Digital Humanities and Theatre Studies: From Fragility to Sustainability

Zafiris Nikitas¹

¹Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Published on: Jul 18, 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/f1f23564.2fd86f1
License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0)
The use of digital humanities in theatre studies has been evolving rapidly during the last decade, leading to multiple online projects and conferences, such as the ones of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR). Theatre historiography and performance studies implement digital tools in order to create searchable databases and apply cultural analytics to promote accessibility and revitalized hermeneutics. However, these projects are quite susceptible to the “planned obsolescence” pointed out by Kathleen Fitzpatrick (*Planned Obsolescence*), as they often become stale or get lost in the plethora of online information. As a result, the viable advancement of this subfield requires a constant dialectic on the practical as well as theoretical aspects that will enhance inclusion and academic growth. My scientific interest and experience in the field through my recent projects and research acts as a compass for the possible solutions leading to the formation of a theory model on the subject. Researching the use of digital humanities (DH) in theatre studies, I detected a methodology gap that needed to be addressed. This requires two separate endeavours:

1. The formation of projects that use visualization as a means of interpretation, as Johanna Drucker pointed out (See *Visualization and Interpretation*) and
2. an overview and review of selected case studies where DH methods are applied in theatre studies.

A series of points that led my research were formed in the beginning of the process. These initial inquiries (which took into consideration the accessibility and usability of metadata, geospatial mapping, and textual mining in theatre studies in Europe, and North America) addressed the need to form sustainable methodologies and suitable digital tools. The institutional participation on the subject (meaning the open scholarship and the funding by universities, the European Union, and public and private research centres) were also taken under consideration in order to form “a sociology of digital futures” concerning theatre studies, not just a theoretical model in vitro.

In the process, I had to communicate with multiple DH communities around the world. This dialogue informed my critical outlook and illuminated practical considerations. I also had to research (along with related scholarship) online journals dedicated to DH, such as *Digital Humanities Quarterly, Digital Studies/Le champ numérique, IDEAH*, and *Early Modern Digital Review*. In order to select a series of case studies, I had to ask the necessary research questions: Are the digital resources that appear in my field of interest sustainable? Are they active or static? How do they relate to the needs of pedagogy and higher education? How do they relate to Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s frameworks? That is, are they doomed to “planned obsolescence” and are they the fruit of “generous thinking” (*Generous Thinking*)? How can we re-evaluate their function? And, lastly, what is the model I could propose in order to pinpoint a suitable approach of the scholarship to DH in theatre studies? These steps led to the synthesis presented here.

In this article, I look into the use of DH in theatre studies and propose a framework that can lead from fragility to sustainability. First, I provide the background of my research and an overview of the scholarly field. Afterwards, I focus on selected digital resources on theatre history (which I have used as a scholar and which
are seminal contributions in the field) to illuminate their uses. After examining these case studies, I propose an open scholarship framework for DH in theatre studies called the Accessibility, Research, and Collaboration (ARC) model. By prioritizing accessibility, research and collaboration, this approach stresses the need to connect academic communities of theatre studies in Europe and North America in order to advance sharable and specified research desiderata that apply to the global needs of the communities. The endeavour demands a link between policies and methodologies (Huculak 1; Siemens and Arbuckle). Initiatives around the globe, such as the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) Partnership in Canada, have already taken major steps in this direction (Siemens and Sayers 154; Lane 9; INKE). Additionally, this prospect reinforces a future where scholars showcase a systematic “willingness to engage the public” and take into consideration the bridging of academia and society (Fitzpatrick, Generous Thinking 148). I should also note that my recent contact with the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) at the University of Victoria in Canada, and the welcoming dialogue by participants and by its director, Ray Siemens, expanded further my article’s outlook.

**Digitizing + Theorizing**

The application of DH in theatre studies through multiple projects in North America and Europe has led to the emergence of a theoretical perspective on the subject through seminal recent contributions (Carson and Kirwan; Tompkins et al.; Mackenzie and Martin). The roots of this inquiry can be traced back several years. In the early 2000s, for example, the groundbreaking *Companion to Digital Humanities* edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth included a relevant chapter on performing arts written by David Z. Saltz. Saltz focused on the prehistories of database analysis from the late 1960s and the possible contributions of computers to scholarly and pedagogical endeavours (121–132). Reading this approach from the current perspective makes us realize the major changes in the digital landscape that took place during the last fifteen years.

Making a leap forward, in 2015, Debra Caplan published her article “Notes from the Frontier: Digital Scholarship and the Future of Theatre Studies.” As she noted, the implementation of DH in theatre studies bears the potential to tackle issues very specific to this field, which includes both the study of history and the documentation of performance (347–359). For example, the ephemerality of the theatre phenomenon—although inevitable in terms of the live event—can be dealt with through digital means. In this respect, I would add that the performative nature of theatre and performing arts in general enriches (and reframes) our understanding of digital tools as performative entities. Theatre and digital humanities face the same challenge: the entropy of transience. Finding ways to document a fleeting phenomenon such as theatre correlates with the demanding task of turning desolate DH projects into intertwined research matrixes that stand the test of time.

The impact of DH is clear not only in the documentation of contemporary performances but also in the reconstructing process of the fragmented past into a solid narrative through the lens of theatre historiography. Sarah Bay-Cheng has underlined the major challenges that rise in the case of digital archives. Our ability to revisit a historical record changes our perception of it, leading to novel hermeneutics. The continuum from
history-as-record to history-as-event is, in a way, shattered. As she notes: “recent documentation and digital technologies have complicated this seemingly straightforward processes by which we locate the available documents, how we reconstruct the event from historical evidence, and the very characteristics of the documents themselves” (Bay-Cheng 27).

The inevitable ramifications of digital media on theatre historiography call for a new research mentality that balances the lurking dangers with the emerging prospects. Scholars, more often than not, seem to suffer a destabilizing experience in the liminal transition to the digital era in theatre studies. This new—inescapable—reality of swift changes in the documentation and evaluation of historical evidence calls for an open and multifaceted dialogue on the digital revolution that allows the data mining of virtual archives while it detracts from the safety of embodiment. The DH taxonomies rising in performance studies are closely related to use of new media (Bay-Cheng et al.).

The growth of theory perspectives becomes clear through the constant recontextualization and specialization on the subject. Sparse articles with initial remarks led to collected volumes tackling holistically the present and future of DH in performance arts. In 2018 Nic Leonhardt—a scholar that contributed to one of the case studies we will examine—edited the *Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities in Theatre and Performance*. Addressing a wide array of themes, the *Routledge Companion* framed DH as a new paradigm of the field and discussed the impact of digital media on theatre pedagogy, historiography, and criticism. The gradual theorizing of the subject develops questions (and pending answers) on a pressing desideratum: the formation of informed methodologies.

**Case Studies: From London to Toronto**

My research on theories and applications of digital tools in theatre studies led me to use and evaluate a series of online resources in order to “excavate” hidden drawbacks and the crucial advantages. Reviewing these paradigms sometimes required the implementation of their tools in my personal research in theatre studies and—at other times—contact with the principal investigators of the projects. Simultaneously, my critical approach was informed by the literature on similar endeavours as well as another seminal field that is becoming increasingly important: theoretical models of DH. In order to cast a wide net—and thanks to the kind suggestion by Luis Meneses—I selected case studies that span across the Atlantic, from London and Munich to Toronto, Ontario.

An early example of a digital resource on theatre is *Shaksper*, which was formed in the 1990s and developed into its current form in 2011 thanks to its current editor, Hardy Cook. The resource, which bears the subtitle “The Global Electronic Shakespeare Conference,” is an international email distribution list for discussion among Shakespearean researchers (Cook, “General Information”). It focuses on announcements of conferences, calls for papers, seminars, lectures, and publications. The community of the website also hosts artists (such as actors and poets), leading to an interdisciplinary perspective and dialogue. In addition, the
special features of the resources include a series of useful tools such as the Tour of Internet Resources that focuses on the Early Modern Period, the Book Reviews section (along with a relevant panel), and the Selected Guide to Shakespeare on the Internet. The materials included in the Archive for the site have been regularly cited, which offers useful insight into Shakespearean bibliography (Purcell; Lloyd; Rollett). This digital resource is an example of an implementation of DH tools for the formation of a community that focuses on a specific topic. It is a conjunction of a scholarly social space and an informative arena that predates the rise of the social media era. Its maintenance demands rigorous effort by the editor as the resource functions on a flow of constant information. From this perspective, it also demands the contributions of willing participants.

An extraordinary example of a digital resource on Shakespeare is the Cambridge Shakespeare, which includes the complete works of Shakespeare. The plays are accessible along with relevant essays and digitized material from the original texts. Another section of the resource, called Worlds of Shakespeare, is solely devoted to interdisciplinary essays on the Bard. There is also a rich database of multimedia resources curated by the Folger Shakespeare Library. In addition, the Shakespeare Survey is another tool of the resource: a yearbook of Shakespeare and production. Focusing on performance, the Survey brings together reviews of major productions and charts the performatory space of Shakespeare. The resource has been used for educational purposes, for example by the California Polytechnic State University. Nicole Jacobs, a Shakespeare scholar and lecturer, turned to the resource in order to reinforce access for her students to relevant material. During the pandemic, the resource was used profusely by her students, and this led to a vital reinforcement of her class. The students could log in, for example, and study a certain scene, contextualize it in a historical perspective, and see which actors played certain roles in the past. It is clear that the resource, which can be accessed by subscription, functions as a complete academic course on Shakespeare. The data of the resource reflects the preferences of the users and offer insights into the tendencies of the public interest and the scholarly perspective on dramas as well as performances.

The online resource Theatrescapes Research-Tool was launched in 2016 by the Faculty and the Arts Department (School of Arts) of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. The project leader is Nic Leonhardt. Ambitious in content scope and form application, the project employs innovative tools from DH and historical network analysis and focuses on theatre historiography and media history. The title of the resource is inspired by the concept of the various “-scapes” that was proposed by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and embraces multiple research dimensions: ethnographical, sociological, and historical (1–10). The thematic epicentre of the resource is the so-called first phase of globalization (1850–1920), and its goal is to map cultural encounters through theatre.

This innovative tool offers to theatre scholars a relational database with a basis of geo- and chronoreferencing. This digital application allows a collection and analysis of transnational exchanges in theatre communities throughout the globe using related data from a vast pool of information. Specifically, the global map of the project includes 1055 theatre venues from 95 different countries. The map visualizes the database based on
their spatial dimension while an added histogram reflects their historic dimension. This second aspect allows a searchability of specific time periods. Information on the history, the type, and the seating capacity of the venue are also available. A second map, the “Theatre Map of Berlin,” presents venues from 1821 to 1914. This tool implements a superimposition by using a palimpsest of two discrete cartographies for visualization: a historical map (by Julius Straube) and a contemporary map (by Google Maps).

A critical view of this daring project demands the necessary inquiry. The first question I would pose—rephrasing the one posed by Randa El Khatib and Marcel Schaeben in their 2020 paper “Why map literature?”—is a *sine qua non* one: “Why map theatre?” In other words, what is the specific (and presumably necessary) contribution of geospatial humanities projects to theatre studies? The argument in favour of this study case is twofold. First, the globalized and cosmopolitan nature of theatre, which arose in the nineteenth century through travelling troupes, impresarios, and glamorous stars such as Sarah Bernhardt, becomes evident through the visualization offered by the digital tools of the database. In this respect, the use of the map produces radical “visual clarifications” of the theatre mobility of the times (Leonhardt, *Theater Across Oceans*). The second aspect, both pedagogy- and scholarship-bound, is the ability to form new research desiderata through geospatial optics. Newfound correlations are swiftly made clear through the relevant tools. The use of DH in theatre studies (in this case, as an example) is elevated due to the suitability of the thematic scope. Experimentation is, however, by no means a forbidden fruit: the maximization of digital tools demands a clarification of scientific aims.

A different route to digital evolution (in practice and—even more—in theory) was followed in the case of another online resource called the *Lost Plays Database*. Bringing together a community of scholars as editors—David McInnis from the University of Melbourne, Matthew Steggle from the University of Bristol, and Misha Teramura from the University of Toronto—the endeavour focused on a different era and primary source material of theatre studies. As its title suggests, this is an online archive of lost plays in England, belonging to the period 1570–1642. The aim of this digital forum is also very different from the one in Theatrescapes: not the inclusion of information for purposes of data mining and geospatial visualization but the collection of information on the plays through the participation of scholars. Potential contributors are not granted unrestricted access. For reasons of quality control, the process demanded the permission for contribution given by the editors.

In parallel to the formation of indexes for fascinating plays of this period, such as *Love’s Labor Won* (attributed to William Shakespeare) and *The Maiden’s Holiday* (attributed to Christopher Marlowe), the database includes selected digitization. Years, play titles, dramatists, and venues are available for eager scholars. Besides inspiring articles focusing on the findings (e.g., on the Marlowe play), the Lost Plays Database has also led to a monograph which examines the connection of DH and the drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean era. Matthew Steggle’s *Digital Humanities and the Lost Drama of Early Modern England: Ten Case Studies* (2016) is an example of further uses of digital tools in theatre studies. The principal tool for establishing information
on the selected plays is Early English Books Online (EEBO), created by the Text Creation Partnership (Steggle 1–17). The main elements that were investigated rigorously in order to form the conclusions of the research were the titles of the plays.

The importance of this approach is self-evident, but I will make it even clearer. Instead of focusing on the plays in the database, Steggle produces a methodology for the viable techniques that can be used in order to examine all lost plays of early modern England, over one thousand in number. As a result, the database becomes a paradigm for the expansion of DH in tasks where digital tools provide (possible) solutions to puzzling problems. John Lavagnino had already noted in 2012 a “digital turn” in Shakespearean Studies (14–23). The evolution of online refereed journals on the same era, such as Early Modern Digital Review, illustrate the evolution of DH (and its theoretical debate) in specified historical contexts. More than a luxury, digital tools become (in cases such as the one I examined) elemental pathways to a scientific evaluation of history documents.

As is well known, King’s College London has been a long-standing innovator in terms of DH. In collaboration with Queen’s University Belfast and the University of Oxford, theatre scholars developed an outstanding digital resource, entitled Out of the Wings, in 2018. This project is a result, once again, of a necessary pillar which I include in the ARC model, and this is none other than collaboration. Working together for three years, the institutions created a virtual environment that hosts Spanish plays from the Spanish Golden Age to modern Spanish theatre and Spanish–American theatre. Maintaining a transnational scope, the project offers a vast overview on the subject. The website includes details of the plays and the authors along with extra metadata such as sample translations, synopses, and valuable performance history.

The resource produces a wealth of information that promotes the exploration of Spanish dramaturgy by theatre practitioners and scholars. One valuable asset it includes is the formation of three major scientific approaches which are proposed, clearly outlined, and accessible on the website. These are key areas to be explored, namely: (1) translation, (2) methodologies and performance, and (3) historiography of the Spanish Golden Age. As a result, the resource offers a dual advantage: the hosting of primary sources and the proposal of hermeneutic frames that can be used in order to further the scientific research. This is an excellent example of open scholarship, which breaks the barriers of enclosed communities.

Theatre studies resources are expanding all over the world mostly thanks to the various initiatives of university departments to expand their internal and public outreach. These projects are either accessible to the wider public or function within a specific community. Multiple endeavours serve pedagogical needs within academia and choose (due to reasons that obstruct shareability such as intellectual property laws) to offer their content to a selected audience. For example, the Digital Theatre Plus project at Queen’s University includes a plethora of resources, including films of Shakespeare, modern plays, and learning resources that provide tools such as language analysis, relationship maps, historical context, performance background, and character analysis.
(Queen’s University Library). In this case, DH tools allow a convenience that became a necessity during the coronavirus pandemic: the immediate access to core study material.

The ARC Model

Taking into consideration the conclusions I draw from case studies such as the above in correlation with the development of my postdoctoral project on minority theatre, I formed an overview of the DH challenges in theatre studies. The purpose of this overview—which drew from my interdisciplinary background in law, sociology, and theatre studies—was to construct the basis for an informed model that could be applied in ongoing DH projects and succeed in establishing long-term functionality and sustainability. This ARC model promotes three major aspects:

- Accessibility
- Research
- Collaboration

The first aspect is the vital application of accessibility, which transforms the projects into a forum for critical thought, expansive research options, and transnational collaborations. As Lisa Jaillant argues in her recent edited volume Archives, Access and Artificial Intelligence (2021), the transformation of humanities and social sciences that is taking place through digital archives (e.g., of plays, performances, newspapers) can be reinforced by open access software for the use of data-rich methodologies (Jaillant 3–17). Building on the discoverability and accessibility of the resources is the first step towards a reframing of theatre studies in a future of shared archives and epistemologies.

The second aspect is research. This does not concern only the research on the content and the construction of the resources but—more than that—the recurring evaluative research on their functionality. Subtracting the obstacles and maintaining the benefits is invaluable for building effective, efficient, and long-term digital projects in theatre studies. Additionally, this research demands an interdisciplinary expansion and the constant retooling of the scholars’ learning horizons. Johanna Drucker pointed out that DH moves across a wide range of disciplines and integrates expertise in aspects such as data, topic modelling, data mining, and mapping, while also tackling issues of intellectual property, ethics, and privacy (Drucker, The Digital Humanities Coursebook). Staying “enveloped” in a separated science field disallows the complete engagement in DH. Constant re-evaluation and interdisciplinary growth become prerequisites.

The third aspect is the implementation of collaboration, which promotes a future global network of digital scholarship. Communal practice rises as a necessary parameter in order to transition from secluded (and fragile) digital projects in theatre studies to a nexus of sustainable possibilities. The case studies I examined have one common denominator: the formation and support of active collaborators. So, sharing is caring? Indeed. The “generous thinking” perspective in scholarship proposed by Fitzpatrick turns the academic race of antithesis into a creative process of synthesis. Scholars have pointed out that DH calls for a deeper change of
personal attitude. They promote a need for “conscious humility” (Howard) or, at least, balanced compatibility. Scholars face the challenge of overcoming the notion, as Willard McCarty noted, “that humanists work normally alone” and come across the need to connect with “the social dimension of knowledge” locally and internationally (6).

**Conclusion**

The development of an informed methodological and hermeneutic outlook on DH in theatre studies demands rigorous research and evaluation of existing and suggested projects. At the same time, it calls for a dialectic concerning the mechanisms of academic life and the establishment of parameters that lead to a dialogue between the institutions (universities, as well as research centres), that lead this evolution and break new ground. The characteristics of theatre and performance must also be taken into consideration to form modules that correspond to three challenges: (1) the live aspect of performance, (2) the demands of historiography as a narrative, and (3) the cultural poetics of past and present. This is a complex matter of contemporary theatre studies scholarship, where reviewing case studies is only the beginning in a constant process.

The case studies presented in the article showcase theatre studies as a field that demands inclusion in an interdisciplinary drive toward a digital community that focuses on common interests. From this perspective, DH functions as a platform of cultural, scholarly, and artistic interchange. On the other hand, other resources promote scholarly knowledge offering digitization and visualization of theatre material (from ancient theatres to dramas and performance catalogues). The maintenance of such endeavours relies less on the initiative of a theatre community and more on funding from foundations (such as universities and the state). The common ground in all these resources is a vibrant globalism that brings together scholars and students from all over the world. In this way, theatre is promoted as an everchanging digital archive that functions within a shared metaverse. Community and knowledge are combined.

The ARC model takes into consideration the needs of theatre studies and digital humanities and offers a specified framework that can lead from fragility to sustainability. The triptych of accessibility, research, and collaboration pinpoints the priorities of DH as a tool of scholarly evolution and communal recontextualizing of knowledge. The implementation of the model demands both the use of software tools and the training of the willing participants. This is an interplay between education and play. As Plato pointed out, it is important to maintain a balance between *paideia* and *paidia* (Jaeger). These are two Greek words with the same root that referred originally to the activity of the child (*pais*). Yet the first means “education” (connecting with discipline and structure), and the other means “play” (relating to imagination and exploration). The future of DH—which offers both great expectations and worrisome problems—demands a mentality of digital creativity and boldness, rather than a fearful way of thinking. Theatre, after all, is the art of the ethereal present. Performance is delivered and then vanishes. The tools offered by DH can lead to the understanding of theatre as a shared experience that is archived, shared, and reinvented.
In 2020, in “Introduction: Open Scholarship in the 21st Century,” Alyssa Arbuckle, Rachel Hendery, Luis Meneses, and Ray Siemens pointed out that “the practice of open scholarship” is “gaining prominence in local, national, and international contexts.” This scholarly expansion, which forms a global landscape of scientific dialectics in an unprecedented manner, is built on the foundations of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, that is, the evolution of technology and interconnectivity of the twenty-first century. The Digital Age offers renewed possibilities for theatre studies, a field that has always relished the baroque-rooted concept of *theatrum mundi*: all life is a stage—now it is a digital stage where the audience sits in front of laptops. Maintaining the understanding that the humanities bears the core of our cultural identity may help install in digital humanities what Marvin Carlson (and my father, a professor of Latin at the Aristotle University) always admired in theatre: a *conditio humana* (Carlson; Davis and Postlewait 130).

**Works Cited**


*Cambridge Shakespeare*. Cambridge University Press, 2023,
www.cambridge.org/core/publications/collections/cambridge-shakespeare.


*Digital Theatre Plus*. Queen’s University Library, library.queensu.ca/search/database/digital-theatre-plus.


*Early Modern Digital Review*. jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/emdr


INKE. inke.ca/


McInnis, David, et al. Lost Plays Database. Folger Shakespeare Library, lostplays.folger.edu/Main_Page.


*Theatrescapes Research-Tool.* [www.theatrescapes.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/#home](http://www.theatrescapes.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/#home).