

# Digital Theatre

## Introduction

Launched only recently on the 25 October 2009, [Digital Theatre](http://www.digitaltheatre.com) is a project where users can download high-quality theatre productions from some of Britain's leading theatre companies. These are available from [www.digitaltheatre.com](http://www.digitaltheatre.com) to download and keep for £8.99. Not only is this a ground breaking idea in theory, but also in execution, as theatre partners involved in the process currently include: the Almeida theatre, English Touring Theatre, The Royal Court, The Royal Shakespeare Company and the Young Vic.

There are currently five productions online: The Almeida's 'Parlour Song', English Touring Theatre's 'Far From the Madding Crowd,' the Young Vic's 'The Container' and 'Kafka's Monkey' and The Royal Court's 'Over There.' The content is played through the dedicated DT player, which also acts as a library for all downloaded content. The website also functions as a source for news and information about the available downloads, providing cast lists, details of creative teams, reviews and specially created trailers for each production.

If we were to be flippant, we could compare Digital Theatre to the BBC's iplayer. The Digital Theatre website is optimised and secure and the player is built with the similar technology and DRM file protection as iplayer. It has equal functionality and high design values, with the added option of a shopping cart function to purchase downloads.

This could be one of the most important projects currently being undertaken concerning digital technology in the cultural sector.

## Aims and objectives

The primary aim of Digital Theatre is quite simple: to film great theatre using the latest technology in order to produce films of high quality that come as close to capturing the experience of live theatre as is possible. Although the recording of live theatre has been commonplace for quite some time, the standard has varied as the productions are often from archives rather than intentionally created to push the boundaries of a new medium. Digital Theatre recognised that emerging technology made the successful capture a real possibility, especially if combined with a keen sensibility for the processes and vocabulary of creating live theatre.

For the theatres involved, this was an opportunity to increase and/or widen their audience. For example, many wonderful productions have only a short theatrical run, with the majority running for only 6-8 weeks. The theatres wanted to give these productions longevity, but it wasn't always practical to provide it through a live arena. Such constraints meant that many potential theatre-goers were not able to attend, either for reasons of time or even geography. Digital Theatre is a way to combat this and reach more people. This new audience may also include those who did attend the productions and merely wanted a souvenir.

Of course, creating a single website to carry all the recorded content from British theatre and even abroad was a daunting task, especially as the entire venture was broaching new territory. However, through partnerships across the industry they have been able to establish effective distribution and increase the variety and quality of the content produced. Thereby, through these partnerships, Digital Theatre has essentially created a 'new language' of filmed theatre.

## Partnerships

Considering the legal parameters around intellectual property do not actually reflect the current state of technological developments, there were some considerably daunting and delicate issues to face. Therefore, perhaps a key example of the partnership method involved in the project's genesis was how the British Actors Union Equity quickly reached an enabling agreement with Digital Theatre. These deals, backed by ongoing engagement with industry bodies such as The Musician's Union, is establishing an industry wide confidence in the viability and professionalism of Digital Theatre.

This industry enthusiasm was presumably a product of Digital Theatre's unique approach to creative partnerships. The initial 'pilot project' involved working closely with the aforementioned theatres. One of the most important elements in the partnerships was the spirit of artistic collaboration. Creative Director of Digital Theatre, Robert Delamere, is an acclaimed theatre director and as such the partners know that the process is being handled by someone with experience and empathy with the theatre. Each theatre was closely involved with each production and a fair deal was ensured for all.

## Outcome

Although still in its infancy, Digital Theatre is already achieving above its means.

- Over 23,500 distinct visits to the site since it launched;
- 15,000 unique visitors, who we are converting to regular repeat users;
- On-line visitors from 105 countries in 6 continents;
- A database of thousands of subscribers registered for news and updates.

It has been featured in The New York Times, The Sunday Times and The Daily Telegraph. Broadcast interest has also been high with appearances on BBC Breakfast, and London tonight.

## The future

The future for Digital Theatre includes building and growing from its exceptionally strong base by reaching wider and including more theatre partners. There are also plans to allow users to stream content as well as download it.

In conclusion, to play devil's advocate for a bit: despite the technical and logistical wizardry that has allowed Digital Theatre to come to fruition, surely it is missing one crucial aspect: that nothing can replicate being present during a live performance? This is true, but Digital Theatre does not aim to replace the aura of live theatre, but rather complement it and expound upon the dynamic. Many critics have actually noted how the Digital Theatre performance captures aspects that cannot always be absorbed from the back row of a small theatre. Then of course add the previously discussed issues of geography and time constraints to potential audiences.

The NT Live offer, where the National Theatre is showing its performances 'live' in cinemas across the UK and overseas as they are being performed in the theatre, goes some way to resolving the geographical barrier to access but obviously does not have the longevity and intimacy of Digital Theatre's downloads. It will be very interesting to see the research results from the NT Live study being undertaken by Nesta as to the audience experience and the cultural value of NT Live.

If theatre is about being in the right place at the right time, then that is exactly the position Digital Theatre is occupying in the cultural sector: the perfect time to embark on this endeavour and truly create something spectacular with new digital technology.

The willingness to embrace such an entrepreneurial and cutting-edge spirit has the potential to secure Digital Theatre as one of the most important and potentially far-reaching projects in the cultural sector. This will undoubtedly yield rewards with both artistic and financial merit for partners who recognised the changing dynamic and supported such an exciting and revolutionary endeavour.