

## The Digital Stage in Richard Nelson's *What Do We Need to Talk About?*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the theatrical space and audience and the demonstration of the performative presence in the context of virtual theatre and Richard Nelson's *What Do We Need to Talk About?* (2020). The world's catastrophic situation with COVID-19 caused the performing arts industries to turn to digital faster than ever before, and traditional dramaturgical practice needs to be re-examined. In a qualitative case study based on the work of Nelson, this research examines how the medium of Zoom performance reconstitutes spatiality, liveness, and audience experience. Based on digital dramaturgy, media theory, and the performance concept, this paper demonstrates that virtual theatre does not offer a straightforward alternative to physical theatre, but rather can be regarded as a new aesthetic form that strikes a balance between presence and intimacy through digital interfaces. The study demonstrates that Nelson's play is a poignant example of the phenomenon known as networked liveness and distributed space, which creates a demand for new storytelling and spectatorship in response to current social and technological conditions.

**Keywords:** digital performance, distributed space, networked liveness, virtual theatre, Zoom

### 1. Introduction

Traditionally, based on the presence of both the performer and the viewer in the same physical location, theatre has always been praised as both immediate and ephemeral, as well as a form of embodied, communal performance. This geographical and chronological reactivity has made it distinct from other outputs of cultural expression, and it is unique in the human practice of telling stories and sharing experiences (Lente 2021). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic that struck at the beginning of 2020, such strong traits are questioned severely (Nelson 2020).

The development of the virtual theatre at this time did not only amount to survival, but it formed never-seen-before experimental grounds on which the form, content, and ontology of the live show could be re-determined. Having to discard the traditional stages, theatre practitioners resorted to such online technologies as Zoom, YouTube Live, and Microsoft Teams, and, treading in the new landscape of technologies, they tried to recreate the affective and narrative swerve of theatrical expression (Horváth 2025). This is a shift that was also met with some scepticism and imaginative expansion opportunities. Would a show that takes place behind a screen be able to keep the theatricality of theatre? Would it be possible for the actors

to act in the same way? Would people receive the same level of attention through their television screens in their living room?

One of the earliest and most widely discussed responses to these questions was Richard Nelson's *What Do We Need to Talk About?* The play was performed on Zoom in April 2020 and streamed by The Public Theatre in New York. It quickly became the most notable example of early pandemic theatre (Nelson 2020).

The adaptation of the work to the virtual platform, however, is not what makes the work of Nelson stand out, but its possibility to embody the new dimension that the given technology represents on the theatrical stage (Mooney et al. 2021). The direct address, minimal staging, and the effect of an unbroken real-time dialogue point to a sophisticated knowledge of the possibilities and constraints of using a digital interface. The camera is privy to performances of the actors who are toned down to the realism of the camera, shunning the theatrics of projecting a performance (Baía Reis and Ashmore 2022).

In its theme, *What Do We Need to Talk About?* focuses on the currently experienced crises, such as COVID-19, isolation, and political tension, but also extends its attention to a crisis within the theatre itself (Nelson 2020). It becomes a self-reflective contemplation of belonging, separation, and the place of art during periods of confusion. It is therefore an interesting argument to reconsider the principles of theatre in the digitized world.

The paper will explore how Nelson's work redefines the workings of a theatrical space, audience engagement, and the essence of performance itself in the digital space. Based on the interdisciplinary model, where performance, media theory, and digital dramaturgy intersect, the paper contextualizes the question of changing aesthetics in virtual theatre within the broader context of discussing Nelson's play.

In "*What Do We Need to Talk About?*", Nelson (2020) revisits the fictional Apple family, whom we have already met through his previous stage plays, as they gather together via Zoom due to the COVID-19 lockdown in upstate New York. The play begins like an online dinner discussion among siblings Richard, Barbara, Marian, Jane, and their partner, Tim. During the 70 minutes, they exchange personal stories, discuss the past, work through their fears and worries related to the pandemic and the political situation in the USA, and mourn both individual and national losses. There is no plot-driven drama; the play is based on fine-grained emotional adjustment, the ordinary rhythm of dialogue, probing the topics of loss, family, silence, and strength in a country extended by national emergency.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 The ontology of liveness**

Over the decades, the phenomenon of liveness and its meaning in the context of theatre have been primary subjects of discussion. Conventionally, liveness has been considered as the constitutive property of theatrical performance--an attribute based on durationally co-present enactment, spur-of-the-moment performance, and incarnated instantaneousness (Kattel, Drechsler and Karo 2022). This perception

has been best stated by Gagneré and Anastasiia (2022), who view live performance as a form of art that disappears the instant it occurs.

However, Simpson (2021) presents a strong counterargument. He challenges the strict dichotomy between live and mediated performance by hinting at a notion according to which any performance (of the same or diverse media) will be treated as live or un-live in social and cultural senses. In their work, Steil et al. (2021) redefine liveness no longer as an essential characteristic of the medium but as the sense that is established in perception, which changes in novel ways with technological progression. According to this perception, virtual and recorded performances can be viewed as live performances, provided that they do not lose real-time connection, time-sharing, and emotional immediacy.

Such discussions are particularly relevant to the more widespread use of virtual theatre. The recent shift to online spaces, precipitated by the pandemic, has in turn forced practitioners and scholars alike to recontextualize the ontological staging of the category of performance (Nelson-Jones 2022). As the substantiation of liveness in performance shifts to the online realm, one is forced to reconsider the myriad ways in which the elements that were once used to gauge the category of liveness within performances fail to produce this effect in an online space.

The concept of networked liveness, developed by Padberg (2021), advances this argument even further. The author emphasizes the idea that liveness in digital theatre is maintained by connectivity, rather than co-location. An example of this is performances conducted on Zoom, where although they are separate spaces, both performers and audiences are within the same time and technology systems (not necessarily the same venue); hence, what is live is not physical but synchronous (Nelson-Jones 2022). Notably, these new kinds of liveness are not deprived of theatrical intensity. Quite the contrary, Bay-Cheng (cited in Smallwood et al. 2025: 28) emphasizes that networked liveness can foster a new form of intimacy, one based on the close positioning of the display and the vulnerability of the digital connection.

## **2.2 Virtual theatre and digital dramaturgy**

Virtual theatre has led to the emergence of another subfield of dramaturgical thought: digital dramaturgy, which enquires into the structural, aesthetic, and technological transformations necessitated by the development of theatre in and through the digital (Bollen et al. 2021). Contrary to conventional dramaturgy, digital dramaturgy must take into consideration the limitations and opportunities inherent in the digital interface itself.

Skinner, Nelson and Chin (2022) argue that the concept of dramaturgy in virtual theatre also requires rethinking in light of the application's constraints, including audio delay, image resolution, screen size, and the lack of commonality. The new syntax to which the performance is subjected is that of the Zoom interface, a grid of isolated windows (Xu 2021). The screen turns out to be the stage and the proscenium that flattens space relations, but at the same time creates new possibilities of composition. Actors in the picture appear evenly spaced, and spatial

stratification is minimized, which necessitates a complete reevaluation of blocking, pacing, and visual narrative.

According to Xu (2021), this adaptation takes the form of the so-called distributed stage. The actors play in different physical spaces, and their personal space becomes a node of performance. This may seem to disperse the theatrical event. Boenisch (cited in Srinivasan 2021: 16) points out that a coherent performance can be accomplished by highly specific coordination and dramaturgical direction. It is a digitally mediated shared presence or a stage that is all here and nowhere all at once, and what holds it together is not geography but signal and intent.

Graham-Wisener et al. (2022) continue this line of thought, introducing the term “post-theatricality,” a way of performance that is not based on the traditional understanding of theatre but still works within its artistic tradition. The post-theatrical also involves hybridity, intermediality, and genre and media crossings (Lennox and Mason 2022). When Nelson (2020) writes “What Do We Need to Talk About?”, he does not merely create a digital performance, i.e., a performance that exists in a digital dimension; when seen and experienced, it generates a theatrical dimension – a cultural memory dimension, one would say. Still, it also opens up a possible future, at least potentially, of the theatre.

Furthermore, digital dramaturgy encourages practitioners to prioritize interactivity and contactability as key factors. Digital theatre platforms can help ensure the incorporation of audiences who are otherwise excluded, such as those with disabilities or those unable to afford entrance fees to traditional theatre, in the world at large (Hollidge 2023). Such democratization of access necessitates a reconsideration of the audience, which should not be viewed as a mere audience, but as a digitally situated entity in an environment and on a device that is the remediated recipient of the work (Iudova-Romanova et al. 2023). Overall, digital dramaturgy does not aim to recreate the theatre of the past; it creates an entirely new theatrical language, addressing the possibilities of the screen, the dynamics of digital communication, and the uncertainties of a post-pandemic world.

### **2.3 Audience experience and reception**

The dimension of experiencing the audience is, probably, the one that has undergone the most radical changes in the transition from traditional theatre to virtual theatre. The audience in the proscenium model is a co-presented group, whose collective responses, such as clapping, gasping, and laughing, are part and parcel of the affective exchange in performance (Tompkins et al. 2022). Meanwhile, *What Do We Need to Talk About?* is viewed privately on laptops or personal devices regularly. The audience exists as an intangible entity that is detached from both the performers and each other. Yet, on the contrary, this anonymity builds a strong sense of intimacy.

According to Tompkins et al. (2022), the process of digital spectatorship is inherently self-reflective. Low-key and emotionally restrained acting in the Nelson play, the eye-level look of the actors, and the leisurely pace of the dialogue make a viewer feel not as a person observing the Apple family dinner via digital devices,

but as a silent guest and participant in the scene. The absence of the theatrical convention, absence of applause, absence of physical stage, and absence of shared anticipation encourage the viewer to be more thoughtful, and the lack of reaction makes it more emotionally engaging, in line with Liu et al. (2024), who think that digital theatre opens a more emotionally immersive experience.

Yet, this experience is fragile. The viewers are likely to feel the urge to multitask or even give up on the stream. Contrary to custom-theme productions, where the theatre generates a socially constrained performance, virtual performances are usually subject to competing activities within the household. Nevertheless, building an effective engagement can also occur due to such proximity and casualness, which Sullivan (2022) argues is the case. Something like the scene in which Barbara quietly melts into tears as she takes the loss of a colleague to COVID-19 – the truth of stillness in the scene, the sheer intimacy of the camera – might have been lost in a large setting. Barbara's voice cracks as she says, "It just... happened so fast. We weren't ready. No one knew what to say. And now he's gone."

Moreover, Nelson's decision to broadcast the play online at no cost through the Public Theatre's YouTube channel significantly increased its visibility. Similarly, Richard (Jay O. Sanders) says: "You know what's terrifying? That it's not just incompetence. It's indifference. That's worse." This line, delivered in a low, steady tone, lands with precision not because of dramatic emphasis, but because of its quiet finality, amplified by the stillness of the frame. Since, as Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger (2021) note, virtual distribution eliminates geographic and financial access, it makes theatre readily available to everyone. *What Do We Need to Talk About?* was watched by tens of thousands of people around the world, those who would never have sat in a seat at the Public Theatre. One YouTube viewer commented: "I felt like I was in the room with them. I cried alone in my kitchen watching this." Such a wider audience now has lower visibility and interactivity. Still, they nonetheless become part of a single cultural experience, this cohesion being created through the synchronicity of the pandemic expertise.

Lastly, performance itself is transformed without real-time audience feedback. Instead of focusing on vocal extravagance and facial hyper-expressions, the cast resorts to the priority of vocal subtlety and facial micro-expressions. When Richard stammers mid-sentence, regarding the government's response to the pandemic, what he does not necessarily say is being conveyed not through a dramatic gesture but by simply blinking, pausing, and looking away. These subtle preferences also enhance the emotional verisimilitude of the work and reveal a performative potential of the Zoom interface. As Jane (Sally Murphy) reflects, trying to talk about grief, she says: "There's no right thing to say. Maybe that's why we keep talking – because silence feels like defeat."

#### **2.4 Review of previous studies**

Recent years have seen a growing interest in studies that address virtual theatre and Zoom performances from multiple angles, but these efforts collectively reveal a clear research gap that this research attempts to fill. Karam and Naguib (2022)

studied two performances presented via Zoom during the lockdown, highlighting the ability of digital media to preserve essential elements of theatrical performance, such as interaction and communication between the actor and the audience. While his findings are significant, his study did not offer an in-depth dramaturgical analysis of a single text, nor did it explore how the digital home space reshaped the emotional dimensions of the performance.

Likewise, Weitkamp, Smith and Johnson (2022) analysed the reactions of the audience to the performance "The Time of Your Life" conducted online through Zoom and emphasized that camera proximity increased the sense of intimacy, at the same time exposing personal elements of the performer home lives. The study, though providing valuable information on the topic of reception in digital theatre, did not analyse how dramatic structure, textual rhythm, or the choice of performance in the Zoom environment change, but instead addressed only the audience.

Padberg (2021) contributed to the field of knowledge significantly as he proposed a new idea of networked liveness, which proposes that the coordinated technological connectivity is a novel form of theatrical presence. She stated that technology can create a common virtual community of viewers who are in various locations. Nevertheless, her thesis was mostly theoretical, without a specific dramatic text illustrating the effect of networked liveness in character interaction or developing a storyline.

Sermon et al. (2022), on the other hand, proposed another idea, that a telepresence stage exists, and Zoom boxes can serve as a stage, as a visual space, and as a presentation frame at the same time. His work contributed to a better understanding of the adaptation of visual composition and the arrangement of actor movement in digital theatre, yet it did not focus on how this digital environment influenced dramaturgical structure, including character interaction, expressiveness, and rhythm of narration.

Chen (2023) investigated Zoom Theatre and how it employs some of the traditional theatrical conventions, including the opening, musical effects, and symbolic framing, and re-invents them in the digital space. Although the paper has mentioned the hybrid aesthetics that occur due to the collision of the theatrical and digital world, it lacked a profound exploration of the dramaturgical and emotional processes that produce narrative intimacy and interpersonal relationships presented in one, whole play.

It is clear from the foregoing that these studies have contributed to developing our understanding of digital theatre, but they also reveal the absence of a comprehensive dramaturgical analysis of a single text that relies entirely on Zoom and combines digital space with intimacy, presence, and emotional realism within a cohesive framework. Hence the importance of this research, which offers an in-depth reading of Richard Nelson's play "What Do We Need to Talk About?" as a prominent example in the evolution of contemporary digital performance aesthetics.

## 2.5 Research gap

Despite the increased attention to virtual theatre following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most research efforts were theoretical or general, focusing on trends such as digital adaptation or technological mediation (Srinivasan 2021). Few offered close, text-specific analyses of seminal works. Although *What Do We Need to Talk About?* by Richard Nelson is often cited as one of the most essential works in the list of the earliest works of Zoom theatre, the piece has never been read dramaturgically in scholarly articles (Xu 2021). This ignorance overlooks the depth of the play as an experiment in technology and drama about living in pandemic times.

The plot of the play is designed to appear straightforward: five people converse, much like over a virtual dinner, reminisce, mourn, and navigate the psychological impact of pandemic living. However, on the subterranean level, the play is very full of tension and subtext. Practices such as cautious politeness and emotional control, which characterize the Apple family in Nelson's previous works, are enhanced when performed within the Zoom format, where features like freezing, muting, and delays are inherent to the dramaturgy.

To illustrate, at one point, Jane pauses before telling her neighbour has passed away alone, and her pause is extended by a moment in the video. As Jane says, "Our neighbour died alone. Just... quietly. And I couldn't go." The scene consists of more than individual sorrow; it is a collective despair, which the audience can only relate to as their own personal grief, as well as their separateness. In another scene, Tim, the foreign member, attempts some humour with a joke, but the delivery is lost somewhere in a lapse, thus losing the joke. As he remarks with awkwardness, "So I said, 'I don't think the virus is scared of sarcasm,' but... yeah, that didn't land." The embarrassment remains an integral part of the emotional verisimilitude of the play. Instead of breaking the beat, the embarrassment becomes a significant element of the emotional authenticity of the play, drawing attention to the fact that even laughter is hardly heard in the digital abyss.

These moments are typical of self-reflexive thinking of the play, not only about family or society, but also about theatre. Barbara reflects this emotional repetition, stating, "Every day is the same. I try not to watch the numbers, but they crawl in anyway." This Zoom format requires us to think about the following: where is theatre, without a stage, without a viewable audience, without the rite of mass watching? Richard voices the blurred line between exhaustion and emotional fatigue: "I can't tell anymore if I'm tired or just sad." Nelson does not answer, but opens himself, allowing viewers to be uncomfortably engaged and explore ambiguity, discovering meaning within partial, delayed, or mediated presence that consists of pixels. Marian expresses, "There's something about all of us sitting here... even like this... it's something," while Jane confesses, "It's like we're rehearsing how to feel things again."

In an attempt to fill this gap, this paper presents a focused case study of Nelson's play, situated within its broader context of digital performance (Simpson 2021). It states that *What Do We Need to Talk About?* is not just a record of a crisis,

but a feature of the changing language of modern theatre, a language that is, in turn, becoming increasingly mediated by screens, networks, and mediation.

### 3. Method

The author employs qualitative research in the form of a case study, focusing on the object of consideration: *What Do We Need to Talk About?* Richard Nelson created it under the conditions of the first wave of the spread of the pandemic. The case studies can also be of specific interest for a more in-depth investigation of local phenomena that may reveal more widely spread tendencies or upheavals, as is the case with the rapid adaptation of those involved in theatre-making to the COVID-19 pandemic (Wales et al. 2024). The publicly available video of the play performed via Zoom in April 2020, along with the official script of the play and interviews with the playwright and cast members, serves as the primary secondary source (Nelson 2020).

Such a theoretical framework is triadic and informed by performance studies, digital dramaturgy, and media theory. The main ideas of performance theorists provide an overview of the mobile ontology of liveness and physical presence in mediated spaces (Bollen et al. 2021). The notion of digital dramaturgy offers a means of understanding how digital platforms, like Zoom, necessitate new aesthetic means of expression and narrative patterns (ibid).

The proposed research is organized within the framework of three interconnected thematic areas. To begin with, the reorganisation of space highlights how the Zoom interface reorganizes the principle of space in theatre, rendering those secluded digital windows another type of stage (Xu 2021). Second, the audience dynamic examines how reception and involvement change with the shift to a decentralized platform, where viewers are largely invisible online. Third, the discussion of temporal and embodied liveness addresses the possibilities of preserving (or redesigning) notions such as presence, simultaneity, and performative immediacy in technologically mediated performance.

Triangulation of data is used to enhance the overall validity and diversity of the results (Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger 2021). This is the case because the sources will allow for additional verification (cross-validation) and contextualization of ideas that analysts arrive at after the analysis, ensuring their connection not only with the details of the case but also with more general theoretical and culture-based aspects (Tompkins et al. 2022). Based on this approach, the study will attempt to shed light on the idea that 'What Do We Need to Talk About?' is not only a demonstration of the problem of digital theatre but also a depiction of new possibilities in the realm of art. For example, the rigid framing of each personality, which is focused on the domestic setting, serves as a visual metaphor for the emotional trap of loneliness and isolation. When Marian sits in a dark corner, her monosyllabic reaction, "Fine... just tired" to discussions about the pandemic, is not only a personal feature but also one that depicts the country as being in a daze.

Likewise, when Jane reads aloud an excerpt of Walt Whitman, reciting softly, "I am the poet of the body, and I am the poet of the soul...", that scene is not just

literary, but an act – a conscious thought of calling on poetry as a balm to all. The camera does not leave her, even, and her voice quivers a little, pointing out the delicacy in her sincerity. Such aesthetic choices are an integral part of the digital medium, but they also represent larger issues regarding vulnerability, narration, and how performance shapes our expression of shared trauma. Instead of fighting against the limitations of the virtual space, Nelson lets the latter influence the emotional reasoning of the performance. As Barbara remarks, “We keep talking, because what else is there?”

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Reimagining theatrical space**

Domination is not digital and virtuality is not indicated by expensive special effects and sets but by little coordination and visual integration over vast areas and spaces. All the actors are positioned in their own Zoom boxes and seem to sit in an ordinary, rather dull domestic environment, such as a kitchen, living room, or home office, which serves as a reminder of lockdown life (Baía Reis and Ashmore 2022). These are physically non-continuous visual frames that are joined together by even lighting, finely regulated *mise-en-scène*, and flawless rhythm in conversation. The consequence is a paradoxical spatial unity, visually discontinuous yet narratively consistent, which resembles the emotional detachment between the characters as well as the isolation experienced by society during a pandemic (Strippoli 2023). The physical distancing of actors becomes a metaphor for social disintegration in 2020, transforming even the closest connections into distractions.

Nelson (2020) does not view the Zoom interface merely as a technical limitation that needs to be overcome, but rather as a realised dramaturgical gesture through which the texture of the performance will be established. The pause, lack of reaction, and even lagging or frozen frames are integrated into the rhythm of the performance, reflecting the hesitancy of feeling, the precariousness of technology, and the awkwardness of digital-mediated intimacy. Such a tender moment appears when Barbara, remembering someone dying of COVID-19 at work, pauses in the middle of a sentence, and then her video stutter fades a few moments, and her figure on the screen remains motionless. That silence is extended as well, as it is not interrupted by other characters, so the technological gap repeats the emotional significance of a scene. This instance of unwanted stagnancy amplifies her sorrow through the digital interruption, serving as a device of expression rather than interruption.

Such digital artifacts are not distractions, but tools of expression, offering an opportunity to communicate the doubt and vulnerability that characterizes not only the relationships between the characters, but also the world they inhabit (Gao et al. 2024). Instead of trying to recreate the effect of stage presence and conceal the drawbacks of the medium, Nelson employs the so-called screen-native aesthetic and develops a performative language that is specific to the setting (Simpson 2021). As an illustration, all characters are located in a dimly lit domestic space: Barbara is shown sitting at her kitchen table, Jane has shelves of books behind her, and Tim is in a room that is sparsely decorated and slightly hints at his outsider position.

These personal, yet still modest, home environments do not strive to recreate an exclusive stage; instead, it is the emotional and geographical distance between the characters that will be highlighted, which is also reflected in the disunity of their dialogue and the social world around them imposed under lockdown.

#### **4.2 Audience as invisible participant**

In contrast to traditional theatre, the spatial co-location of the audience and the performative qualities of their response (applause, laughter, or gasp) are typical of Zoom theatre, which brings about a uniquely individuated and mostly unseen reception (Srinivasan 2021). In *What Do We Need to Talk About?* Nelson (2020) utilizes the closeness of the screen and the direct eye contact of the camera to establish a highly intimate relationship with the spectator. Eye-level camera angles, soft lighting, and conservative acting break down the metaphorical barrier of the fourth wall, allowing viewers to enter the inner family world of the Apple family as trusted advisers (Strippoli 2023). The play, therefore, supports a kind of silent interaction that is introspective, emotionally touching, and even more all-encompassing than traditional theatre.

The absence of real-time audience feedback changes the performance's dynamics, which the actors must adjust in terms of expressivity. The lack of visible or audible reaction, which allows viewers or listeners to gauge information, makes the performers inward-looking as they employ gestural minimalism, facial micro-expressions, and tonal accuracy to convey information (Padberg 2021). The emotional nature of the text, which involves death, illness, political disappointment, and family anxiety, is further supported by the mellow professional interpretation of the actors, inspiring harmony with the surrounding misery and confusion in its listeners (Gao et al. 2024). Becoming a viewer of the play is an expression of solidarity; a muted yet collective understanding of how a fragile human bond can be both mediated and screened, yet still have the same effects.

#### **4.3 Embodiment and temporal presence**

The issue of maintaining credible levels of liveness in digital theatre is one of the most pressing theoretical and practical questions in digital theatre, a question with a long history, as theatrical liveness has always been a precondition of the theatrical experience (Baía Reis and Ashmore 2022). Nelson (2020) overcomes this problem by making sure that *What Do We Need to Talk About?* happens in real time, so that there are no edits and no prerecorded elements. The actors naturally react to each other, even though they are physically separated, as they can be involved in the acting process from different countries (Lente 2021). As an example, at one point, when Richard started talking about what the federal government is doing regarding the pandemic, Jane involuntarily interrupts him because of the small lag in her speech. Instead of correcting or editing the interruption, Nelson lets the overlap be. Richard hesitates, makes a self-deprecating smile, and tells her, "Sorry--go on, Jane," and she tells him, "No--no--please do go on."

The issue of embodiment has certain limitations due to its being limited by the camera frame, but on the contrary, this aspect is not wantonly abandoned.

Instead, the play enables a new type of embodied performance, focusing on the expressive powers of the face and voice, as well as the subtle movements of the body (Brejzek and Wallen 2021). It can be seen in one dramatic scene, when Marian says how lonely her old students are, her voice just a little bit louder than a whisper. She shapes her shoulders just a bit, her eyes are lowered out of the camera, and there is a noticeable twitch in her lower lip. Although the movement of the whole body is missing, these tiny gestures, due to the tight close-up, become rather articulate in expressing emotions. In a similar manner, obscure changes in gaze, such as Jane looking in other directions when Tim mentions the news, or when she is quietly reading poetry by blinking her eyes, become encoded in specific gestures of awkwardness, intellectual contemplation, and a bewildered unhappiness.

The eyes, brows, and posture of the actors are full of emotion, and even the slightest blink or change of gaze is emphasized by the close-up frames. Such closeness transforms digital closeness into emotional proximity, making the virtual body able to rebound with realness and depth. This shift in focus from a performance based on full-body movement to one cantered on the subtle nuances of facial expressions does not diminish the power of the performance; rather, it enhances the sense of immediacy and elevates the level of emotional expression (Tompkins et al. 2022). Nelson (2020) manages to create a temporal state that combines simultaneity and emotional impact, where the audience and performer share the same moment, even if not within a shared physical space.

## **5. Textual analysis**

Nelson's text does not overlook the rhythms of language or the flaws of natural speech and its spontaneity; rather, it embraces them intentionally, preferring intimacy and realism to blatant theatrical appearances. The characters all talk quietly and calmly, they pause frequently or drop off the end thereof, like the weariness of being inside the pandemic. According to what Jane says at the beginning of the play, "Some days I feel fine, and then suddenly I don't." Throughout the story, there is this emotional vulnerability that one can find in thin lines, not in blatant utterances.

Utilisation of digital space alters the experience with the text. Dialogue, as well as facial nuance, is used instead of blocking and choreography to convey the characters. There is a strong conversational tone, but the words are typically veiled. An example is given by Tim, who has recovered after a case of COVID-19, who says, "There are moments, I swear, when I feel like I'm breathing someone else's air," a poetic image of the psychic intrusion and unease of illness.

The usually mute Barbara refers to the silence in the town, saying, "There's a silence in the town now. Like the world is holding its breath." Silence plays a greater role than just being an absence; here it is a character, a collective pause, which the whole world undergoes. Political weariness is introduced into the picture in this moment when Richard gives a sigh; he says, "I'm not sure I can take another press conference. It's like being lied to in slow motion."

The emotional tension does tend to come out in the manner that the characters do not confront each other head-on. When Marian talks about one of her former

pupils who was killed by the virus, Marian can say nothing, but, "He was... good. He didn't deserve this," and then silence (Abd Aliwie 2025b). The play is against melodrama and allows grief to rest in peace with no resolution. Thematically, the play talks about disconnection. Jane reflects, "It's odd, but I feel closer to you all now than I did before this," almost as though being close together virtually improves emotional connections.

## 6. Discussion

*What Do We Need to Talk About?* has become a milestone in virtual theatre creation, not in trying to break free of the constraints the pandemic has set on the theatre field, but in exploring, and doing so with an atmosphere of sensitivity and imagination, the realm of possibilities its new set-up allows.

In addition to the artistic and dramaturgical changes, some researchers note the growing significance of time in modern cultural consumption patterns. The switch to the virtual theatre, on the one hand, has greatly shortened the time limits of the audience. The audience does not have to travel, visit other cities, or spend a lot of time to go to a show anymore. Online platforms such as Zoom enable the audience to watch a live theatre performance in real time and regardless of their location, which makes the performance more in line with the breakneck speed of the modern world. The change does not only enhance the investment of time, but also results in evident economical and financial savings, since the expenditures on transportation, accommodation and tickets buying are practically eliminated. One of the most pragmatic benefits of virtual theatre is that watching performances requires little time and money, a strength that strengthens its role in a more efficient, expedited, and accessible world.

Nelson (2020) has never imitated traditional stage action, but introduces a new grammar of performance - a subtle, hybrid, and all-too-human grammar, sensitive to the emotional background of a sick world. This grammar is revealed in silent variant of the play, which does not depend on open conflict but on subtle relationships between people of the Apple family. Five actors in the play Richard, Barbara, Marian, Jane, and Tim illustrate emotional responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Barbara, the stable and rigorously stoic school administrator, deflects anguish beneath prim phrases; Jane retreats into words and introspection, Marian diffuses calm concern, and Tim, frequently the loner, battles to add some light relief. Their discussions concern loss, political despair, and individual helplessness, yet the conflict is psychological, expressed in those painstaking pauses as well as all those suppressed feelings and moral hesitation. Thematically, the play covers isolation, death, and the uncertainty of the future; however, it is also critical of the value of art. Besides, it once again explores and adds value to letters and communication, linking human bonds. Nelson produces a performance in which every glance, pause, or dropped line is a deliberate move, an eight-part dramatic construction built from synchronicity and digital distance. All this critical and popular success of the play can even indicate that virtual theatre is not a temporary or inferior solution to playing in the room. Instead, it serves a perfectly "valid and adjustable form in its own right" (Holledge 2023). Moreover, the feelings of loss,

memory, disconnection, and yearning, that were the main thematic motives of the play, are strongly represented by the screen, which was emotionally muted but highly saturated (Liu et al. 2024; Abd Aliwie 2025a).

In *'What Do We Need to Talk About?'*, the play is remarkable in how it has gotten inside the souls of its characters and how it has utilized the Zoom interface as a metaphor of fractured emotions. The virtual environment is the mirror of the inner isolation of the characters. All members appear to be imprisoned in their little worlds, but they are seeking some sort of rapport at the same time. The conversation of the Apple family is full of mutual experiences, unresolved conflicts, and unspoken fears of a world that is apparently getting out of hand. To illustrate this, when Richard turns to a lighter subject after talking about political despair, when Marian is seen quietly pulling out of the conversation about mortality rates, the audience feels the emotional landscape consisting of fear, avoidance, and silent empathy. These moments are not hyperbolized or theatrical, quite the opposite, they are brought on board with the highest level of discretion and control, which endows them with a unique beauty and allows them to reflect the anxiety of modern life in the face of the pandemic with such profundity. What here is going on does not appear to be a mere acting, but a dwelling-room, and serious and gloomy, in which silence and quiet are as expressive as speech. In that manner, the project Nelson is the nature of the fractured consciousness of the moment, which is personal and public, isolated and sharing more than coincidentally.

## 7. Conclusion

*What Do We Need to Talk About?* by Richard Nelson is an example of the transformative power of virtual theatre in the digital media era. The use of the new features of Zoom implies that the play will establish a theatrical context of distribution and connection that is held not by geographical proximity but by emotion. This changes the viewer/audience dynamic in terms of interactive intimacy and solitary viewing as well as keeping it alive through the contingency and immediacy of time that are implied by the technological medium. Nelson, however, does not see digital platforms as a concession, but shows how the constraints can act as a launchpad towards a new aesthetic language founded on intimacy, realism, and a feeling of the present.

Since the theatre business still functions in the post-pandemic environment, the lessons of the first digital productions, including those by Nelson, are still incredibly timely. They challenge our basic premises regarding the notions of presence, embodiment, shared space, and community. This is a challenge to see how the live performance and the technology are altering their cooperation, not as conflicting partners, but as complementary entities in the development of new theatrical forms. Rather than lamenting the provisional loss of the traditional stage, *What Do We Need to Talk about?* encourages its viewers to look forward to the emergence of new theatres, new forms of communication, and new future possibilities of performance, in a cultural landscape that is more and more marked by media overlap and mixture.

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