



# THE DUCHESSES OF MALFI

*Exploring a collaboration with  
Creation Theatre*



THE OXFORD RESEARCH CENTRE IN THE HUMANITIES



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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Between 17th and 27th March 2021, Creation Theatre in collaboration with TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities) produced a production of *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster, performed live on Zoom. It was directed by Dr Laura Wright, Stipendiary Lecturer in English at University College Oxford, and Natasha Rickman, theatre maker, director and part of Creation Theatre's Digital Rep Company. *Malfi* was performed by a cast of six actors from the rep company. A further recorded performance was streamed on 5th April.

This report chronicles the nature of the collaboration, its benefits, challenges and impact.

### *Cast*

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI – Annabelle Terry

FERDINAND – Dharmesh Patel

THE CARDINAL – Giles Stoakley

ANTONIO – Kofi Dennis

BOSOLA – Graeme Rose

DELIO – Andy Owens

Co-directors: Natasha Rickman and Laura Wright

Stage Manager – Judith Volk

Video Design – Stuart Read

This report draws primarily on interviews with Lucy Askew, Chief Executive of Creation Theatre; Natasha Rickman, co-director of *The Duchess of Malfi*; Giles Stoakley, Company Manager of the Digital Rep Company and actor; Annabelle Terry, member of the Digital Rep at Creation Theatre and actor; and Laura Wright, co-director.



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# INTRODUCTION

This report is an experiment in evaluative collaboration: a detailed case study of a TORCH-funded Knowledge Exchange collaboration between Creation Theatre and Dr Laura Wright on *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Knowledge exchange (KE) is best described as the mutually beneficial sharing of ideas, data, experience, and expertise. At its most challenging, it involves transformational collaboration and co-creation between academic researchers, external organisations, artists, and members of public. In this case, an early career researcher in English Literature from Oxford University worked with a recognised, respected, and adventurous local theatre company. The online show that ensued was innovative and vivid, and provoked a new level of engagement for all involved.

When we talk about knowledge exchange projects we are interested in a wide range of issues. Is the exchange truly reciprocal? How do the collaborators navigate their different experiences and working practices to find a way of creating together that is meaningful to both? What went wrong? What worked unexpectedly well? What do audiences understand of the process as well as the production? How much can we communicate the intangible as well as the tangible outcomes of our work?

As you read through this case study, you will encounter both questions and answers relating to the kind of work that KE supports, exemplified in this account of the scholarly and artistic collaboration which enabled this lockdown production of *The Duchess of Malfi*.



We also wanted to document the nuts and bolts of this particular project – to give readers a behind-the-scenes glimpse both of how KE works in practice, and how this very unique rehearsal and co-creation process worked. When we look back, years from now, at the upheavals in theatre caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be projects like this that remind us how we found a way through. Theatre-makers have always been both resilient and resourceful, but there is a new level of innovation and willingness to embrace new forms on display here. We hope you enjoy this glimpse of how it was made, and trust that the thoughts, reflections, and analysis gathered here might spark ideas in your own practice.

**Professor Wes Williams**

*Director, The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities - TORCH*

To find out more about TORCH Knowledge Exchange activities and how to take part, [visit here](#). This report is in many ways an act of knowledge exchange in itself. Written by Fay Lomas, a doctoral student and theatre-maker, it created space for a period of reflection between Laura Wright and her creative collaborators. That reflection in itself will influence future collaborations.

*With thanks to contributors:*

Lucy Askew  
Ruth Moore  
Natasha Rickman  
Giles Stoakley  
Annabelle Terry  
Laura Wright



*Wes Williams, TORCH Director*




# BACKGROUND TO COLLABORATION

## TORCH Theatres Seed Fund and *Henry VIII*

The project started in June 2019, when Laura Wright first approached Lucy Askew at Creation Theatre about a possible collaboration on Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*; Laura was researching lesser-known Shakespeare plays. The idea at that stage was to create a production accompanied by learning resources and targeted at a school audience. Laura had watched Creation shows as an undergraduate and felt that Creation would be the ideal partner for the project. Lucy came on board and Laura applied for TORCH's Theatres Seed Fund.

She was successful in her application; with the funding in place, Laura and Lucy engaged with Oxford Festival of the Arts as further partners. However, with preparation for the production underway, Covid-19 hit. Theatres closed on the 16th March 2020, and it no longer looked possible to stage a full production of *Henry VIII*.

Creation Theatre from the early days of the pandemic were innovators in digital theatre. Their first Zoom show, *The Tempest*, launched in April 2020. Given Creation's growing experience in this medium, the decision was made to perform a rehearsed reading of *Henry VIII* on Zoom in June 2020.



*Henry VIII* was put together very quickly — there were a couple of group rehearsals with the whole cast (who were already working together on another Creation show), and then Laura met each member of the cast individually for a one-on-one rehearsal to go through their speeches in detail. These sessions revolved around text work, shaping scenes through exploring moments of tension, and some rough staging, in the form of exits and entrances.

In the spirit of lockdown, the actors created costumes and props from whatever they had around their homes that might be suitable! Tickets were free and it was performed live on Zoom as part of The Oxford Festival of the Arts, then made more widely available on YouTube. One of the benefits Laura highlights is having the production digitally available as a teaching resource. This was a really valuable example of the play in performance given how few productions there normally are of this text. By June 2021 the production had 217 views on YouTube.



## The early process of *The Duchess of Malfi*

Following the rehearsed reading of *Henry VIII*, a significant percentage of funding remained. Laura and Creation needed to think creatively about ways of continuing the collaboration, given the ongoing health crisis. Laura had the idea of exploring a new digital project: *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Laura was already thinking about *The Duchess of Malfi* in relation to her research on early modern drama and the horror genre, and she had also in the past explored it in relation to her work on sound effects. She felt it would work well for a Creation digital project because it could be done with a small cast (of six) and a tight edit of the script, and it had a strong narrative drive without too many subplots.

Based on the strength of the collaboration on *Henry VIII*, Lucy at Creation Theatre suggested that, instead of another rehearsed reading, they could mount a full production using the actors from the Creation's Digital Rep company (which was funded by Innovate UK for six months). TORCH agreed to a departure from the original project in order to deepen the collaboration between Creation and Laura.





Laura's interest in the similarities between the role of violence in some early modern dramas and in slasher movies led her to the concept at the centre of the production: echoing the aesthetic of Italian giallo movies. This shaped the production: the overall style, the colours used in the digital mix, the decisions about hair, makeup and costume.

Creation Theatre paired Laura with director Natasha Rickman, who has a track record of creating Zoom productions. Natasha was enthusiastic about the giallo concept, and within a few weeks the two directors were in rehearsals together. The turnaround of the production was very tight, compared to normal theatre shows. The digital form and the presence of an existing rep company enabled a much faster way of working than normal.

The process was also accelerated by Laura's scholarship: co-director Natasha Rickman comments, 'it was less time to prep a show than I've been used to on anything that I've directed before [...] [but] I was co-directing with Laura who has been prepping it forever'. The combination of each director's expertise meant that they were able to move swiftly into a shared rehearsal process.

A photograph of a red planet, likely Mars, in a dark, starry space. The planet is in the center, showing some surface details. The background is a deep black with scattered white stars.

## REHEARSING THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

The process started with a read-through of the full text of *The Duchess of Malfi*, as well as a broader discussion of the text, over the course of three days. This enabled the actors to engage with the scope and full context of the original text, before starting to work on the rehearsal edit. At this point, the actors had not been assigned their roles.

There was then a week-long break in rehearsals, during which Laura did the edit. In this week off, the casting happened. When the team returned to rehearsals, one week was dedicated to 'table-work' — during which the actors engaged in rigorous detail with the text, discussing the play's context, themes and imagery with the directors.

Following this week, Natasha worked rapidly through the play to stage it. Simultaneously, Laura took the actors for individual sessions, where she did more detailed work on the language. In some cases she worked with the actors to translate the text into modern English, so that they were absolutely sure of what they were saying at each moment. In the final week of rehearsals, Laura and Natasha came back together, and worked through the play again, firming up staging and choices, whilst working in more detail with the V-Mix software, used for this digital production.



Laura and Natasha found this process to be a fruitful collaboration. They both contributed to each stage of the process, and engaged in a regular exchange of ideas, checking-in during the rehearsal day and after rehearsals. They took it in turns to lead more strongly on certain parts of the process (Laura on the text/context work, and Natasha on the staging).

They and the actors described a rich 'symbiosis', where their different perspectives fed each other throughout. This was true in working with the actors as well as with the technical requirements of digital theatre. As actor Annabelle Terry comments, 'I would ask Tash about an intention, and I would ask Laura about a textual question, but it was so interchangeable because they are really similar in the styles in which they direct'. As Laura comments, 'we both had a very strong sense of what we wanted it to look like. We were very detailed about the aesthetics of it and were both very passionate about that'.



# KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE: BENEFITS IN REHEARSAL

What benefits did embedding knowledge exchange in the rehearsal process bring to Laura, Natasha and the actors?

## Benefits for Laura, co-director and researcher

### *New Perspectives*

- Laura developed a new way of thinking about text, from an actor's perspective: fresh ideas 'came out of conversations with actors who were asking totally different questions about the text [...] By looking at it from a slightly different angle, you see things that you didn't see before'.
- Laura gives an example of working on *Henry VIII* with actors: 'I thought we would find the pomp, [...] the luxury of the history, and actually what we ended up finding was the humanity of it and in many ways the sadness [of] Catherine'.
- Laura offers another example in relation to *The Duchess of Malfi*: the line between comedy and tragedy, between absurdity and violence, was something she found herself thinking about increasingly in rehearsals, especially in terms of how laughter relates to power and gender. This grew into an idea for an article for Laura to develop.

*'By looking at it from a slightly different angle, you see things that you didn't see before.'*



### *New teaching ideas*

- Working with actors has given Laura new ideas about how she might teach these pieces to students. She learnt a directing technique from Natasha, where actors read a scene, then go back and rephrase it again in modern English, then read it back again a third time, in the original early-modern phrasing. She plans to use this exercise as a teaching technique for undergraduates, to get them used to 'not feeling trapped by the poetry'.
- The production is a teaching resource in itself: 'It's really useful to be able to show productions to students. [...] to be able to point to something and say, "This decision was made for this reason, what would you have done differently?"'
- The project has led Laura to using digital resources (e.g. Zoom), to set students creative tasks, like bringing to life a five minute section of *Macbeth* as a piece of digital theatre. Laura argues that prompting students to think about how they would stage a play helps to encourage detailed engagement with a text.

### *The opportunity to focus on one text for a prolonged period*

- Laura: 'I'm so often looking at a broad scope of plays that just to sit with one for a couple of weeks is a real luxury'.

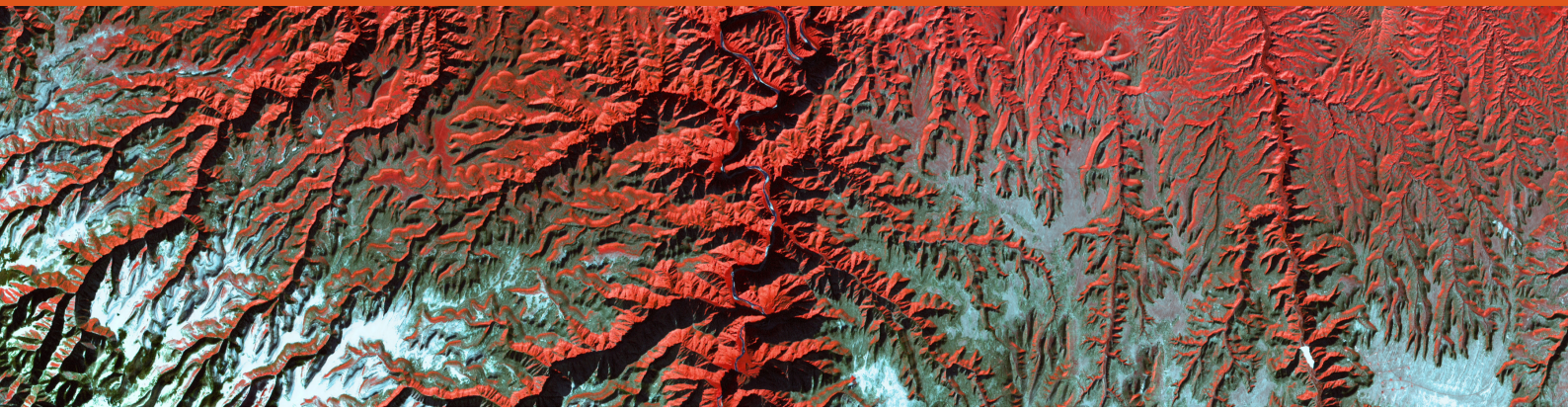


### *The learning process*

- 'It was a really great learning curve for me, learning about digital theatre [...] Tash [Natasha Rickman] has a really rare expertise right now. There are very few people who have the knowledge of how to put a digital production together, so that for me [was an] apprenticeship [that] was amazing'.
- Laura: 'What I don't ask in the classroom is why. Why is the character feeling this? If I did ask that it would create quite a lot of theoretical problems [...] Of course they're feeling nothing, because they are constructs [...] Whereas actors, they have to ask that; they have to know [...and so] I'm learning [about contemporary theatre practice]'.

### *Increased ambition for public engagement with research*

- The collaboration with Creation enabled Laura to think on a bigger scale than previously — when she suggested a reading of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Creation encouraged her that a full production would be possible.



## Benefits for Natasha Rickman, co-director

### *The concept:*

- Collaborating with Laura enabled both directors to bring to life a concept that came out of Laura's research and her knowledge of the context (both of *The Duchess of Malfi* and of film): Laura's instinct to keep the setting of the production Italian, but fuse it with *giallo* movies. Natasha: 'It was lovely because Laura was able to say, "I really want it to look like this", and I was able to say, "I think that we can get it to do the thing you want".'

### *The depth of Laura's knowledge*

- Natasha comments, 'She has such deep context that she can talk about'. In a normal rehearsal room, the director would do lots of research, but 'what's so refreshing about it being a person rather than a book or the internet, is that they know things that a lot of people in the audience don't know'.
- Natasha offers a precise example: Laura's knowledge of the early-modern context proved invaluable for exploring the theme of the corruption of religion in the production — how this theme ties into the Cardinal's character; how it ties into the imagery; how the play talks about aspects of what was happening in England through the guise of talking about Italy. *'The academia was there and it was this amazing support but it didn't have to be at the forefront [...] the generosity of going, "here's all this knowledge", and then the flexibility of Laura saying, "how does this become part of the theatrical process?"'*



## Benefits for the actors

### *Directors with different specialisms*

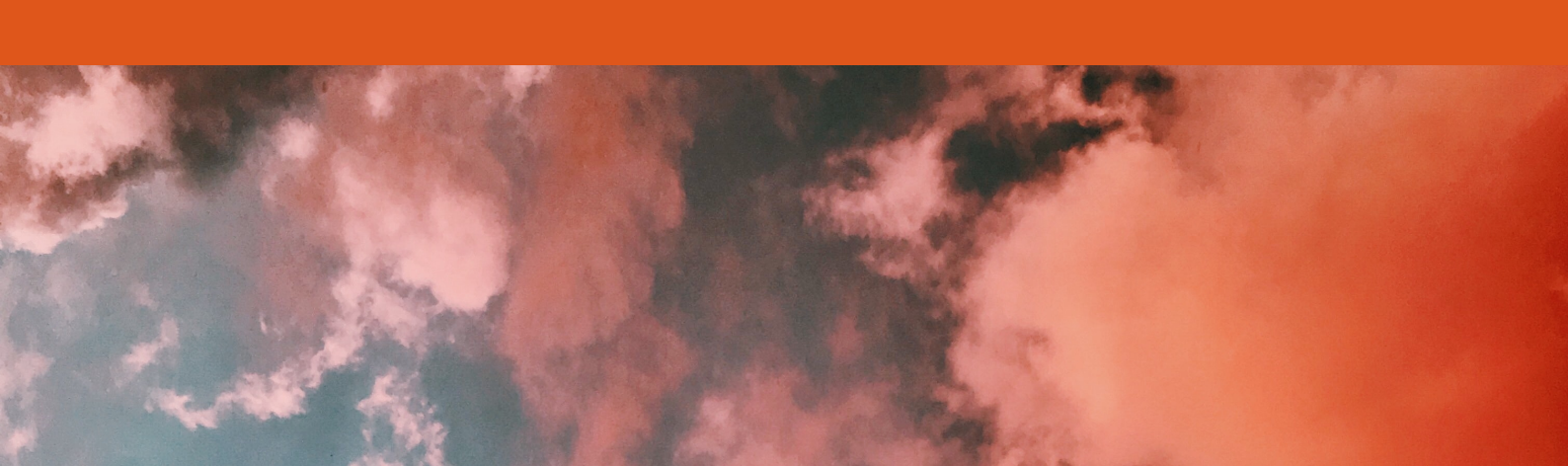
- An unusual opportunity to work with two different perspectives
- Even when working with well-funded companies, the detailed text support (if there is any) usually comes from a voice coach; actors cited the benefit of having that detailed level of support from someone with a background in academia.
- '[Laura] really went into detail with us and so the rehearsal process never felt rushed. As an actor you want to be fully prepared, especially when doing a classical text' (Anabelle).

### *A malleable edit*

- 'One thing that I could offer which became quite an important part of the process is being able to be malleable with the text' (Laura). This meant adapting the edit as the company saw what worked/did not work in rehearsals, and being able to use her wider knowledge of the text to move things around: 'I was able to say this line is great but it's from another scene, but let's put it in this moment because it seems to fit' (Laura). Knowing the text so well meant that 'you're not locked into your cut even quite late in the process' (Laura).

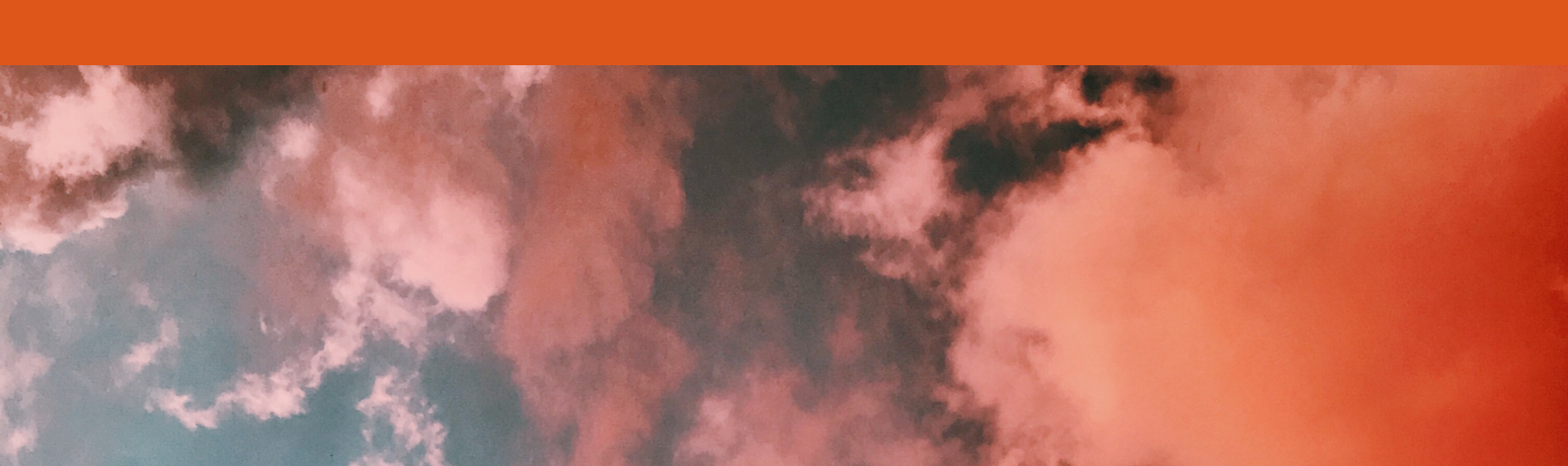
*'One thing that I could offer which became quite an important part of the process is being able to be malleable with the text.... I was able to say this line is great but it's from another scene, but let's put it in this moment because it seems to fit.'*





### *Detailed focus on language*

- Lucy comments that 'the clarity of delivery in the performance' shows the benefit of Laura and Natasha's work with the actors. One of the outcomes, as Laura expresses it, was 'to make the language something that became [...] a natural thing to say'.
- Anabelle says, 'the language, its imagery and poetical nature can be quite daunting for an actor, because you don't want to just sound like you're reading a poem. You really want to do it justice and she [Laura] really helped with that'.
- The process enabled the actors to be really specific in their choices. As actor Giles describes, rather than an actor coming to a text and feeling, 'I know that's basically an insult', in this process, the actors felt they knew the specifics of why that insult, how it linked to other aspects of the play; what it meant in the context. Sometimes understanding this specificity revealed crucial aspects of characterisation that would otherwise have been missed.
- Laura and Natasha were able to answer questions about why a character might be using verse structure in a particular way; these again enabled the actors to develop their characterisation.
- The detailed engagement with language played out in the staging: conversations about the imagery of light/the sun, found their way into the staging, where the Duchess was often situated centrally, with the other characters orbiting around her.
- Being able to look at things in both a theatrical and academic context 'means you pick up themes in the play, much more quickly [...] and if you're aware of [themes] as an actor, it makes your performance journey much more interesting [...] and [enables you] to plot a character journey more accurately' (Giles).

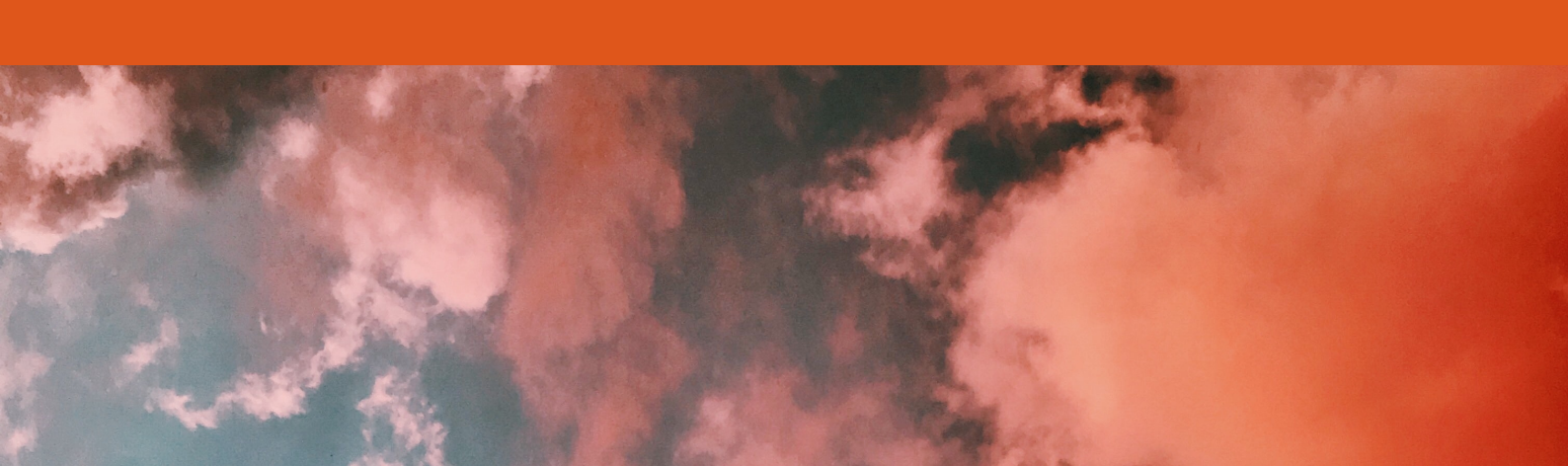


### *Knowledge of background and context*

- Anabelle Terry comments that Laura's wider knowledge was invaluable for 'unlocking the context', especially details related to the character of the Duchess, who is based on a real person. Anabelle also discusses the benefit of keeping the Italian context of the original, even whilst setting it in the 20th century, and the decision to enable Anabelle, who has Italian heritage, to translate some of the lines into Italian.
- Laura unlocked crucial aspects of context (especially around themes of science and religion), that enabled actors to deepen their understanding of characterisation: speaking of a moment where a Galileo reference was explained by Laura, Giles comments 'suddenly you get a much deeper insight into his [The Cardinal's] world'.

### *Knowledge of early modern theatre practice giving clues*

- 'I'm really interested in how the text explains itself to the actor, how actually, if you are conscious of what you're saying there are so many cues within the dialogue itself' (Laura).



*Enhanced sense of validation for actors in working with a researcher*

- Lucy: 'It's a really valuable way of sensing that their work is important [...] that they're doing something which has historical significance'.
- This feeling has been particularly valuable at the moment when the performing arts have had such a difficult year.

*Actors feeling heard*

- 'It was a very collaborative process and both Laura and Tash welcomed ideas. And so I felt really comfortable giving those ideas and some of them manifested in bits in the show so that was really exciting' (Anabelle).

*'It's a really valuable way of sensing that their work is important [...] that they're doing something which has historical significance'.*



## KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE: CHALLENGES

The nature of the project was that the turnaround time was very quick. This created some challenges in terms of the directors having to prepare very quickly and establish a working collaboration within a few weeks. Both Natasha and Laura describe this collaboration as very fruitful indeed, and mentioned that because of the flexibility and collaborative personality of the other, they felt that they were easily able to adapt the process to suit them both — but perhaps had the individuals involved had different personalities, this might have been a more difficult process.

One comment that emerged in the interviews was that perhaps having a little more run-in-time would have reduced the pressure on each. This would have been beneficial given that they were each developing a new process of working in this meeting point of academic and theatrical practice. Natasha imagines that it would have been helpful to have an exchange of knowledge related to process, before rehearsals started: the opportunity to say, 'I as a director like to do this when I work on a play, what do you like to do when you teach a play and how can we do both?'



A discussion of the rehearsal timeline and more chance to plan the process might also have been beneficial. One key difference between the two approaches of theatre and academia is the fact that the process of rehearsing a play sometimes works in a more chronological way than the process of studying a text. For instance, the actors might find it difficult to rehearse one of the final emotional scenes early on in the rehearsal process, because ideally they would have had the opportunity to build to the point where they can inhabit the characters' most intense experiences.

Ultimately, both directors make it clear that they felt they achieved a 'harmony' (Natasha) between different processes — but that process might have been even more rewarding if they had had more planning time.

The other major challenge mentioned was the time pressure for Laura as a researcher and tutor in finding the time to rehearse a full production, especially during term-time. Laura took time away from rehearsals in order to teach, enabling her to fulfil all her commitments alongside the project. In addition to the obvious heavy workload of managing different commitments, the production of *The Duchess of Malfi* took the place, for several weeks, of the time that she would normally spend researching or writing. However she believes that *The Duchess of Malfi* played the role of another form of research — research in practice, which has already led to multiple concrete academic outcomes (see below).

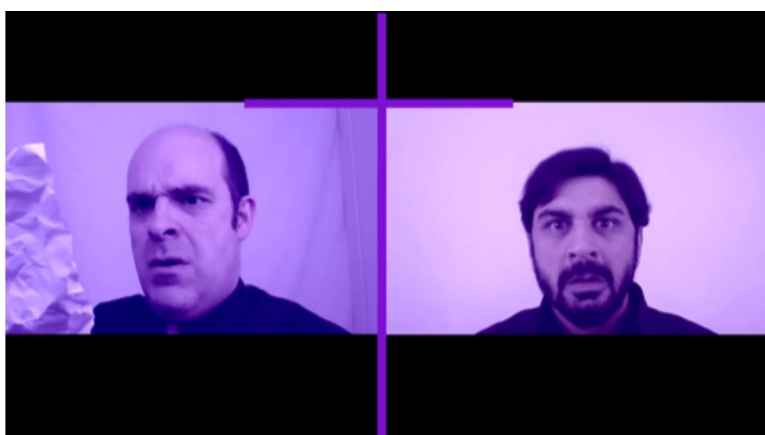


## PUSHING THE FORM: DIGITAL THEATRE

Creation has been one of the companies at the forefront of the creation of digital theatre since the start of the pandemic. Lucy describes the company's work with Zoom as 'moving into a territory which is as much live film or live gaming as it is theatre'. Lucy is keen to define the form as 'digital theatre' rather than 'Zoom theatre': digital theatre allows for 'a whole palette of possibilities that we can play with [...] there's space within that for wildly different levels of interactivity, there's space within that for wildly different levels for how an audience experiences that, of whether they're seen or not seen and what their position is within that experience'.

In the case of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the performance was conducted in Zoom, using integrated V-mix software, which enabled the production to use both live and pre-recorded footage, and to apply numerous effects to the video streams coming from the actors' homes. At times, actors appeared in separate boxes; at others, layering effects were used.

*The actors appear in boxes to  
create the feeling of a  
confessional*





## Layering effects

Whilst in many ways a digital rehearsal process echoes a traditional rehearsal process (starting with text work, moving into staging scenes, and ultimately into runs), the technology, for obvious reasons, plays a bigger role. In a traditional rehearsal process, lighting, and perhaps sound, would only come in in the technical rehearsals, just before the production has its first previews. However, in digital theatre, the technical side is present from early on in the process, with the director(s) starting to explore what the visual language of the show is, what the colour palette is etc.



*Layering effects*



Actors rehearse in Zoom, and ultimately perform in Zoom, from their own homes. They are sent a green screen/white screen, to put up behind them, and some lighting, to reduce the effect of shadows, and a microphone. They have multiple cameras that they can position in different places depending on the angle required for each scene.

During the performance, they are manually responsible for selecting which camera is active. They receive the lines of their scene partners through an earpiece — there is an inevitable delay, so actors report having to ensure they come in with their line right on the end of the previous line, so that the audience do not hear a gap.

As the actors are imagining their scene partners in the space with them, they use visual references (often post-it notes!) positioned at the right eye line for each scene. The specificity of this is part of the rehearsal process, and is crucial to making the audience buy into the experience.

One crucial difference for actors (besides the obvious challenge of not actually being able to see their scene partners), is that their playing space is often only a couple of metres wide. Movements become hugely magnified in the digital space. Actors also have to adapt their vocal dynamics, because it is difficult for microphones to pick up something that moves from very loud to very quiet quickly.





There is a certain degree of technical constraint and challenge but when asked about this, one of the actors, Giles, responds that this is always the case in acting: 'It seems a lot more technical during digital theatre when you first look at it, but actually, you're doing [lots of] those things on stage anyway, in a different way: you've got to hit a certain mark for lighting, you've got to make sure you're far enough upstage that when [something flies in] you're not going to get hit'.

Another actor, Anabelle, commented that, whilst sometimes with digital theatre there can be an initial 'yearning' to be in the same space as one's fellow actors, this production had been 'liberating', and, because of the strength of the storytelling, she felt, during the production, that she could 'really see [her fellow actors]' even when just looking at a wall, and feel as if she was in the same room as them.

*'It seems a lot more technical during digital theatre when you first look at it, but actually, you're doing [lots of] those things on stage anyway, in a different way'*



Plays for digital theatre need to have a strong through-line and *The Duchess of Malfi* worked particularly well as it has a central storyline based around a small number of characters — and Laura's cut enhanced the strong line. There's an 'intimacy' (Natasha) to it, that worked well in the digital form: you can get 'close up to the characters and you can get almost inside their heads' in this form — and given the themes of *The Duchess of Malfi*, this was particularly powerful. The digital form also enabled the directors to foreground the themes: Laura's edit made the Duchess the only female character in the play, and the digital medium made it possible 'to foreground Annabelle [playing the Duchess], in a way that would be harder to do onstage' (Natasha).



*The cast take their bow*



## Advantages to digital theatre include:

- Numerous breakout rooms during rehearsal process.
- Fast turn-around time, especially given Creation's Digital Rep company (in some ways this is more akin to an early-modern rehearsal process than a contemporary one, with shows rehearsed rapidly with a rep company, and performed in quick succession).
- It's possible to make artistic decisions very quickly — it's very rapid to change a background, in a way that a set design has much less flexibility to it; it's possible to control what the audience is looking at much more easily in digital theatre as it's not 360 degree environment.
- Actors are able to perform from the safety of their own homes (during Covid times); more generally, it's possible to bring together a company from across the country.
- There is increased access for audience members, including for those who feel less comfortable in traditional theatre settings: 'Anybody can switch on, at home, and access a play straightaway' (Natasha). This could enable theatre to reach whole new audiences — Lucy mentions the possibility of reaching care home audiences, for instance.
- There is a particular advantage in making less regularly performed plays more accessible, including to a younger audience; as actor Annabelle comments, 'we need to have classic texts in digital form because we need to get young kids wanting to watch them'.



- It brings the audience closer to the action, there are no 'cheap seats' right at the back of an auditorium, with the distancing effect that such seats can cause. Digital is a very democratic form of theatre.
- There is huge potential also for children's theatre — the excitement children feel at seeing themselves on the screen as part of the audience (Lucy comments that for young people, it can almost feel as if they have been invited up on the stage during a show).
- It is possible to reach audiences over a much wider geographical area, and even internationally: digital theatre becomes 'a conversation between actors and an audience [...] a global audience' (Natasha).
- 51% of Creation's audiences at digital shows are audiences who have not attended an in-person Creation show.
- Productions are generally cheaper to make with a bigger potential reach — therefore companies are more able to take risks.



# AUDIENCE RESPONSE

## The style of the production:

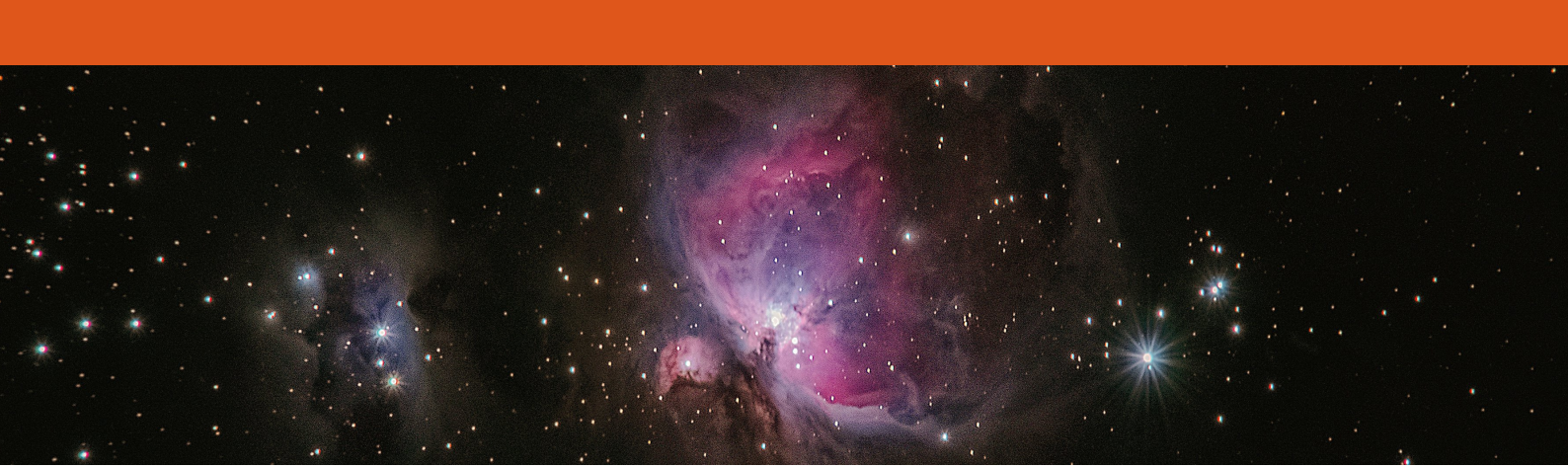
The form of the production, on Zoom, enabled Laura and Natasha to create a visual world which explored crucial themes of the play — reality/dreamscapes, thresholds and space — in a digital context. The aesthetics of the production are a key example of the way in which Laura's and Natasha's different areas of expertise creatively fuelled each other.

Creation marketed the production as ‘a delicious nightmare which plays with the boundaries of life and death, until we are no longer sure what is real’.

The following excerpts from reviews offer descriptions of how the *giallo*-concept-meet-Zoom-production translated onto screens:

'The production has a dreamlike (nightmarish?) quality to it and there's extensive use of filters which enhance that effect as we watch through mists of yellow, violet, blue and so on. There are also some film inserts which look like they come from a 1970s travelogue or one of those glossy adverts for Cinzano or Martini which were used to suggest the continental high life'.

<https://2ndfrombottom.wordpress.com/2021/03/19/the-duchess-of-malfi-online-review/>



*A scene between the Duchess and Antonio, performed live*

'Most scenes layered the actors' individual feeds on top of each other into a single colour-filtered screen, giving the impression of the characters existing in the same space — but, importantly, without ever attempting to create the illusion that they actually were together. Apart from a couple of pre-recorded scenes, the actors never appeared completely 'solid', allowing their images to overlap and bleed into one another. Wright and Rickman also played with perspective, having some characters appear in close-up whilst others were captured in mid-shots, utilising established filming techniques to distort the production's sense of reality further'.

Benjamin Broadribb <https://medium.com/action-is-eloquence-re-thinking-shakespeare/speaking-with-others-tongues-creation-theatre-company-s-the-duchess-of-malfi-db6dad8ac569>



*Layering effects with nightmarish doubling*

The other main visual language had the characters appearing in multiple coloured boxes, creating feelings of fragmentation and isolation; whilst, as the production became stranger, there were moments in which one character's image was repeated across multiple boxes, in a disturbingly warped reality.



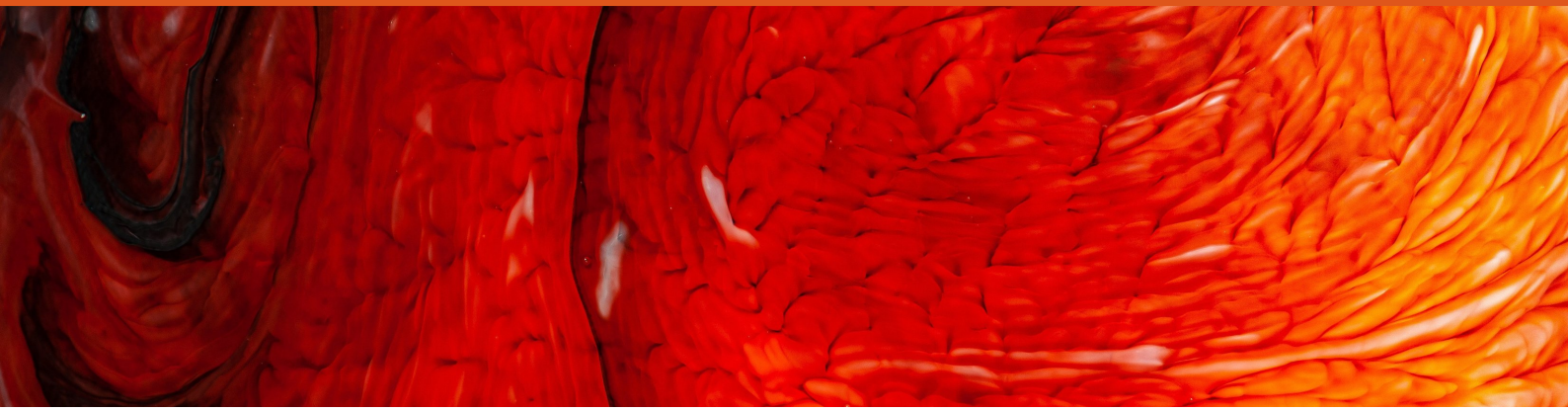
*The production explored repeated images*

Benjamin Broadribb described the approach of the production: 'utilising pop culture iconography and aesthetics to create a surreally postmodern filter through which to pass the play'.

Audiences were invited to turn their lights off and watch the show by candle light: Laura discusses wanting to create a feeling of intimacy, in a parallel to the intimacy of an early-modern Blackfriars production.

There were nine live performances, and one recorded and streamed one. Laura watched and noted every show.





## Reviews

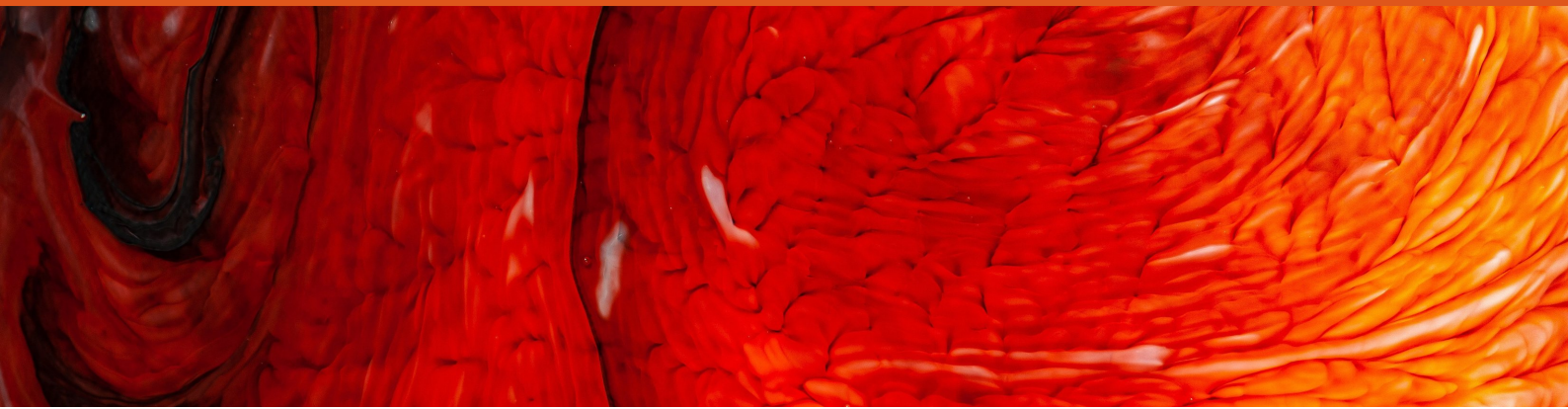
The audience ratings were high: an average rating of 4.8 / 5 when asked 'how would you rate *The Duchess of Malfi*?' (poll conducted by Creation Theatre). The production also received excellent reviews, both from traditional theatre publications and from researchers writing about it. Many of the reviews from researchers highlighted particularly how themes within the production were well honoured by its concept.

Peter Kirwan's blogpost on the production for the University of Nottingham is particularly impressed by 'the fluid spatial logic of the production... the Duchess's appearance suddenly reconceptualised the space according to the frame of the Zoom screen, literally redirecting everybody's gaze in impossible and yet immediately clear ways'. Kirwan praises the 'technically dazzling and intelligent reworking of spatial dynamics to accommodate the play to a single screen, both fragmenting and superimposing images to create relationships between characters that shift between the impressionistic and the literal'.

He commends this 'bold and audacious experiment... the most satisfactory blend of filmic and theatrical styles I've seen in this medium so far' and described the production as 'a real triumph for Creation, and a worthy addition to this play's illustrious performance tradition'.

<https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2021/03/27/the-duchess-of-malfi-creation-torch-zoom/>

*'Technically dazzling and intelligent reworking of spatial dynamics'*



Eoin Price, in the blog 'asidenotes' which focusses on 'Renaissance drama then and now' describes it as a 'remarkable production'.



*The Duchess's appearance reconceptualises the space*

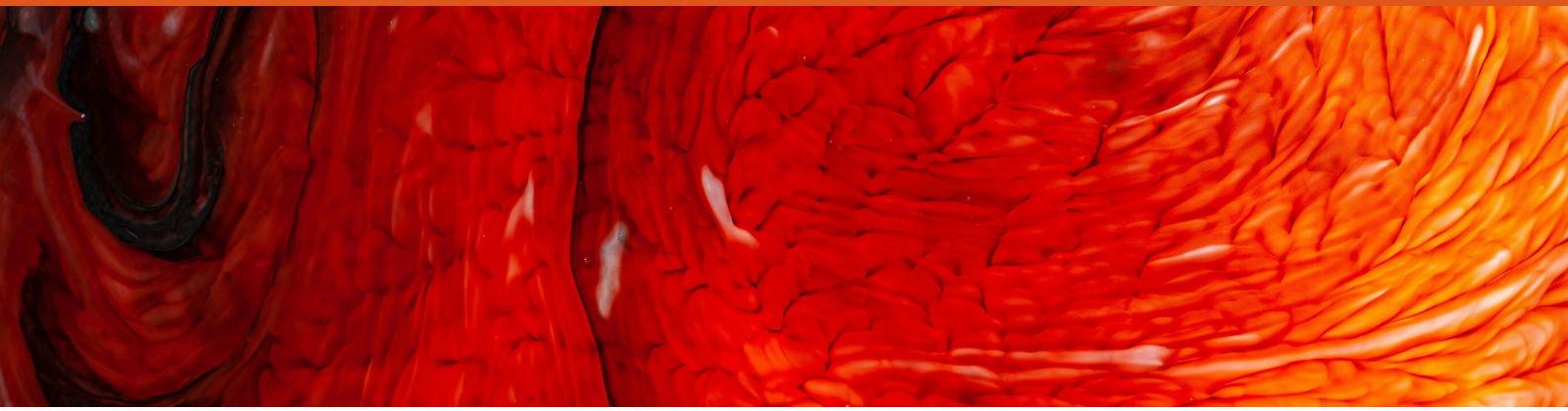
This review particularly responds to 'the brighter, bolder, brasher colours [that] remind us that tragedy happens in multicolour too', and the layering effects: 'One of the most striking effects of this socially-distanced Zoom production, was the eerie sense of ghostliness it managed to create. Initially, even simple scene changes felt like a bewitching conjuror's trick, as characters faded in and out of view.

More strikingly still, characters appeared to permeate each other. [When] the Duchess is confronted by her two brothers, in a conventional production, they might get into her personal space, but in this production, they get into her head, literally'.

<https://asidenotes.wordpress.com/2021/03/28/wretched-eminant-things/>

Exeunt highlights how the production achieves a 'fun' tone 'while still respecting the reality of violence at the play's centre', and describes it as 'a seamless blend of film and theatre'. The strength of the edit of the play was highlighted by *Exeunt*, as well as the delivery: the reviewer also highlighted the 'great attention brought to Webster's poetic lines'.

<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-duchess-malfi-online/>



Benjamin Broadribb was particularly impressed by the aesthetics and the popular culture references, seeing visual links to Andy Warhol (where the filters and boxes which 'had the impact of transforming the entire scene into a living work of pop art'), Quentin Tarantino and Italian crime thrillers

*Newbury Today* more specifically compares it to 'the many lurid horror films of Dario Argento, with touches of silent movies with scenes bathed in monocolours'.

<https://www.newburytoday.co.uk/news/the-duchess-of-malfi-an-italian-horror-story-9194350/>

The *My Theatre Mates* review also responds particularly strongly to the visual language and concept: 'Visually the production is a treat and deploys some clever video trickery in Stuart Read's bold choices partly inspired by the giallo thrillers of Italian fiction which appeared in yellow covers'.

<https://mytheatremates.com/duchess-of-malfi-creation-theatre-online-review-john/>



## Audience reach

### *Scope of audience*

A mark of the success of the collaboration is the reach of the production: audience numbers totalled 653 devices booked across the run. In addition, 381 Free Tickets were issued across 21 schools, universities and drama schools.

The production had international reach: there were bookings in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the US.

Anecdotal evidence from the cast's engagement with audiences suggests that the production reached some individuals who had never been to the theatre before.



### *Engaging audiences with research*

Laura and Creation produced two key learning resources for students: Laura took part in a podcast about the production, hosted by Creation Theatre on their website, and she created an education pack, with information on the play's context, themes and language. Both will remain online indefinitely.

Creation Theatre, working with Charisma.ai, also created an avatar of Laura, who was available to audiences before the show to answer their questions about the play and the rehearsal process. Topics with answers programmed included the cultural background and imagery of the play, as well as more playful answers about the rehearsal process (including about the recipe for blood in the show!). This avatar used sophisticated AI technology, and the answers were written in Laura's voice, enabling audiences to connect with an Oxford researcher. There are further opportunities for use of this technology in both academic and digital theatre contexts.



### *Expanding Creation's reach*

Through the collaboration between Oxford and Creation, the production was able to reach a large number of different audience demographics, including groups which each organisation would find more difficult to reach on its own.

The collaboration with TORCH enabled Creation to reach Oxford students, through Laura's Oxford colleagues sharing information about the project with their students, through the English Faculty mailing list and through advertising through the Oxford Centre for Early Modern Studies. The engagement of Oxford students with the production was further helped by scheduling the show during term-time.

The collaboration has also enabled Creation to reach a wider academic audience — through a strong early modern academic community, very active on the internet and social media, and reached partly through Laura's connections. This has been enhanced by digital theatre enabling reach to an international audience. There was a post-show discussion group between researchers on Zoom, which took place on 27th March 2021.



The ability for Creation to collaborate with Oxford additionally enabled them a wider reach in terms of reaching schools, with support from the English Faculty Outreach Officer. Lucy, from Creation Theatre, comments that their partnering on the project was 'invaluable' for the wide reach to school audiences.

The collaboration between Oxford and Creation thereby gave the production a wide reach, from theatre-going audiences, to new audiences engaging in digital theatre, to schools, university students, and early modern researchers. This wide reach was a distinct benefit of the collaboration, with each partner organisation able to complement the reach of the other.



# PROJECT IMPACTS

## Outcomes for Laura

In the time-pressured world of academia with teaching commitments and the need to publish, researchers have to weigh up the potential benefits of each collaborative opportunity. This project has clearly offered multiple further outcomes for Laura, both in furthering her research and in building her career as an Early Career Researcher. Her experience on the project provides a case study of the potential benefits to an academic career of public engagement projects and knowledge exchange collaborations.

### Events/papers

- Laura and Lucy spoke about the production at the knowledge exchange series hosted by TORCH, 'Adventures in digital: making performance in lockdown'.
- Laura spoke as part of a class on Shakespeare in the Pandemic, invited by Professor Stephanie Shirilan at Syracuse.
- Laura spoke about the production at the Sound Affects II Conference at University of York in April 2021.
- This production is being reviewed for *Shakespeare Bulletin* by Gemma Allred and for the journal *Shakespeare* by Benjamin Broadribb.





### *New publications*

- Laura is currently writing an article on laughter within the play. In this article, she plans to draw directly on the work done in rehearsals on toxic masculinity, especially in working with the actor Dharmesh Patel on the character of Ferdinand.
- Laura is also thinking about the play in relation to horror, and horror movies, as part of a wider prospective project, envisaged as her second book.
- Laura is also working on a separate piece about digital theatre.

### *New areas of research*

- Laura has made new connections that have moved her towards research into digital theatre practice, an interest in reception, an interest in film studies, and to thinking about the digital medium. She describes the process as having reframed the way that she sees her own research, pushing her faster through a journey that she was already on in terms of thinking about plays in different mediums.
- Laura sees the process as having created the sort of new connections that might usually come about through publishing a monograph. Laura's monograph is currently being developed but is not out yet. *The Duchess of Malfi* is her first piece of work that many of her colleagues have seen.
- The production provided an opportunity to talk to other scholars, whom she might not have met — or certainly might not have met this year given the pandemic and how this has changed the landscape of conferences.
- The production of the report itself has offered Laura time for reflection on the process which has been a valuable part of her development.

## Outcomes for partners

### *A notable digital production*

- This was the first time, as far as the team is aware, that *The Duchess of Malfi* has been performed in digital form.

### *Trying out new ideas*

- For Natasha, the production has enabled her to trial a language of overlapping images in the digital space that she is taking forward into her next digital production, *Romeo and Juliet*.

### *Developing creative practice*

- The project has enabled some of the younger members of the company, who had not worked with classical text so much previously, to have a detailed, rigorous introduction to working with this material.
- Actors discuss feeling empowered to take this use of research forward into their next projects: really understanding the text 'made it feel so solid for me' (Anabelle); Anabelle says she wishes that she could work with a researcher on every project, but when she's not able to do so, she will try to find ways of bringing research more strongly into her own practice.

*'Really understanding the text  
made it feel so solid for me'*

### *Planning future academic/ theatre collaborations*

- Natasha feels that she has discovered an academic community; it has encouraged her to look to work with scholars and specialists in the future.

### *Developing digital theatre technologies*

- Creation Theatre are looking to continue the use of avatars as trialled with *The Duchess of Malfi*, to enhance their learning offer to audiences.
- The project allowed Creation to continue to explore the potential of digital theatre, especially with lesser-known texts
- The project has encouraged Creation to explore the benefit of producing less-performed plays, especially in a digital theatre context; the excitement from the academic community, and the presence of students coming to see it, have shown Creation the potential of producing texts not conventionally considered to be 'big hitters' (Lucy).



## FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Both Laura and Lucy discuss the value of having built from a smaller piece of work — *Henry VIII* — to a bigger collaboration, ensuring mutual trust. Lucy comments that it was because she knew Laura's work already, that she felt confident to trust her with the role of co-director. Lucy remarks, 'I think it's about finding the right project, the right piece of work and the right researcher'.

Creation had a pre-existing relationship with TORCH, and invested in the new relationship with Laura over time. Similarly, Laura has known of and admired Creation's work since she was an undergraduate, and so there was a pre-existing creative connection.

Finding the right collaborators for the project was also crucial. The decision to approach Natasha Rickman to co-direct was key: her personality, collaborative process and experience as a theatre maker all made her ideally equipped for a project of this nature.

*'I think it's about finding the right project, the right piece of work and the right researcher'.*



## ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

Laura encourages other researchers to feel confident in reaching out to partner organisations, and states that there are multiple other ways to engage that are less substantial than her co-directing involvement.

For those interested in working on literary texts/ theatre, possible other forms of involvement include, but are of course not limited to:

- Writing a piece for a programme
- Running a workshop — perhaps where actors come in and explore a section of text and then a researcher offers an accompanying lecture
- Offering a talk or a Q&A alongside a production
- Working as a text specialist/ research specialist on a production
- Working with actors on a reading rather than a full-scale production (as Laura did for Henry VIII)

The examples are of course not limited to theatre, and similar ideas work well in multiple different academic disciplines.

Laura advises researchers to start with the question of what they want to interrogate and then to ask themselves how working on it in a different way might enable them to explore that.



## FINAL THOUGHTS

From all sides, this was a very fruitful collaboration, with each party expressing the desire for there to be similar opportunities in the future. The value of having a researcher embedded within a rehearsal process was clear to see.

Often the scheduling of modern theatre productions — with only three or four weeks of rehearsal — makes it very difficult for actors to have the time to do as much research as they might like into the piece they are working on. Having access to a scholar's research through their presence in rehearsals enables a depth of understanding that is otherwise almost impossible to achieve within a rehearsal process. On the other side, this project has provided Laura with the opportunity for invaluable research in practice, which has already (two months after the end of the production) led to tangible research output and career benefits.

The success of this project prompts further exploration of collaborations between theatre and academia. How might it be possible to regularly embed knowledge exchange both at the heart of the professional rehearsal room and scholars' working processes? And what opportunities does the digital space specifically offer for furthering such collaborations?



# APPENDIX

## Theatres Seed Fund

The TORCH Theatres Seed Fund - now the Humanities Knowledge Exchange Innovation Fund - is open to Oxford researchers. The fund's key objectives are to:

- Develop new, and consolidate existing, research collaborations with the Creative Industries, the Heritage sector, and Theatre & Performance partners.
- Increase the number of researchers actively engaged in knowledge exchange projects with these priority themes.
- Illustrate innovative and entrepreneurial practices within Humanities research engagement and collaboration.
- Provide an opportunity for researchers to trial and experiment ideas and develop collaborative projects and demonstrate the breadth of collaborative opportunities across different disciplines.

Examples of activity funded in the past include contributions towards rehearsal and performance space, research assistants, dramaturgs, videographers, scriptwriters, photographers, directors, actors, consultants, production materials and travel. Interdisciplinary projects with the wider Creative Industries are encouraged

[Further information can be found here.](#)