



Carly Bawden and Marc Antolin in Wise Children's Romantics Anonymous, which was live-streamed from Bristol Old Vic. Photo: Steve Tanner

Is theatre's digital way of working here to stay? Why the tech experts say it is

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While technology was becoming integral to many shows before the pandemic, social-distancing requirements forced theatres to adapt quickly. Designers and technicians tell **Fergus Morgan** how innovative techniques are becoming the new norm



Sound designer Simon Baker has already gone through one technical revolution – the shift from analogue to digital. When he started working in theatre in the early 1990s, his job involved “pressing play on a tape machine”. Now, he says, he oversees “massive, complex, surround-sound, multi-channel epics”.

Baker's career has seen him work in pretty much every large theatre in the country, including the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 2012, he [won an Olivier award](#) for his work on *Matilda the Musical*. Now, he is technical director of Emma Rice's *Wise Children* – and having to embrace a whole new way of working.

“My initial thought when the first lockdown happened last year was that we had to do something to communicate with our audience,” he says. “So I looked to other forms of entertainment – at YouTube and the online gaming community in particular – and I thought that we must be able to adopt some of what they do.”

'We streamed *Romantics Anonymous* with technology stolen from the online gaming community' – Simon Baker, Wise Children

At first, Wise Children created an online radio station, driven by Baker, called Wise Radio. Then came Wise TV, a collection of live interviews and archive footage. That, says Baker, helped the company learn “how to get video into a computer, and then how to stream that on to other people’s computers”.

It also meant that Baker was ready to tackle the next challenge: live-streaming a production. First, he worked on restaging the Old Vic’s [Lungs](#) with Matt Smith and Claire Foy in June. Then, in September, he tackled a Wise Children show that audiences had been clamouring to see again since its first run in 2017: [Romantics Anonymous](#).

“We shipped the set back from LA, where it had been on a fantastic holiday since our tour there was cancelled,” Baker says. “We borrowed the Bristol Old Vic stage. And

with a bit of bravery and preparation, using technology we'd stolen from the online gaming community, we did it.”

His work during the pandemic [won him The Stage award for achievement in technical theatre in January.](#)

Similar stories of adaptation and evolution have happened throughout the theatre industry. Professionals working in technical roles have been required to restring their bows rapidly. Instead of staging live theatre shows, they are getting to grips with everything from Zoom to cinematography to virtual reality.



Orion Slater



*Rose Bruford's Enrique
Munoz Jimenez*

Orion Slater is a 21-year-old member of the National Youth Theatre who has always been “quite mechanically and electronically inclined”. Last March, he was busy working as an intern with Oxford-based Creation Theatre, helping to stage the company’s production of [**The Time Machine at the London Library.**](#)

That show was cancelled just after it opened, but Slater was soon involved with Creation Theatre’s online work. In September, the company created *The Merry Wives of WhatsApp*, a modern reimagining of Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* performed entirely on Zoom. Slater, working from home on his own laptop, was essential to the smooth running of the show.

“I had to get my head around using Zoom pretty quickly,” he says. “I had to spotlight the actors when they were talking – and audience members when there was audience interaction. I realised a while ago that I’ve actually spent more time in a Zoom

rehearsal room than in a real-life rehearsal room.”

Since then, Slater has been involved with a few more online productions. He's also set himself the task of learning more about Zoom, about the world of online theatre, and about all the technologies connected with it.

“Back at the beginning of the first lockdown, I was learning the things I need to know for work in conventional theatre,” he says. “Recently, it looks like online theatre might be here to stay, so I have been learning more about apps you can use alongside Zoom, and about other software involved. I've just been adding tools to my metaphorical tool belt, because even when theatres reopen, there is still going to be a market for people with these skills.”

‘I’ve spent more time in a Zoom rehearsal room than in a real-life one’ – Orion Slater

James Simpson, head of Rose Bruford College's new Centre for Digital Production, agrees. He has worked in the world of

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He cites a report by [StoryFutures](#) – a training and research institution at Royal Holloway University – last January that found 97% of companies in the creative industries lacked expertise in immersive technology.

“So many businesses in the culture sector are missing someone in a key role – the role of creative technologist,” he says. “And that’s the role we are training people in here at Rose Bruford.”

The college launched two new courses in September last year, alongside its Centre for Digital Production – an undergraduate degree in virtual theatre and digital production, and an undergraduate degree in digital content design. Enrique Munoz Jimenez is a lecturer on both.

He says: “We actually planned these courses before the pandemic and haven’t had to change the content of them much. What has changed is how we deliver them, and our expectations for students once they graduate. We are expecting them to have even more work.

“Even in two or three years’ time, when everything is back to normal – whatever that is – we totally believe these skills will be needed. This way of working is here to stay.”



Creation Theatre's The Merry Wives of WhatsApp

Other traditional training programmes in technical theatre are adapting their curriculum to prepare students for the industry they will enter when they graduate. Gillian Tan is head of video at RADA, and teaches on the school's undergraduate degree in technical theatre and stage management. The course's content, she says, has entirely changed.

“We have incorporated pre-visualisation and camera skills to our curriculum, and we have started teaching the creation of virtual environments,” she says. “Digital deliverables were already part of the industry – think of events like [World Ballet Day](#) and [NT Live](#) – but they have become more of an essential, rather than a nice-to-have.”

Students at Rose Bruford and RADA receive lectures and classes in how to use the technology that will allow them to capture shows digitally, live-stream them, and develop new, immersive ways of working online. Those already working

professionally in the industry, like Baker, have had to dive in at the deep end.

‘In future, we believe these skills will be needed. This way of working is here to stay’ – Enrique Munoz Jimenez, Rose Bruford College

The trick, says Baker, is not being afraid to give things a go. That, he says, is how Wise Children made a success of *Romantics Anonymous*, and of its subsequent live-stream of [The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk](#) in December.

“When you start out on a project like live-streaming *Romantics Anonymous*, you don’t know what you don’t know,” he says. “You get a camera. You plug it into a computer. You put the picture up on YouTube. Then you start scaling it up, adding cameras and introducing switches. It’s just a series of hurdles to clear and solutions to find. And there is always a forum or an explainer video to help you.”

Baker thinks that the past year has fundamentally changed how Wise Children will work as a company: digital theatre will

definitely be a permanent part of its output in the future. One thing he, Simpson, Munoz Jimenez and Slater all say is that online content is not going to replace traditional theatre, it is going to augment it.

“There are so many benefits to all this stuff,” says Simpson. “It’s going to make theatre more accessible. It’s going to help tackle the issue of diversity. It’s going to enable us to tell stories in completely new ways. And I know from experience that it actually encourages live audiences to come to the theatre. It’s actually going to support the industry.”



Gillian Tan, head of video at RADA



Simon Baker. Photo: Steve Tanner

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