

Case study: Digital Theatre

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August 2014

Overview

Digital Theatre (DT) films live theatrical productions, including opera, ballet, musicals and drama, in theatres across the UK and makes them available for purchase to a global online audience. Founded in 2008 by Robert Delamere and Tom Shaw – a theatre director and producer respectively – the service aims to create an appetite for live performance, particularly among younger audiences and those unable to get to a theatre. Using the latest technology they produce films that come as close as possible to capturing the experience of live theatre. Alongside its consumer product Digital Theatre also operates an educational service – Digital Theatre Plus (DTP). As well as access to a video of the play, DTP offers a host of educational extras, from interviews with key personnel involved in the performance through to study guides, plot summaries, deep character analyses and context for the original source material.

Digital Theatre homepage

[Source: Digital Theatre]

Background and context

Cultural organisations based on live attendance (theatrical events, live concerts, art galleries etc), by and large, have found it harder to exploit the internet as a distribution channel than screen-based media. A fundamental part of theatre's appeal lies in its ephemerality; DT aims to capture this and give theatre the opportunity to be viewed in a global auditorium. Launching its website in October 2009, about the same time as National Theatre's NT Live project, with around £1 million in investment funding, DT offered the English Touring Theatre's *Far From*

the Madding Crowd as a download for £8.99. A streaming product followed in March 2010 and after six months the site had been viewed by over 30,000 people in 107 countries. Partnerships with theatre companies like the RSC and Royal Opera House have increased the number of titles on offer, and the service is now available on a number of platforms, including iOS, Samsung Smart TV and TalkTalk's TV service. *Merrily We Roll Along*, a Sondheim musical put on by the Menier Chocolate Factory, was broadcast to over 1,000 cinemas in 12 countries, replicating the success the National Theatre has had with its NT Live arm.

DT has been built to complement the existing landscape rather than replace it, co-founder Tom Shaw notes that "it's becoming an expected extension of some of these productions. The idea that a digital production can co-exist with a live space is becoming an accepted notion in the industry."¹ DT provides theatres with an opportunity to increase/widen their audience; many productions only have a short theatrical run – DT gives these productions longevity.

Just under a year after launching the consumer website, DT launched their education arm, DTP, in August 2010. DTP is a tiered subscription service (larger educational institutions pay more for access) that offers plays to schools, colleges and universities, from age 7 upwards. DTP works closely with national exam boards to ensure that students can access study guides (character guides, relationship maps, text analyses etc.) that help them get the most out of their set texts. Alongside high quality recordings of the production itself, DTP offers additional video content, including interviews with key personnel, digging deeper into the ins and outs of the (and their) performance.

Content strategy

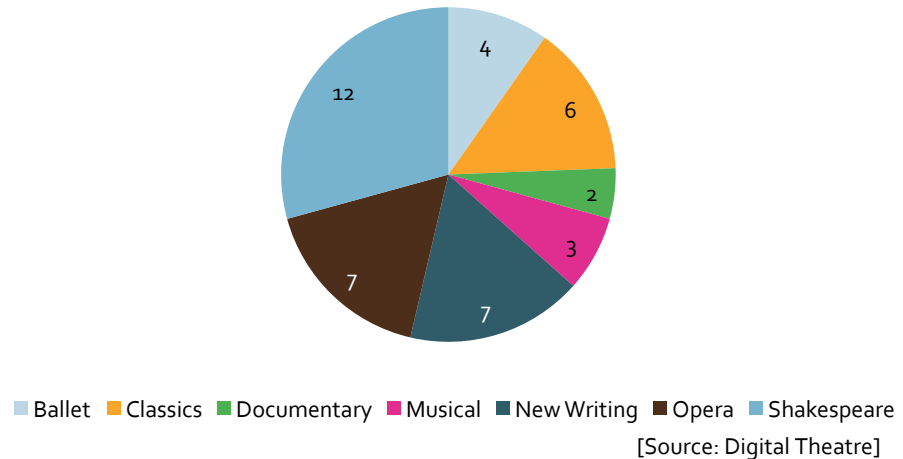
DT is on its way to becoming the destination site for online theatre performances, and its content strategy is designed to cement this position. Through careful selection of quality performances, and partnerships with 22 theatres and production companies, the site now offers 41 performances across a number of disciplines. The 41 productions are a broad range of plays (classic, modern and Shakespeare), opera, ballet and musical and they sit alongside a couple of backstage documentaries. Production quality is important – three recently released shows received 14 Olivier Nominations between them. Recent productions uploaded to the site include *Candide*, the New York Philharmonic's 2004 production of Leonard Bernstein's operetta, four titles from the Royal Opera House (Royal Ballet's *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, Royal Opera's *Dido and Aeneas* and *Hänsel and Gretel*) and *The Soap Myth*, a new production about the Holocaust put on by the National Jewish Theatre. The 22 partner companies range from West End theatres like the Royal Opera House to off-West End theatres (the Almeida, the Royal Court) and regional theatres (Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, Royal Exchange Theatre).

A major area in which DT has innovated is how the productions are recorded. Instead of filming with a few fixed cameras, DT uses multiple remote-controlled high-definition cameras to create a dynamic recording. Co-founder Tom Shaw has said, "In using film techniques to capture live theatre, we are arguably creating a new genre of entertainment – one that lies between film and theatre." This sits in a broader context of digital delivery changing consumption habits and the content offering itself: digital music downloads unbundled the album, shifting emphasis to the individual track; eBooks have made shorter forms more viable than they were

¹ <http://www.digitaltheatre.com/news/details/international-arts-manager-features-digital-theatre-robert-delamere-tom-shaw>

in print, as promoted by Amazon through their Kindle Singles format; all-you-can-eat video services have made watching entire TV series in one go possible, and in some cases this is starting to undermine the traditional release schedule – Netflix’s *House of Cards* is released an entire season at a time. While there is a limit to how much live formats can be affected in this way, it is not totally far-fetched to suppose that digital delivery could spawn new genres of dramatic material.

Number of productions available by type, 22 August 2014



Contribution to the Public Service Objectives

PSO₁ – Cultural activity

DT contributes to cultural activity within the UK through enabling new audiences to experience British drama. Its aim is not to replace live theatre, nor touring, but to make it more readily available to those for whom it is less geographically or economically viable to attend; to take theatre outside the urban environment. Productions embrace all aspects of UK theatre, from Shakespeare to Sondheim, and feature productions from across the UK. Plays are rarely broadcast on TV, though DT is proving there is a previously untapped audience for this content. DT does not aim to replace the act of going to the theatre, rather they hope to, in Delamere’s words, “create a fantastic shop window”. According to the company, 70% of DT customers say they are more likely to attend live theatre having watched a DT production.² Content such as a recording of a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Wyndham Theatre, pictured below, reflects dramatic cultural activity in the UK.

² <http://www.itechworkshop.co.uk/technology-news/interview-digital-theatre-is-bringing-the-best-of-the-british-west-end-to-australia/>

Trailer for Much Ado About Nothing

Much Ado About Nothing

by William Shakespeare

David Tennant and Catherine Tate star as reluctant lovers Benedick and Beatrice in Shakespeare's timeless comedy directed by Josie Rourke.

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[Source: Digital Theatre]

PSO4 – Education

Theatrical performance is an important part of the National Curriculum at a number of levels, and DTP provides a number of materials to support teachers in the classroom and help pupils engage with their set texts. While there are a number of educational recordings already in the marketplace, DTP piggyback on DT's recordings, recordings that have been captured in HD using multiple remote-control cameras, captured with the assistance of the original directorial team. Similar services are almost non-existent. As well as simply providing a recording of the play, DTP records exclusive in-depth interviews with each theatre production's creative team and additional materials. The complete experience is an appealing alternative to the worn-out recordings of outdated archival productions formerly used in the classroom, and removes barriers to accessibility posed by geographical location or socio-economic background.

Digital Theatre study guides

[Source: Digital Theatre]

Audience reach and profile

Though DT's main product is focused on the UK, it describes its core audience as an 18-35 year old American woman. At present, around 38% of visitors are from the USA, 38% from the UK and 24% from the rest of the world. DTP has been used by 600 institutions around the world (with a combined student population of 1.5 million), including Yale, Columbia, NYU and a school in Malawi.

DT maintains an active online social media presence, with over 7,000 followers on Twitter and 12,000 fans on Facebook. Twitter and Facebook are used as promotional tools and the occasional organised Watchalong, where viewers around the world are encouraged to watch – and Tweet about – a certain play at the same time. DT's YouTube page has 177 videos that have been viewed more than 1.5 million times to date. YouTube is used for promotional purposes (exclusive clips, behind the scenes, hangouts with the stars etc), but also as a commercial channel. Subscribers pay £3.99 a month for access to all plays uploaded to the DT YouTube channel; currently only 11 of the 39 plays in DT's catalogue are available on YouTube.

Business model and revenue

DT launched with over £1 million in investment, and in 2013 received another £750,000 from Ingenious Ventures' media investment arm, accompanied by a personal investment of £250,000 from Ingenious' CEO Patrick McKenna, who said "as well as being an exciting commercial investment, this is a cultural investment. DT is in the process of distributing – and exporting – a thriving aspect of Britain's creative industries to as broad an audience as possible".³ McKenna described the investment as being both a commercial and a cultural one. At the time of Ingenious' investment 30,000 users had purchased content, or registered for an update, and the site was receiving an average of 60,000 visitors a month.

The consumer product is available at a number of price points. The DT website and app offers the choice of renting a play for 48 hours for £3.99 or buying a play in SD (£8.99) or HD (£10.99). The DT account on YouTube page also offers a subscription product: for £3.99 a month users can stream any of the DT titles on offer, although there are only 11 titles available. DT have not made any direct consumption figures available to the public, but between November 2011 and November 2013 *Much Ado About Nothing*, starring Catherine Tate and David Tennant, sold upwards of 20,000 copies, 75% of which were outside the UK.

DTP's commercial model is different to DT's, offering an annual subscription of between £275 for a small primary school to £920 for a large secondary school. Colleges, universities and home schools pay different rates.

In most cases DT covers all up-front costs in exchange for owning sole distribution rights for the films, the main draw for arts organisations being to boost interest around their productions rather than generate immediate revenue. DT has worked closely alongside the unions (including Equity and the Musician's Union) to ensure performers and creative teams were adequately remunerated for their contributions to the productions. DT has begun paying out to partners as a result of sales, as well as advances of over £300k to actors, musicians and creative (as of November 2013). More recently DT has started to move towards co-producing hand-in-hand with the theatre or production house.

³ <http://www.thestage.co.uk/news/business/2013/01/ingenious-invests-750k-in-digital-theatre/>

Summary

Digital Theatre makes high-quality recordings of UK theatre shows available online for rental and purchase. It aims to be incremental to actual attendance at the theatre, rather than replacing it. It compares its relationship with live theatre to that between recorded and live music – “different experiences of the same thing”. It also offers tools for educators. Much of Digital Theatre’s output is aimed at those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience the theatre live. It is an example of traditional drama being supported by the new routes to market offered by the internet, and also to a limited extent an example of how new content offerings can be encouraged by online services. If it is true, as the founders claim, that Digital Theatre customers are more likely to go on to watch live theatre, then services like DT could prove a boon to the theatre industry.

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