatized dramaturgy”, (Ilter 2021) the use of different media components in the performance appears to enhance spectators’ hypermediated theatrical experience.

Against this backdrop, it becomes highly significant to locate the performance in the COVID-19 context in which the performance was adopted to a telematic setting with its new form, as it helps us to conceive how it relates itself to the discussions revolving around (re)defining *liveness* and *co-presence*. The next section attempts to depict such context.

---

<sup>70</sup>The spectators are redirected to Soundcloud via links to listen to the pre-recordings of these two stories recited by Sonmez. Pre-recordings of *Kahır Fetiş* and *Slut-Honouring* are respectively as follows:  
1. <https://bit.ly/3RSz1FJ> (last accessed November 2021).  
2. <https://bit.ly/3RWu3rM> (last accessed November 2021).

<sup>71</sup>The last message of the performance is a link redirecting spectators to Soundcloud to listen to the epilogue that is structured as the performer’s suicide letter. <https://bit.ly/3okqa1U> (last accessed November 2021).

### 6.1.1 Murder of Male in the Context of COVID-19

The performance was formerly designed to be recited on the physical stage in a form akin to a closet drama within the scope of IFF 2020. However, due to measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizational body of IFF decided to hold the festival through online streaming. After this decision, Sonmez adapted his performance to the multimedia messaging service WhatsApp and premiered it on 27 September 2020 as part of the live performance category within the scope of the festival. The premier dates back to the era when the theater venues were reopened with the half capacity of seats in Turkey. Although MOM premiered in the era when the theater venues were reopened with a restricted capacity, it was produced at a time when performing arts businesses were suspended completely for an unlimited period of time. Sonmez explains this point as follows:

“I had envisioned Murder of Male as a play that I would perform on stage. I applied to the Istanbul Fringe Festival in this way. But when the pandemic lasted too long, the festival couldn't be held on stage and they asked us; ‘Could it be possible to adapt it to digital means?’ So we talked about the possibilities. We talked about what kind of format it could be. The first thing that came to our minds was to read the text on Instagram Live. Then I thought about WhatsApp. WhatsApp theater was also done before. Fuat Mete made an adaptation of Romeo and Juliet for WhatsApp during the pandemic. So after a number of consultations, we decided on the WhatsApp format.”<sup>72</sup>

The performance has been performed since then twice, first on January 3, 2021, and second, on June 27, 2021, on the virtual interface of WhatsApp. The choice of WhatsApp as the central software of the performance stems from the circumstances that entail challenges that COVID-19 poses regarding the physical togetherness of performers and the audience. At this point, the question of how a multimedia messaging application such as WhatsApp as a telematic tool might create a new form of *liveness* and *co-presence* becomes relevant. All in all, based on the interview I conducted with Nadir Sonmez on MOM, I discuss the potentiality of WhatsApp

---

<sup>72</sup>“Erkek Cinayeti’ni sahnede sergileyeceğim bir oyun olarak kurgulamıştım. İstanbul Fringe Festivali’ne bu şekilde başvurmuşum. Ama pandemi çok uzun sürünce festival sahnede olamadı ve bize şey sordular; ‘bunu dijitalle uyarlamak söz konusu olabilir mi?’ diye sordular. Bunun üzerine olasılıkları konuştuk. Nasıl bir formatta olabilir diye konuştuk. İlk aklımıza gelen Instagram’da canlı yayında okumaktı metni. Sonra ben biraz böyle WhatsApp’ı düşündüm. WhatsApp tiyatrosu da yapılmıştı. Fuat Mete, Romeo ve Juliet’in bir adaptasyonunu yapmıştı WhatsApp’a pandemi döneminde. Birkaç istişareden sonra WhatsApp formatına karar verdik.”



in creating such forms throughout the next section.

### 6.1.2 Group Liveness

MOM uses WhatsApp’s broadcast list feature which allows Nadir Sonmez to send instant messages to several contacts at once. However, this feature deprives the participants/spectators of seeing other participants or interacting with them. According to Sonmez, participants/spectators’ isolation from each other offers an individualized spectating experience on this medium.

“Of course, since everyone participates in it [the performance] on their own phones, it’s a very individualistic experience. You’re not among the people who are experiencing it with you, you can’t see them.”<sup>73</sup>

Although the participants/spectators’ *co-presence* with other participants/spectators is jeopardized throughout the performance, the message box of each participant/spectator is left open so that they can respond to the received messages by the performer. Sonmez’s interaction with the audience through in-app messages gives him a sense of *co-presence* with spectators:

“Actually, I was assuming that it would be a format where I wouldn’t be able to hear people’s reactions because we weren’t in the same room. So honestly I didn’t know how that interaction part would be. But actually, there was definitely an interaction with people. For example, there were some people whom I haven’t known before who sent me messages and commented on what I wrote very consistently. There were also people who wrote to me from time to time when they felt like it. Since I don’t normally have such an opportunity on stage, I really liked this situation. Normally, of course, people comment; ‘We found like this, we found like that’ but here it was one-to-one and real-time interaction.”<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup>“Herkes tabi kendi telefonunda olduğu için baya bir bireysel deneyim. O deneyimi seninle beraber yaşayan insanlarla bir arada değilsin, onları göremiyorsun.”

<sup>74</sup>“Aslında insanların tepkisini duyumsayamayacağım bir format olacağını farz ediyordum aynı ortamda değiliz diye. Yani o etkileşim kısmının nasıl olacağını çok kestiremiyordum açıkçası. Ama aslında insanlarla aramızda kesinlikle bir etkileşim oldu. Örneğin, daha önceden tanımadığım insanlardan çok istikrarlı bir şekilde mesaj atanlar ve yazdıklarımı yorumlayanlar oldu. Bir de böyle arada bir içinden gelince yazanlar oldu. Normalde böyle bir imkanım olmadığı için sahnede, benim baya hoşuma gitti bu durum. Normalde tabi ki insanlar yorumluyorlar; şöyle bulduk, böyle bulduk falan diye ama burada böyle birebir ve tam zamanlı bir etkileşim oldu.”

As for the debate on the *liveness*, MOM's spectators/participants can be either synchronous or asynchronous audiences. Theatrical experience on the medium of WhatsApp or in any other multimedia messaging app is extended in time; hence, the participants/spectators can personalize their experiences by reading in-app messages either simultaneously or afterward. As a multimedia messaging app, the interface of WhatsApp makes such an asynchronous experience possible since it is designed to automatically compile in-app messages. However, according to Nadir Sonmez, not being able to control the participants/spectators' synchronicity with the flow of his performance on WhatsApp constitutes a handicap for the dramatic composition:

“Since I can't control when the participants read the messages in the chat box, how they experience the play is not up to me. Ideally, they would read the messages when they're sent because the dramatic composition of the play relies on that. If you read or listen to the messages right away, they are supposed to make you curious about what is going to happen next. Therefore, using WhatsApp can be a disadvantage for people who don't keep track of the chat during the play.”<sup>75</sup>

WhatsApp's virtual interface stores the messages in the personal chat tabs of each participant/spectator. The everlasting presence of messages as personal archives clashes with the ephemeral ontology of performance, namely the classic category of *liveness*. While the compilation of messages can be thought of as a challenge to fostering a sense of a classic form of *liveness*, as Sonmez mentioned in the aforementioned quote, in-app messages substituting theatrical actions help participants/spectators to customize the time spent throughout the performance according to their needs.<sup>76</sup>

In this respect, MOM is a clear indication of how performing on a multimedia messaging service engenders new ways of experiencing a theater event. Broadcasted in the real-time but virtual space of WhatsApp, MOM signals a shift from *classic liveness* (Auslander 2008, 61) to *group liveness* (Couldry 2004). From the perspective

---

<sup>75</sup>“İnsanların mesajları ne zaman okuyacağına ben karar veremediğim için oyunu nasıl tecrübe edecekleri biraz onların inisiyatifine kalıyor. İdealinde mesajı geldiği zaman okusalar daha iyi olacak çünkü aslında mesajların eş zamanlı takip edilmesine dair bir dramaturji var oyunda. Eğer hani mesajları geldiği anda okuyor ya da dinliyorsanız, oyun sizde o mesajdan sonra neyin geleceğine dair merakı körükleyen bir hissiyatı devreye sokmayı planlıyor. Ama sürekli o mesajları takip etmeyen insanlar için de hani öyle bir handikapı var WhatsApp'ın diyebiliriz.”

<sup>76</sup>For instance, as an observer who participated in the performance, while I did not check my phone, unread messages accumulated in my personal WhatsApp chat tab, and while I tapped on the chat and read through them, sometimes, I read the messages of my choice while eschewed the chronological order of them. Consequently, the destabilization of the classical *liveness* category made me think that another kind of *liveness* category could be introduced into the performance.

of media studies, *liveness* is not limited to physical interactions unlike it is the case in the field of performance studies. According to Nick Couldry, *liveness* is a sense of being connected to other people in our mediatized world, meaning a “continuous contact” to “peer-groups” which necessitates “a mobile group of friends” co-present one another in real-time via mobile phone technology and the Internet (Couldry 2004, 357).

Happening through a real-time messaging application, MOM gives spectators a sense of ongoing *liveness* throughout the course of twelve hours. The performance makes it possible by allowing spectators the very ability to participate in an interaction with the performer by texting, multimedia messaging, or sending any other media content supported by WhatsApp. This real-time interaction generates a sense of *group liveness* while also eliminating the performer-spectator distance that conventional schemes of *liveness* and *co-presence* might refer to. Besides the live chat with the performer, the performance incorporates other platforms navigating through links. It, in turn, serves to proliferate the experience of *group liveness*. In MOM’s practice, real-time interaction through chat and other platform roaming by incorporating links indirectly refers to the audiences’ everyday online experience. As such, the performance generates a sense of *group liveness* among spectators/participants, although it seems like an individualized activity on their own telephone at first glance. Given this context, the experience of *liveness* shifts from being face-to-face and physically co-present as a default condition to the technologically mediated performer-audience interaction fostering a sense of *group liveness*.

## 6.2 Walkthrough: Istanbul by tibia x fibula

Walkthrough: Istanbul is a site-specific performance that weaves a participatory intervention to the city. It is created by tibia x fibula, an interdisciplinary art initiative co-founded in 2020 by Cansu Pelin Isbilen who has a background in architecture, and Fatih Genckal who works as a performing artist. As they put it, tibia x fibula works on a variety of subjects including time, space, body, memory, participation, and creativity through art, technology, and daily life. Isbilen and Genckal explain the performance on their website as follows:

“Walkthrough is a shared walk through the city, a flaneur experience across cities through a digital connection that makes a physical change somewhere else in the world. It explores the body as space, as part of

the cityscape, through a real body that becomes an avatar for those who aren't there. It reflects on the various shapes, faces, relations that make up the cityscape, embracing miracles of chance encounters.”<sup>77</sup>

The performance consists of two performers who are physically situated at the site where the performance happens, and audiences connect to this site via telecommunication technology. Both spectators and performers share an interface through which the audience participates in a promenade experience across the city. It is structured through a computer game logic in which participants are invited to choose between two avatars, Tib and Fib, enacted by two performers, who have different strengths and weaknesses. Tib represents a male avatar who can dance, moves faster, and is stronger, while Fib represents a female avatar who can take photographs, has a sense of direction, and is talkative. By selecting an avatar in a two-dimensional space, viewers become players and start to guide the chosen avatar within a three-dimensional public space.

Figure 6.2 Interface of Walkthrough: Istanbul on Zoom Webinar, performers located in Ferikoy Antique Bazar, Sisli, hold a picture in front of the camera asking the audience to choose between the two avatars<sup>78</sup>



When the players' time is up, they either continue to follow the adventure as a viewer or quit the play. There are no extra rules or limits to their imagination as

<sup>77</sup>Resource: <https://bit.ly/3b3JBZT> (last accessed September 2021).

<sup>78</sup>Resource: own screen shoot

they can freely guide their avatars in the city. In Walkthrough, spectators are the object of special concern. By choosing an avatar, they become players and leave their supposedly passive status as viewers. Their flaneur experience starts as two performers recite the following epilogue respectively:

“Today we will walk together. You will guide us. There are clues everywhere we walk. You can see them if you look carefully. Sometimes they can be a person, sometimes a tree, a wall, or a color. Follow them. They will lead you to the answer to your question. Remember. . . It cannot be found by searching. But finders are seekers. Where do you start looking for that thing whose nature is unknown to you? What are we looking for with you today? You can find the answer to this question while walking with us. Let’s walk! You can talk to us as you walk and tell us what you saw.”<sup>79</sup>

As seen in the above-mentioned epilogue, the pedestrian act of players proceeds throughout the performance without any scripted narrative in a traditional sense. The avatars/performers may ask the players questions regarding how they approach the city and its inhabitants and/or invite them to make a story out of what they see around them. However, players are mostly positioned as co-authors of the performance. As the players or flaneurs walk through the city by guiding the avatars, they script the scenes together with the chosen avatar. As in the case of MOM, Walkthrough should also be located in the COVID-19 context to understand the intricacies of the performance concerning the above-mentioned debates on *liveness* and *co-presence*. While section 6.2.1. tries to depict such a context, section 6.2.2. reveals how Walkthrough might also engender new forms of *liveness* and *co-presence* and debunk the classical definitions of these two conventions.

### 6.2.1 Walkthrough in the Context of COVID-19

The performance was previously held in Izmir with three different concepts; firstly *Walkthrough: Last Day of Quarantine*, secondly *Walkthrough: Daragac*, and thirdly

---

<sup>79</sup>“Bugün birlikte yürüyeceğiz. Bizi sen yönlendireceksin. Yürüdüğümüz her yerde ipuçları var. Dikkatli bakarsan onları görebilirsin. Onlar bazen bir insan, bazen bir ağaç, bir duvar ya da bir renk olabilir. Onları takip et. Seni sorduğun sorunun cevabına götürecekler. Unutma. . . Aramakla bulunmaz. Ama bulanlar arayanlardır. Doğası senin için bilinmez bir gerçek olan o şeyi aramaya nereden başlayacaksın? Bugün seninle neyi arıyoruz? Bu sorunun cevabını bizimle yürürken bulabilirsin. Hadi yürüyelim! Yürürken bizimle konuşabilir ve bize gördüklerini anlatabilirsin.”

*Walkthrough: Intersections*. To start with, *Walkthrough: Last Day of Quarantine*<sup>80</sup> took place on May 30, 2020 as part of *LiveatHomeİzmir* Festival, a digitally mediated performing art festival.<sup>81</sup> The screening date of the performance marks the last day of the full time curfew throughout all of Turkey as starting from July 1st, 2020, the Turkish government eased the pre-existed public health-related restrictions in low-risk provinces in the country. Secondly, *Walkthrough: Daragac* screened as part of *darağaç.icra* performance program on October 31, 2020 in the district Daragac, an open art space and collective in Umurbey Neighborhood. Daragac version of the performance is structured as an interactive performance work that combines elements of first and third-person adventure games and of live performance in which the remote audience participates in a promenade experience across the district through a telematic connection. It is streamed in three parts on the troupe’s Instagram account.<sup>82</sup> Lastly, *Walkthrough: Intersections* took place on May 28, 2021, with the participation of Taldans within the scope of Beirut International Platform of Dance Festival.<sup>83</sup> As part of the festival, the screening was in a format where participants from different parts of the world followed two characters on the streets of Izmir. With all of these different concepts that use different urban spaces, Walkthrough is a product of insurmountable obstacles for performance art to operate within classical forms of *liveness* and *co-presence* due to COVID-19. During our conversation, Genckal highlighted this point as a momentum that Walkthrough instrumentalized to engage in various possibilities of coming together with spectators:

“Everyone was worried, especially in the early days, whether the theater was over because of the pandemic, whether or not it was possible for us to come together. Could there be such a lazy way of thinking?: ‘The theater is over, we can’t come together anymore.’ If our idea of theater is just that fifty people in a room watching people acting, then yes, my friends, [theater] is over! But there are a hundred and fifteen thousand other possibilities [for us to come together].”<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup>For more information on the performance, please visit <https://bit.ly/3PJgfyK> (last accessed July 2021).

<sup>81</sup>For more information on the festival, please visit <https://bit.ly/3ReNkn7> (last accessed July 2021).

<sup>82</sup>The recordings of these three live streamed parts can be found respectively at the following links: Walkthrough: Daragac 1 <https://bit.ly/3RPhVsm> (last accessed July 2022). Walkthrough: Daragac 2 <https://bit.ly/3IVjscl> (last accessed July 2022). Walkthrough: Daragac 3 <https://bit.ly/3RPhVsm> (last accessed July 2022).

<sup>83</sup>The recordings of these three live streamed parts can be found respectively at the following links: Walkthrough: Daragac 1 <https://bit.ly/3RPhVsm> (For more information on the performance, please visit <https://bit.ly/3RUV3HM> (last accessed July 2021)).

<sup>84</sup>“Herkes özellikle ilk zamanlar, pandemiyle birlikte tiyatro bitti mi, bir araya gelmemiz artık mümkün değil mi diye endişeleniyordu. Bu kadar tembel bir düşünce tarzı olabilir mi; ‘Tiyatro bitti, artık bir araya gelemiyoruz.’ Tiyatrodan anladığımız elli kişinin bir odaya toplanıp rol yapan insanları izlemesiye, evet

While talking about the production process of the performance, İsbilen, in a similar fashion, underlined how the limitations of COVID-19 pushed them to look for new forms.

“We already knew the pandemic restrictions. There were curfews or was the limitation of the distances we could travel even in times of partial openings... We spent days when we were not able to change cities. I remember for a moment we had a feeling that we would never be able to go out on the streets again. How did this relate to our work? One of the proposals we received was ‘Would you like to do something at home?’ Upon this question, we said, well, we don’t really want to do it at home... Let’s go out on the street, so this is how we decided to do it in the way it is.”<sup>85</sup>

By instrumentalizing the potentiality of telematic connection in the face of COVID-19, Walkthrough intended to create idiosyncratic, spontaneous, and unpredictable moments in the city space, in which the audience fell themselves co-present one another, as part of an online community walking through the city. Hence, the performance focuses on the possible ways of coming together, rather than insurmountable obstacles to the theatrical congregation. It is against this backdrop that Walkthrough’s context-specific meaning can be evaluated. In short, in a COVID-19 context where participation in public space was not possible, Walkthrough offered a participatory intervention in public space and did so with telematic tools. İsbilen explains the importance of public space for the performance as follows:

“We tried to pursue both to understand the definitional dimension of public space and to see what we can do about the practical use of it. For us, the practical use of public space is also connected to its social dimension. Because it seems to me that the more we stop using public space, the faster we socially separate from each other.”<sup>86</sup>

---

arkadaşlar [tiyatro] bitti! Ama bunun [biraraya gelmemizin] yüzbeş bin farklı imkanı daha var.”

<sup>85</sup>“Pandemi kısıtlamalarını zaten biliyoruz. İşte sokağa çıkma yasakları ya da işte sokağa çıksak da gidebildiğimiz mesafelerin kısıtlılığı... Kent değiştiremediğimiz günler geçirdik. Bir an için acaba bir daha sokağa çıkabilecek miyiz gibi bir hisse kapıldığımızı hatırlıyorum. Bunun bizim yaptığımız işle nasıl ilişkisi oldu? Bize gelen tekliflerden bir tanesi ‘evde bir şeyler yapmak ister misiniz?’ idi. Bu soru üzerine şey dedik, ya biz evde yapmak istemiyoruz aslında. Hadi sokağa çıkalım diye düşünerek karar verdik.”

<sup>86</sup>“Kamusal alanın hem böyle tanımsal boyutu hem de onun kullanım pratiklerine yönelik neler yapabilirizin peşine düşmeye çalıştık. Bizim için kamusal alanın kullanım pratikleri biraz şeye de bağlıyor, bunun sosyal ve toplumsal boyutuna da bağlıyor. Çünkü işte biz kamusal alanı kullanmamaya başladıkça, bizim toplumsal olarak birbirimizden ayrışmamız da daha hızlı gerçekleşiyormuş gibi geliyor bana.”

As İsbilen highlights, the urban landscape is not a backdrop for the Walkthrough but an important aspect of the performance, simply because it is a public space. During our conversation, İsbilen referred to the interaction they want to establish in public spaces as follows:

“Public spaces are important because they are the only places where people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds come together. So, what we are trying to create is a possibility to do something within that space.”<sup>87</sup>

As a volunteer of IFF 2021, I assisted the performance on both screenings of September 25-26, 2021 within the scope of the festival. Thanks to this experience, I witnessed that the collective act of walking throughout the performance inspires spontaneous encounters in the public space, as İsbilen underlined. As Patrice Pavis asserts, the walking “tends to eliminate the boundary between cognitive reception and proprioceptive reception, the visible and the invisible, fiction and reality” (Pavis 2016, 229). Based on Pavis’ insights, I can claim that sensory, bodily, and emotional experiences and liminal moments are created through encounters in public space. In this sense, encounters create togetherness where social bonds are re-formed, changed, and transformed. While COVID-19 has suspended these encounters and all social possibilities that people can have together, including coming together in a theater space; Walkthrough creates a ground for performance where these social possibilities can be re-established through telematic methods.

On another note, the Istanbul version of the performance was situated in Ferikoy, Sisli. At the screening on September 26, 2021, the starting point of the performance was Ferikoy Antique Bazar in Sisli.<sup>88</sup> Historically, Ferikoy is an ethnoreligious mixed neighborhood that has been through a series of drastic changes regarding the urban landscape and the demography of its populace. In the eighteenth century, Greek, Jewish, and Armenian inhabitants populated the district. The massacre and deportations of Ottoman-Armenians between the period 1915-1917, the 1942 wealth tax levied on non-Muslim citizens in Turkey, and the anti-Greek pogrom of September 6-7, 1955, mark the collective memory of this neighborhood. As an urban space with the remnants of its former residents, it bears witness to such state atrocities

---

<sup>87</sup>“Kamusal alanlar, farklı dini ve etnik kökenden insanların bir araya geldiği yegane mekanlar olması nedeniyle önemli. Bu yüzden, bizim yaratmaya çalıştığımız biraz o alanın içerisinde bir şeyler yapmak.”

<sup>88</sup>For those who are unfamiliar with the neighborhood, the Antique Bazaar reflects its surroundings considerably. Analog cameras, old tablewares, and jewelry displayed on the stalls have a story behind them to be explored. Some of these intriguing objects in the bazaar might formerly belong to different ethnoreligious groups who once populated in this district.



and acts of collective violence against non-Muslims along with urban dispossession. The neighborhood now sits at the heart of a gentrification project with its hotel blocks, restaurants, and third-wave coffee houses, and the art and culture island Bomontiada, formerly known as Historical Bomonti Beer Factory.

On the one hand, on a dramaturgical level, the site-specificity of the performance does not reflect the myriad ways in which both the old and the new inhabitants of Ferikoy have faced migration and urban dispossession. On the other hand, as an example of site-specific performance, which is referred to elsewhere as “in situ performance” (Pavis 2016), Walkthrough “focuses on local conditions, it uses local talent, the genius of the place” (Pavis 2016, 229) by definition, meaning that in Walkthrough, spectators have an interactive experience based on locations through telematic connection. In this respect, one of the hotel blocks in the cityscape or an ordinary church can attract the attention of the players in the performance, and the performance mainly deals with an occasion where the players can interact with these places in real-time.

Figure 6.3 Interface of Walkthrough: Istanbul on Zoom Webinar, Tib is in front of the tallest hotel block Hilton in Bomonti, Sisli<sup>89</sup>



---

<sup>89</sup>Resource: own screen shoot

Figure 6.4 Interface of Walkthrough: Istanbul on Zoom Webinar, Fib is in front of the Notre Dame de Lourdes Catholic Church in Bomonti, Sisli<sup>90</sup>



### 6.2.2 Digital Liveness

As an example of an interactive application of video conferencing in performance, Walkthrough engenders new theatrical conventions regarding *liveness* and *co-presence*. Genckal explains this point as follows:

“We are deconstructing the performance in terms of being at the same time and in the same place. The spaces [of spectatorship and performance] are different, but the times [of spectators and performers] are the same. An intervention made by the audience leads to a situation in another space.”<sup>91</sup>

As Genckal puts it, the performance transgresses the condition of a corporeal quality concerning *co-presence* convention. The participants/players perceive and connect to the performance in real-time without necessarily being physically co-present with the performers. On the other hand, unlike MOM, it does not transgress the qual-

<sup>90</sup>Resource: own screen shoot

<sup>91</sup>“Performansın aynı anda ve aynı yerde olma kısmını biraz yapı bozumuna uğratıyoruz. Mekanlar [seyir ve performans mekanları] farklı ama zamanlar [seyirci ve performansçıların zamanları] aynı. Seyircilerin yaptığı bir müdahale başka bir mekanda bir duruma yol açıyor.”

ity of synchronicity which belongs to the condition of *classic liveness*. That is, the performance takes place in real-time on a virtual interface. In this respect, the performance falls into the category of what Philip Auslander called *digital liveness*, which is defined as a “real-time response and interaction or an ongoing connection” with and through a “technological artifact—a computer, Website, network, or virtual entity” (Auslander 2012, 9). The space in which the performance takes place becomes an interface for those who are not present in that space, providing a different kind of *liveness* where participants/players interact with the space in real-time, namely *digital liveness*. In this interface, the participants/players experiments with the new kind of spatial and temporal practices of theatrical attendance that destabilize traditional categories of *liveness* and *co-presence*. In this respect, in the performance, the pedestrian act on the city via a virtual interface generating a sense of *digital liveness* becomes an experiment with multiple spatio-temporalities.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The latest COVID-19 outbreak suspended theater activity across Turkey, including rehearsals as well as public performances while also forcing theater venues to shut their doors. The suspension of on-site theater activity brought a surge of new, or newly expanded, interest in telematic performance works. This, in turn, caused the re-emergence of the milestone discussions regarding *liveness* and *co-presence* in the field of performance studies. In this study, I explored how the conventional definition of theater performances is challenged by and is challenging the new forms of theater performances, namely telematic performances, by specifically focusing on the COVID-19 context in Turkey. In order to understand the antagonism intrinsic to these two standpoints, I mainly focused on the concepts of *liveness* and *co-presence* of theater performance since the two terms are the main pillars of contemporary discussions on the changing ontology of performance. In order to answer my question, I have designed the research as an empirical study on telematic performances that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey context. By doing so, the abstract discussion on *liveness* and *co-presence* in the field of performance studies is empirically grounded through empirical examples.

The analysis of the study was twofold: Section 5 and Section 6. In section 5, through conducting ten semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews with theater professionals from various plays during COVID-19, I demonstrated how theater professionals experienced the transition to telematic performances during the lockdown. Analyzing their main motivations in transitioning into telematic settings, the limitations and obstacles as well as various potentialities of telematic performances concerning various forms of *liveness* and *co-presence* helped me to understand not only how these two conventions operate within empirical telematic settings but also how they challenge and are challenged by the classical understanding of *liveness* and *co-presence*.

Based on such data, firstly, I found out that there are two main strands concerning the motivations of the theatre professionals in transitioning into telematic perfor-

mances: 1) survival matters and providing solidarity with theater venues that are under threat of shutting down; 2) experimenting with new artistic forms. These findings revealed that all theatre professionals relate their motivations to the harsh conditions the COVID-19 pandemic brought about regardless of what these motivations are. Thus, I found out that the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant eliciting factor bringing the static discussions on various forms of *liveness* and *co-presence* to the surface. It is a useful tool that makes such discussions on *liveness* and *co-presence* an urgent, dynamic, and relevant debate.

Secondly, concerning the limitations and obstacles of telematic performances regarding *liveness* and *co-presence*, I demonstrated that theater professionals adopt quite similar standpoints concerning the reluctance of moving from on-site theatrical performance to telematic settings. The main limitation for them is the difficulty in using telematic technologies as a medium of performance-making. Based on the interview data, it is found that telematic connection is a limiting factor for theater professionals to generate live performance's alleged conventions of *liveness* and *co-presence*. It is also revealed that many professionals do not feel at ease in using these technologies in their performances due to reasons related to difficulties in *digitalization of performance*, the *lack of ad-hoc telematic platforms*, as well as the *lack of IT skills and IT-related trainings*. I found out that solutions for these three challenges stand as prerequisites for telematic performance-making to succeed in becoming a future model theater.

Thirdly, as for the potentialities of telematic performances, I manifested how telematic performances enable theater professionals to (re)imagine theater conventions with regard to *liveness* and *co-presence*. I argued that telematic performances reach a far larger audience and make attendance to theater performances more democratic as one of the most significant results of generating new forms of *liveness* and *co-presence*.

In section 6, I present my analysis based on a) participant observation of two specific performances that took place during the COVID-19 lockdown; b) semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews with the three theater professionals from these two performances. In this chapter overall, I provided a closer look into the experiences of theater professionals by zooming in on the specific practicalities and particular COVID-19 contexts peculiar to each performance. The such approach helped me not only to observe real-life experiences of the theatre professionals but also to exemplify how conventional theatrical schemes of *liveness* and *co-presence* are (re)defined by the very telematic settings of the performance.

Throughout the chapter, I discussed how the two performances point to a newly ex-

panded performance-making and performance-attendance, namely a telematic performance, by using telecommunication technologies. I presented tangible qualities of the performances in the implementation of telematic technologies, namely WhatsApp and Zoom. Based on my analysis, I argued that the two performances destabilize existing definitions of *liveness* and *co-presence*. Consequently, I point out the potentialities of telematic performances in generating different kinds of *co-presence* between performers and the audience and redefining the sense of *liveness* among spectators, namely, *group liveness* and *digital liveness*.

All in all, having manifested limitations and potentialities of telematic performance in creating new forms of *liveness* and *co-presence* through an empirical study with a specific focus on the COVID-19 period in Turkey, this study reveals how existing theatre conventions challenge and are challenged by telematic performances. Simply put, the findings of the study provide us with tangible operations of the *liveness* and *co-presence* which was rather abstract and ungrounded before the empirical scrutiny. Considering especially the lack of research looking into telematic performances produced during the global COVID-19 with a critical gaze, this research provides us with excellent access to how the two conventions of *liveness* and *co-presence* practically operate in the empirical world. It is obvious that the presented findings can only be a starting point of a more extensive and broader empirical inquiry in the future on how other forms of *liveness* and *co-presence* different than the presented forms might look like. Besides, future research might also look into the subject matter specifically from the perspective of the audience as it is the other fundamental subject of *liveness* and *co-presence* in theater performance. By engaging the spectator aspect in the analysis, such a study would provide new insights on the subject matter, which in turn, could not only test but also elaborate on the presented findings of the study.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acikdeniz, Banu. 2021. "Yeni Dijital Sanat Dünyamız." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3zrNEJ7> (last accessed March 2022).
- Aebischer, Pascale, and Rachael Nicholas. 2020. "Digital theatre transformation: a case study and digital toolkit: final report, October 2020."
- Akim, Melike Saba. 2021. "Canlılık ve Karşılıklı Etkileşim: Tiyatronun Dijitalleşmesi ve Seyir Rejimi Üzerine Ontolojik-Tarihselci Bir Soruşturma." *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi Sanat Yazıları Dergisi* 44: 31–47.
- Anheier, Helmut K, Janet Merkel, and Katrin Winkler. 2021. "Culture, the Arts and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Five Cultural Capitals in Search of Solutions."
- Auslander, Philip. 2008. *Liveness: Performance in a mediatized culture*. Routledge.
- Auslander, Philip. 2012. "Digital liveness: A historico-philosophical perspective." *PAJ: A journal of performance and art* 34(3): 3–11.
- Aydoğan, Derya, and Özge Aydoğan. 2021. "Pandemi Döneminde Tiyatro ve İstanbul'daki Özel Tiyatroların Dijital Açılımlarına Genel Bir Bakış." *Ordu Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Sosyal Bilimler Araştırmaları Dergisi* 11(3): 951–964.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1935. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936."
- Bennett, Naomi P. 2020. "Telematic connections: sensing, feeling, being in space together." *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 16(3): 245–268.
- Berger, Nicholas. 2020. "The Forgotten Art of Assembly. Or, Why Theatre Makers Should Stop Making." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3omdIig> (last accessed November 2021).
- Berghaus, Gunter. 2017. *Avant-garde performance*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Bilgin, Mesrur Melis. 2021. "Dijitalleşen Sahne Sanatları Deneyimi." In *DİJİTAL DÖNÜŞÜMÜN KÜLTÜR VE SANAT ÜZERİNDEKİ YANSIMALARI*, ed. Canan Arslan. Ankara: Nobel Bilimsel Eserler. pp. 71–86.
- Blake, Bill. 2014. *Theatre and the Digital*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Carson, Christie. 2008. "eShakespeare and Performance." *Shakespeare* 4(3): 254–270.
- Causey, Matthew. 2016. "Postdigital performance." *Theatre Journal* pp. 427–441.
- Cho, Dukhee. 2021. "Digitally Mediated Shakespeare in South Korea." *Shakespeare* 17(3): 344–358.

- Compton, Timothy G. 2021. "Digitally-Delivered Mexican Theatre during the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020." *Latin American Theatre Review* 54(2): 199–215.
- Couldry, Nick. 2004. "Liveness, "reality," and the mediated habitus from television to the mobile phone." *The communication review* 7(4): 353–361.
- Danesi, Marcel. 2014. *Dictionary of media and communications*. Routledge.
- Dictionary, Oxford English. 1989. "Oxford english dictionary." *Simpson, Ja & Weiner, Esc* 3.
- Dixon, Steve. 2007. *Digital performance: a history of new media in theater, dance, performance art, and installation*. MIT press.
- Dixon, Steve. 2020. "The new abnormal and where we shouldn't zoom to." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3ITHbK> (last accessed November 2021).
- Firincioglu, Semih. 2021. "03. Direct and Indirect Arts." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3aYj8gg> (last accessed March 2022).
- Giannachi, Gabriella. 2004. *Virtual theatres: an introduction*. Routledge.
- Gurer Arslan, Gizem, and Zeynep Kizilgol Topaloglu. 2020. "We Are Monitoring Violations of Theater Workers' Rights." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3b4NDkG> (last accessed November 2021).
- Ilter, Seda. 2018. "Blast Theory's Karen: exploring the ontology of technotexts." *Performance Research* 23(2): 69–74.
- Ilter, Seda. 2021. *Mediatized Dramaturgy: The Evolution of Plays in the Media Age*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Jamieson, Helen Varley. 2008. *Adventures in Cyberformance: experiments at the interface of theatre and the internet* PhD thesis Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.
- Marranca, Bonnie. 2010. "Performance as design: The mediaturgy of john jesurun's firefall." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 32(3): 16–24.
- McKernan, Bethan. 2020. "Turkey announces its first case of coronavirus." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3yVHIGB> (last accessed November 2021).
- Ookla. 2022. "Ookla Speedtest Global Index." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3vbmMub> (last accessed March 2022).
- Parker-Starbuck, Jennifer. 2011. "Introduction: Why Cyborg Theatre." In *Cyborg Theatre*. Springer pp. 1–13.
- Pavis, Patrice. 2016. *The Routledge dictionary of performance and contemporary theatre*. Routledge.
- Pérez, Elena. 2014. "Meaningful connections: Exploring the uses of telematic technology in performance." *Liminalities: A performance journal* 10(1): 10–1.



- Phelan, Peggy. 2003. *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. Routledge.
- Piccio, Benedetta, Ingi Helgason, Chris Elsdon, and Melissa Terras. 2022. “A hefty dose of lemons: the importance of rituals for audiences and performers at the online Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2020.” *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 18(1): 154–175.
- Riel, Michelle, and Helen Thorington. 2005. “Networked performance: how does art affect technology and vice versa?.” In *ACM SIGGRAPH 2005 Panels*.
- Salihbegovic, Fahrudin Nuno. 2013. “Directing Cyber Theatre.”
- Selim, Yasser Fouad. 2020. “Cyberformance: towards a transnational user-response theory.” *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 16(1): 55–67.
- Sermon, Paul, Steve Dixon, Sita Popat-Taylor, Satinder Gill, and Randall Packer. 2021. “Telepresence Stage Website: Collaborative Solutions for the Performing Arts.”
- Şeyben, Burcu Yasemin. 2016. “Tiyatro ve multimedya.” *İstanbul: Habitus Yayıncılık*.
- Sullivan, Erin, P Aebischer, S Greenhalgh, and L Osborne. 2018. “The Audience Is Present: Aliveness, Social Media, and the Theatre Broadcast Experience.” *Shakespeare and the “Live” Theatre Broadcast Experience* pp. 59–75.
- TurkStat. 2021a. “Cinema, Theatre, Operas, Ballets, Orchestras, Choirs and Groups Statistics, 2020.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3cxcE8J> (last accessed November 2021).
- TurkStat. 2021b. “Cultural Economy and Cultural Employment Statistics, 2020.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3b0Uegb> (last accessed November 2021).

## APPENDIX A

### Timeline of Theater Operations in Turkey During COVID-19 Pandemic

- March 11, 2020: Ministry of Health confirmed the first COVID-19 case in Turkey.
- March 12, 2020: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality suspended Istanbul City Theaters' programs in the city throughout the month of March, which was subsequently followed by Ankara Metropolitan Municipalities' pulling the plug on all cultural and artistic events held in the city affiliated with the municipality.
- March 14, 2020: Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT) postponed all artistic events held under the directorates bound to MCT, including State Theater and State Opera and Ballet, from March 14 until the end of April 2020.
- March 16, 2020: The circular issued by the Ministry of the Interior promulgated the restrictions in various fields of social life including education, culture and arts, tourism, sports, and travel, where the indefinite closure of theater venues across Turkey is announced.
- July 1, 2020: Theaters were reopened as part of the period of the government's new normalization plan that marked the easing of the restrictions in low-risk provinces. Theater venues in concerned provinces were run under strict rules which authorize to fill a maximum of 50 percent of the spectator capacity.
- November 4, 2020: Additional measures were taken by the government introducing night-time curfews after 9 PM. Theater venues were respectively allowed to resume their operations with half capacity within the specified hours before 9 PM.
- November 17, 2020: Partial curfew was introduced which stopped once again theater activities across the country.
- March 2, 2021: Theaters were reopened as part of the period of the government's controlled normalization plan.