



Digital Theatre



**Suggestions and recommendations for
publicly funded theatres, policy makers
and funders at the local, national and
European level**



This paper distils ideas and recommendations for Digital Theatre.

It has been six years since ETC last published policy recommendations on digital theatre. In 2018, following the conclusion of the two-year international project ‘European Theatre Lab: Drama Goes Digital’, ETC urged theatres and policymakers to explore the artistic possibilities of digital on stage – and to find the time and resources for experimentation with digital technologies.

The intervening years have seen a dramatic change in the relationship between European theatres and new technologies. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, theatres now have considerable experience distributing work online, increasing accessibility for audiences around the globe that were previously blocked by cost, geographic, or health-related barriers. While we now have a more nuanced vocabulary for analysing digital theatre – work is either digitally distributed, digitally mediated, or digitally located – some artists still see digital theatre as overly expensive, or the source of additional challenges about digital rights and responsibilities.

On top of this, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now a compelling matter for European theatres to consider, as is the issue of online discoverability – or working out how to introduce audiences to find digital theatre while they enjoy the TV streaming age. Public funding is at risk of falling around the continent, and artists are increasingly aware of their limitations in the context of the climate crisis.

We have therefore created new policy recommendations on digital theatre for theatres, funders, and EU policy makers. They draw on ETC’s cutting edge research ‘Digital Theatre Strategies and Business Models (2023)’, conducted during our three-year programme for European theatres, co-funded by the European Union “TRANSFORMATIONS – Recharging European Theatre for Audiences” 2021-24). They are also deeply informed by ETC’s participation in ACuTe, the Creative Europe-funded project on new technologies and the performing arts; the Opole Recommendations policy document; and the Harvard University’s Digital Access Research Project (DARP) on accessibility of theatre in a digital climate.



Publicly-Funded Theatres

Reaching Audiences with Digital Productions

- » Continue to develop interactive digital content that fosters community engagement. Host virtual talkbacks, Q&A sessions, and behind-the-scenes tours to create immersive experiences for audiences.
- » Utilise multiple digital platforms, including streaming services, to reach diverse audiences. Implement user-friendly interfaces and ensure content is accessible to individuals with disabilities or health conditions.

Ensuring High Quality of Digital Productions

- » Allocate budget for high-definition cameras, sound equipment, and editing software to ensure professional-grade digital recordings.
- » Collaborate with experts from outside of the theatre field, particularly from academia and adjacent worlds of film and video games.

Training Theatre Professionals in Digital Techniques

- » Implement regular training sessions for staff on the latest digital tools and techniques. Partner with educational institutions to provide certification programs in digital theatre production.
- » Encourage knowledge sharing among staff through workshops, seminars, and collaborative projects.

Futureproofing the Sector

- » Highlight the unique value of human creativity in theatre, which cannot be replicated by AI. Promote storytelling, emotional engagement, and improvisation as key strengths.
- » Use AI to enhance, not replace, human work. AI can assist in areas like lighting design, sound engineering, and audience analytics without compromising well-established human skill sets.
- » Invest in energy-efficient technology and production practices. Use digital platforms to reduce the carbon footprint of physical touring.



Policy Makers and Funders at Local and National Levels

Supporting Audience Reach and Engagement

- » Offer grants for theatres to develop innovative digital content and purchase high quality digital equipment to expand audience reach – with attention to sustainability.
- » Facilitate partnerships between theatres and technology companies to enhance digital infrastructure and capabilities.

Investment in Training in the Age of AI

- » Fund training programs for theatre professionals to learn digital skills, ensuring the workforce is prepared for the digital shift.
- » Promote policies that emphasize the irreplaceable role of human creativity and ensure AI is used to complement rather than replace theatre professionals.

Digital Rights and International Collaboration

- » Work towards harmonizing digital rights regulations across countries to facilitate smoother international collaboration and distribution.
- » Launch campaigns to educate theatre professionals about their digital rights and how to exercise them in a digital context.



Policy Makers at the EU Level



Enhancing Audience Reach

- » Develop EU-wide digital platforms for theatre productions, allowing cross-border discoverability and accessibility
- » Promote digital cultural exchange programs that allow theatres to share productions and collaborate internationally.

Investment in Resources and Professional Development

- » Create EU grants specifically aimed at digital theatre initiatives, covering both production and training costs.
- » Fund EU-wide training programs to upskill theatre professionals in digital techniques and tools.
- » Fund and promote green digital initiatives that reduce the environmental impact of theatre productions.
- » Develop a unified EU framework for digital rights in the creative sector, simplifying cross-border collaborations.

Working in the Age of AI

- » Develop regulatory frameworks that ensure AI is used to enhance human creativity rather than replace jobs in the theatre sector.
- » Establish innovation hubs to explore AI's role in theatre, focusing on augmenting human roles.



Conclusion

In general, funding and support schemes at all levels should bear in mind that continued development of digital theatre techniques requires the space – and support – for experimentation.

The **policy recommendations** in this document set out the European theatre sector's needs in detail, particularly in a context of ongoing cuts to public funding, recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the climate crisis. They draw on ETC research and documents like the Opole Recommendations, the policy outcome from the European Theatre Forum in 2023, to make clear recommendations for theatres, funders, and EU policy makers.

The **recommendations** are faithful to several key concepts. Expanding digital accessibility and community engagement is crucial, which must be supported by further investment in technology, revised funding programmes, and more training for theatre professionals. As digital distribution to an international audience is only set to increase, more attention must be paid the rights and obligations involved in international distribution. In addition, sustainability must not be considered a separate concern from digital development, and human creativity must be emphasised while artificial intelligence is further integrated into theatre.

By implementing these recommendations, we aim to ensure that the theatre sector thrives in the digital age, while preserving the unique human creativity that defines it. ETC aims to fight for these requirements in upcoming programmes and advocacy actions.

About ETC

As the largest network of public theatres in Europe, ETC has 63 members from 31 countries, reflecting the diversity of Europe's vibrant cultural sector.

Founded in 1988, ETC promotes European theatre as a vital platform for dialogue, democracy and interaction that responds to, reflects and engages with today's diverse audiences and changing societies.

ETC fosters an inclusive notion of theatre that brings Europe's social, linguistic and cultural heritage to audiences and communities in Europe and beyond. Powerful and professional ETC governance ensures that the network will thrive and grow, taking into consideration the latest trends and developments.

The ETC's current three-year programme of activities, "TRANSFORMATIONS – Recharging European Theatres and Audiences in a Post-Covid World", offers Member Theatres many opportunities and project possibilities. This comprehensive, groundbreaking programme is supported by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union.

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