

This article was downloaded by: [Manchester Metropolitan University]

On: 16 September 2011, At: 09:30

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Performance Research

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

### Here, There and In-Between: Rehearsing over Skype

Peter Petralia

Available online: 15 Sep 2011

To cite this article: Peter Petralia (2011): Here, There and In-Between: Rehearsing over Skype, Performance Research, 16:3, 113-116

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2011.606036>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## Here, There and In-Between Rehearsing over Skype

PETER PETRALIA

My rehearsals, until recently, have been constrained by my ability to gather a group of collaborators together at the same time and in the same geographical place. Over the past several years, however, technologies have developed that have upended my notion of what a rehearsal is and, importantly, where it takes place. With the advent of technologies like Skype, iVisit and TokBox, which allow multiple people to gather in a single e-space despite being in disparate geographic places, previous spatial barriers to collaboration are no longer as relevant. In my recent PhD I dedicate a chapter to a discussion of what the implications of these technologies might be on the conception of the rehearsal space. In this article, by discussing a recent collaboration, I provide a glimpse of how these technologies are impacting the potential for collaboration, participation and synchronization across geographically disparate locations.

In 2007 I began working as a dramaturge and performance director with Tiffany Mills Company on a Skype-enabled dance-theatre collaboration called *Tomorrow's Legs* (Mills and Petralia 2009). From 2007 to 2009 we worked exclusively over Skype, except for one week in January 2009 (for *Tomorrow's Legs*) when we worked together in New York City. In our Skype sessions, the dancers and Tiffany Mills (the choreographer) would use a laptop and a camera to transmit live images and sound via Skype to me wherever in the world I was. For my part, I would connect from my own laptop with its

built-in camera. I generally wore a special Skype headset that included earphones and a small microphone, to reduce the amount of ambient noise from my office. In this way I could 'attend' rehearsals held in a variety of dance studios throughout New York City despite being in Manchester, Lancaster, London, Wisconsin or Glasgow (fig. 1). Our shared space for rehearsing was not just in New York or wherever I was; it was in New York, in my office and in the Skype-enabled space between here and there.<sup>1</sup>

Because this type of collaboration was relatively new territory for us both, we spent several months in a phase of research that

<sup>1</sup> We did eventually rehearse in the same physical location, but we were nearly a year into the collaboration before that happened.

• Figure 1. A screen-capture of rehearsals for *Tomorrow's Legs*.



<sup>2</sup> We eventually switched from using an external camera to using the built-in camera on Tiffany's laptop to limit the amount of bandwidth we were using (and therefore to increase the quality of our video).

<sup>3</sup> *Tomorrow's Legs* was created with and performed by Jeffrey Duval, Luke Gutzgell, Whitney Tucker and Petra van Noord.

<sup>4</sup> This process of repetition correlates with the way that the human brain translates perceptions into conceptualizations; through practice, the embodied brain develops an ability to understand and apprehend experiences and make meaning out of them (Heath 2006: 137).

• **Figure 2.** Close-up conversation in rehearsals for *Tomorrow's Legs*.



involved bi-weekly Skype calls, emails and the sharing of information on a private blog. During this phase, we both sat at our computers in our respective offices engaging in face-to-face dialogue. Experientially, this was relatively comfortable territory for us both: it was essentially a video call in which the image language was that of the close-up. One of the imperfect aspects of using Skype to communicate is that it is virtually impossible to look the person you are speaking to in the eyes because of the position of the camera in relation to the screen (the camera would have to be directly in the centre of the screen to correct this). In face-to-face communication, eye contact can be a powerful tool for establishing trust. In the case of our early discussion-based Skypes, we could not look into each other's eyes, but since we knew each other already and had an established trust in each other, this was not as disorienting as it might have been otherwise.

Using Skype for the early phase of this project allowed us to feel more connected to each other than might have been possible by simply listening to a disembodied voice on the other end of a phone. Being able to see Tiffany's face

on screen when we spoke meant that I could read her responses to a suggestion and that our communications had a more tangible feeling to them. Skype was not quite as good as being in the same room together, but it was far preferable to the abstraction of voice-only communication. It felt somehow *warmer* to be able to see Tiffany than it would have been just to hear her. This warmth could be attributed to what Biocca, Harms and Gregg call 'mediated social presence ... moment-by-moment awareness of the co-presence of another sentient being accompanied by a sense of engagement with the other (i.e., human, animate or artificial being)' (2001: 2). In other words, in our Skype collaborations we felt present with each other because of the way in which we engaged.

We planned the next phase of our collaboration to work as follows: I would 'attend' rehearsals via Skype one to two times per week depending on my availability, and then Tiffany and I would have separate Skype conversations to process what had happened in rehearsal. We also discussed technology and planned to use a high-quality external video camera connected to Tiffany's laptop to transmit the video to me.<sup>2</sup> In these early rehearsals the external video camera allowed Tiffany to position 'me' (as the camera) in the physical dance studio in New York, while the dancers and she could see me as a talking head within the Skype video window.<sup>3</sup> On my screen I could see whatever visual information the camera picked up and as much audio as the small microphone on the camcorder recorded. We structured most rehearsals with a starting conversation where everyone gathered around the computer in the rehearsal room so we could discuss the day's goals and tasks, followed by the dancers performing various speaking and moving tasks, interspersed with reflection on the tasks and concluding with a wrap-up conversation where everyone again gathered around the computer.

The logistics of my presence in the room on screen meant that we were not able to work as quickly as either Tiffany or I expected: the mere

fact of continually having to gather around the computer, combined with the many times when I had to ask that sections be repeated because I could not hear or see, slowed us down enormously. This slowing down was frustrating, but it contributed to a deep engagement with the material as we were constantly repeating, reviewing and re-articulating what it was that we were experiencing in rehearsal if only so that I could get a better view of the material.<sup>4</sup> While repetition is a feature of many rehearsal processes, the reason for our repetition (and our slowing down) came from a functional and technological impetus instead of an artistic one: we were not repeating for the same reasons that we might have in a 'normal', face-to-face rehearsal (to revise, revisit and learn material). Instead, we were repeating as a direct result of the spatial environment we were in. The technology insisted that we repeat, simply so that I could see and hear the material being developed.

At each rehearsal one of the first tasks we would do (after our group discussion around the laptop) was to set out the boundaries of the camera's view in the dance space. Tiffany would position the laptop and then ask the dancers to walk through the space to define what the camera could see. This meant that an entire area of studio space did not exist in our telematic rehearsal room because it could not be captured on screen. And, of course, the dimensions of the telematic rehearsal room were constantly shifting both within rehearsals and between them: the laptop was sometimes moved while the dancers rehearsed to allow me to see areas that were outside our defined borders, and the dancers moved to different dance studios in New York throughout our process, which meant that some rooms were larger than others. There were also times when the noise of the city or the complexity of the sound score (between music and speech) was so complex that the physical shape of the performance had to adjust to the realities of our telematic space. In these instances, the dancers would move closer to the

laptop camera to allow me to hear or see them better (fig. 2). Sometimes they came closer to see me better as well: often it was easier to *show* the dancers what I was referring to by attempting to perform their moves or demonstrate a physical relationship for them on screen. The impact of this spatial reworking was that the material itself was in a constant state of shrinking and expanding to fit the needs of the Skype process. The end piece contained sections in which the dancers would come quite close to the audience and directly address them, as in a *question and answer* section that was sequenced near the middle of the final piece. It is possible that this section would never have been created had we not been rehearsing telematically.

Because I was travelling during our early rehearsals, and because I was not physically present in the rehearsal room, travel and distance found its way into the content of the piece. For example, one of the earliest tasks I conceived was for the dancers to respond to a long list of cities, which included places they had never been or heard of before. The dancers were asked to imagine what happened in these places by inventing a story that could have happened to them when they were there. From this exercise we discovered *real* stories from the dancers' pasts that related to specific locations. Although the list of cities never appears in the final piece, many of the stories that we developed from our investigations of geography do.

We also played with blindfolds partly as a response to my growing feeling that I was impaired in my ability to fully sense everything that was happening in the rehearsals. The blindfolds found their way into the final piece as a symbol of one dancer's difficulty in facing his past. In the final piece, the performer Luke Gutsgell told the story of an older family friend who had made inappropriate sexual advances on him. This section was performed partially blindfolded as a way of representing Luke's fear of telling the story live on stage.

Tiffany described the impact of Skype on our creation process as forcing us to articulate clearly

what we were working on at any given time (Mills 2010). Because Skype limited our ability to experience the physical performances of the dancers, we had to describe verbally what was happening and how it felt in the room. A focus on being able to succinctly articulate the work verbally was a challenge and an opportunity. Both of us were able to speak to presenters and funders from the very early stages in a way we might not normally have been able to, about what we were making, but the relative flatness of the video meant that what I experienced was not always in synch with what was happening in the studio in New York. Because I was watching rehearsals at a remove on video, often not live but on our blog, I was constantly concerned that the material we were creating felt like it was all of the same texture, like it lacked dynamism. As a result, I pushed Tiffany and the dancers to work at the extremes, which meant that the end performance had less subtlety and more sharp edges than it might have otherwise had. This turned out to be a good thing. Only after visiting a series of rehearsals in person was I able to fully appreciate the dynamics in the material.<sup>5</sup>

Skype, then, altered our process, our articulation of what we made together and our conception of where a rehearsal takes place. To be clear, I am not advocating for replacing one-to-one interactions in a shared physical space with an Internet-only rehearsal process. There are many problems in working without the benefit of shared spatial understandings, including the unreliability of the technology and the limits the video introduces to our ability to sense the 'feeling' of material. However, used properly, videoconferencing can be a useful tool for collaborating with artists who are geographically dispersed. If the choice is to use a slightly imperfect set of technologies to facilitate working together or not to work together at all, then I choose the former. Especially as travel costs rise and the environmental impact of air travel becomes more problematic, the Internet seems the (im)perfect tool to allow collaboration across great geographic distances.

<sup>5</sup> More details about this piece, including a description of what happened when I visited New York, are included in my PhD dissertation (2010).

#### REFERENCES

- Biocca, F., Harms, C. and Gregg, J. (2001) 'The networked mind's measure of social presence: Pilot test of the factor structure and concurrent validity', 'Presence 2001', 4th International Workshop, Philadelphia: Temple University (May).
- Heath, Shirley Brice (2006) 'Dynamics of completion', in M. Turner (ed.) *The Artful Mind: Cognitive science and the riddle of human creativity*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 133-50.
- Mills, Tiffany (2010) Discussion about Skype *vis-à-vis* 'Berries and Bulls', conversation with the author.
- Petralia, Peter S. (2010) 'Reshaping Spatiality: Cognitive perception and the fracturing of theatrical space', PhD dissertation, Lancaster University.
- Tiffany Mills Company (2009) 'Tomorrow's Legs', perfs Jeffrey Duval, Luke Gutschell, Whitney Tucker and Petra van Noort, dirs Tiffany Mills and Peter S. Petralia, New York: Danspace.