

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DOCUMENTARY DVD — ARCHIVING THEATRE ART

Brecht argued that ‘the old forms of communication are not unaffected by the development of new ones nor do they survive alongside.’ His argument is that as modes of communication change, so must the means of devising performance. The theatre, if it wishes to be responsive to contemporary mediatized culture, needs to engage the technologies that have helped to occasion that culture.

— Matthew Causey, *Theatre in Crisis?:*

Performance Manifestos for a New Century

Taking a live theatre art piece and making it into a filmic documentary involves much more than locking a camera off in the back of the theatre and hitting the record button. In the case of *Messaging in the Noosphere* it meant planning and storyboarding, shooting the show almost daily from different angles and distances, recording additional performance vocals, and then editing the shots and mastering various versions of the documentary onto Digital Video Disc (DVD) media.

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the process of creating the filmic documentary from the live theatre art event, both *mise-en-shot* and *mise-en-scène*, describe the way in which it contributes to the spectrum of the Integrated Media Products, the manner in which it fulfills a Human-Computer Interaction, and then how it brings the total experience full circle back into an “event” by bringing an audience back in for a public screening.

DIGITAL VIDEO VERSUS FILM

There is still an ongoing debate. Which is better, film or videotape? As I see it, each is superior in certain ways and for my needs in *Messaging in the Noosphere*, there was no point in allowing any lingering arguments about the “inferiority of video” to affect the documentary’s production. I had no choice. I had access to broadcast-quality video equipment and the skill sets required to light, shoot, and edit on videotape — not to mention the fact that the cost of broadcast-quality videotape is hundreds of times less than the cost of film stock and processing.

The question is, can a digital video product be called a “film?” Many major Hollywood productions are now shot in digital video, a phenomena initiated by George Lucas’ *Star Wars* prequels, and are referred to as “films.” However, in order to avoid controversy, I will refer to *Messaging in the Noosphere* as a digital video documentary and will use “filmic” in the form of an adjective to describe an established way of presenting “time-based art” on a cinema screen.

PLANNING AND MISE-EN-SHOT

I made two primary decisions in the making of this documentary: firstly, to integrate the physical necessities of cinematography directly into the dramatic action of the theatre art, which meant the camera operator, namely myself, getting into the scenes as unobtrusively as possible during actual performance. The second thing was to “double-duty” the performance style to accommodate both the live audience and the filmic audience. This meant putting the audience’s “eyes” at the same approximate distance away from the action as the camera lens to allow a style of performance delivery that was believable as projected to a live audience, and as projected to the camera. Once those factors were decided, further considerations of mise-en-shot, a term invented by Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, came into bearing such as camera position and movement, shot scale, and the duration of shots, and, later on, the pacing of the editing.

Shooting and Camera Dynamics

Shot on a Canon XL1S video camcorder from EMMEDIA Production Society, there were, more or less, three types of shots of each scene captured to tape: a wide master shot; POV, or point-of-view reaction shots, often “over the shoulder;” and close-ups where necessary. The performance action was never interrupted and the camera was entirely hand-held. The duration of shots was determined by the conscientious effort to avoid being in the sight lines of any particular audience members for too long and a necessity to avoid collisions with performers moving through the “Noosphere” or the “Cherubim” spaces. Camera angles were decided, for the most part, by a desire to portray the most important aspects of the narrative action and the status relationships between characters were considered. An example of this is level three where the physical movements between ASAP and SatanKali were choreographed to portray shifts in status of their relationship through use of levels. This status was reinforced in the filmic version through the use of camera angles.



Figure 25 (a). ASAP at the beginning of level three using a high-camera angle.

Figure 25 (b). Low-camera angle indicating ASAP’s power shift in status through the scene.

Audio was captured during performance but was only usable when there was no other background music or sound playing from the “Integrated Multimedia” element of

the production. Therefore, voice recording was captured in an ADR (Additional Digital Recording) session, using the same camera microphone as had been used in primary shooting in order to match sound quality as closely as possible.

Post Production

Editing this videotape was a time-consuming undertaking, partly because of the relatively random videotaping of each scene due to the uninterrupted camera tactics, but mostly because of my decision to attempt to portray the audio-tactile aesthetics of the theatrical performance as closely as possible. Therefore, I needed to deliver a constant presentation of the Integrated Multimedia filmic component of the production along with the live art so that the viewer of the documentary would get as complete an experience as possible.



Figure 26 (a). HexaKali’s warning (left) as it appeared in the split-screen DVD.

The “Integrated Multimedia” appears on the left and the live theatre on the right.

The solution I evolved for this task was a split, wide-screen format where the “Live Theatre Art” is shown on the right side of the split screen and a variation of the “Integrated Multimedia” is shown on the left side of the split screen — variation because the Integrated Multimedia footage was re-manipulated from its upside-down and downside-up configuration to a more normal cinematic configuration as described in

Figure 26 (a). Compare that to the figure 26 (b) which is a comparable scene in the original “Integrated Multimedia” that ran during the performance.



Figure 26 (b). HexaKali’s warning as it appeared in the Theatre Art.

A conservative estimate of the hours spent in the Final Cut Pro editing and iDVD mastering was approximately three hours per minute of running time of the final documentary video. This was in addition to approximately three hours per minute of running time of the “Integrated Multimedia” to total about six hours per minute, or 240 hours, of editing time. However, to look on the bright side, this gave me the opportunity to connect in a new way with the project that I had taken from conception to delivery in so many media and over so many genres. Postproduction was another opportunity to play with all the elements — the characters, the narrative, the music and so on — totally in the computer this time in an intimate human-computer interaction — a human, a computer, miles of digital videotape, an editing suite, and yet another personal statement about families, and gods and love, and friendship.

MISE-EN-SCÈNE

The mise-en-scène, or visual style and action of the video’s movement, lighting and set design, was determined by the priorities and aesthetics of the theatrical production and one of the important ways that this digital video serves as a theatre art documentary is that it was not “re-shot” for the camera. However there was also a conscientious effort at

the planning stage to allow for a mutually informed production environment where the theatre art could not help but be under the influence of the technical and artistic demands of the video art. I believe that innovation was achieved in this theatre art as a result of the practical demands of the filmmaking notably in the quality of performance delivery and choreography, in lighting, and in scenographic representations.

Earlier in this research paper, I explained that the lighting affected the general theatrical *mise-en-scène* because of its absence of coloured gels, allowing for a more consistent illumination for videotaping. Also mentioned was the quality and “intensity” of the actors’ performance delivery as a result of the audience’s proximity. Not discussed, thusfar, are the scenographic representations in terms of the filmic *mise-en-scène*.

Messaging in the Noosphere was the fifth time I had used the Reeve Secondary space as a “sound stage” and each experience provided a step up on the ladder of understanding. There are advantages to using this space, for example its convenience and availability, the relatively acoustically correct sound ambiance, and the opportunity to customize lighting. However, there are also drawbacks; namely, the angle at which the overhead lights project, and the shininess of many of the black wall dividers which upstages the performances and tricks the focal length of the camera lens.

In *Messaging in the Noosphere* the scenographic metaphors of human-computer interaction — the glass doorknobs, the cellular phones, and the plasma screen positively affected not only a “rich space” for theatre art, as previously discussed, but also provided rich production design elements for the video art. These elements, supplemented by the turquoise-blue audience mats, rainbow-coloured cushions, not to mention the audience bodies, created a much fuller and complete visual style, or *mise-en-scène*, than I had previously achieved in that space. And in order to prevent the back “false wall” from reflecting light back at the camera, it was rolled back, exposing a fabric that absorbed rather than reflected the light.

ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA

To review: firstly, within the Integrated Media Series of this project, the live theatre art performance was the *event*, the “Integrated Multimedia” was a scenographic and narrative element that ran within the performance event that ran on the plasma screen. The “Web Site System” was identified as an information *service* that runs on viewer audiences’ computer screens. And finally, the “Documentary DVD” is a *product*, or commodity, that can be packaged and distributed — a stand-alone digital storyteller in the form of a convergent product of technology and theatre art that can be watched on a computer, on a TV, or on a cinema screen.

The Documentary DVD is an example of “Entertainment Media” in the form of digital entertainment. This is, more or less, what ASAP Feargod hired HexaKali services to provide for him in the three-dimensional computer in his media room, only living in the “Future of Tomorrow” as he does, his entertainment media technology comes along with fully immersive virtual-reality games, and even an ambient intelligence in the form of a God in the Machine. The real *Messaging in the Noosphere* DVD, as part of the Integrated Media Series, pales in comparison to the fictional device with which the Feargods played. However, within the theatre art script, clues can be found that tie the “Noosphere Reality Game Show” service and the “*Messaging in the Noosphere* Documentary DVD” product into the same burgeoning field of Entertainment Media.

When I wrote the script for *Messaging in the Noosphere*, I wrote a string of trendy buzzwords into the concurrent cellular telephone conversations at the beginning of level five. Since Jema and Keren were talking at the same time, I suggested to the actors that they emphasize certain words and above the general cacophony could be heard “Digital audio,” “G-wave subwoofer,” “Sound synthesis,” “Avatar creation,” “Media caves,” “VR Tech,” “Head-mounted display advertising” — pop-culture girls mouthing pop-culture clichés heading toward an “Enlightenment Workout” in the Noosphere.

If the characters of Jema and Keren were examined with a reality check after achieving enlightenment, how would their perception line up the reality of the future of Entertainment Media? I'll ask a few hypothetical questions using the words of Jema and Keren in level five ... "Are Media Caves and VR Tech huge and totally getting huger?" "Is Avatar creation worth going for?" "Should we think of utilizing head-mounted display advertising?" and "How about boom car low-frequency audio hitting the G-spot?" As the scriptwriter, and therefore creator of these young women's lives and attitudes, as well as having a sincere interest in the future of digital media, I would give their perceptions a positive affirmation. We cannot stop the march toward the future of entertainment in our market economy or the public appetite for electronic media.

The sisters identified advanced, high-end Entertainment Media Technology in their cell phone monologues, certainly more sophisticated than the tools and techniques that I used to create the Documentary DVD. Nonetheless, a few of the affinities that this product, and its contents, have to the world of Entertainment Media Technology are its use of computer graphics, non-linear digital video editing, sound design, and DVD mastering software programs — innovations that were revolutionary a few years ago but have since entered the mainstream of art and industry. These software applications, the creative theatre art content, and the experience to make them express their synergies, formed the creative nucleus of this DVD product that was produced with less than \$10,000 worth of computer equipment.

(THIS PAGE HAS THE DVD NAVIGATION FLOWCHART ON IT)

A DVD “WALKTHROUGH”

The easiest way to describe a journey through this DVD is through the use of an illustrated navigational flowchart, seen in figure 27, similar to the one constructed for the Web site system. There is a updated design sensibility expressed in the opening screens and on the cover art of the DVD, but several things remains consistent to the rest of the Integrated Media Series including the use of the faces of the role players as seen in the performance, on the Web site, on the script cover, the program, and the posters. This human element runs through the Noosphere project and is a strong continuity factor. Many of the other representational design metaphors recur in the documentary video itself including close-up shots of the cellphones, the doorknobs, and the black background. The rainbow-arch shapes are apparent again in the interface design for the DVD’s version of the “Future of Tomorrow” game.

From the main menu screen that loads automatically, whether the viewer is watching on a computer monitor screen or on a TV home entertainment system, three choices are provided — “Play Movie,” “Director’s Cut,” or “Bonus Features.” The “Director’s Cut,” is a thirty-five-minute movie that begins with a commentary of the theatre art and is a concluding choice, that is there are no further links. When “Play Movie,” is selected, it progresses the viewer either to the thirty-minute version of the movie or to a breakdown of scene selections.

If the “Bonus Features” link is chosen, the viewer has a choice of playing a simple variation of the “Future of Tomorrow” game, watching a concert excerpt from “Old Sun Storage,” the music composers for the production, seeing the preview trailer from the Web site, or reading the credits of the show. Several of these submenus break down into further screens — easiest to see by playing the DVD or looking at the illustration in Figure 27. The identified audience for this DVD is also similar to the Web site system but includes film students and enthusiasts.

Just as the Web site system, by definition, is an example of Human-Computer Interaction, the DVD is as well because many of the same principles apply. The participant/viewer/audience may be sitting in front of their computer driving the interactive experience through mouse clicks at a two-foot distance of experience, or they may be across a room from their television guiding the interactive experience through the use of a remote-control device from a ten- or twelve-foot distance. This is similar to the kind of simulated HCI interaction that Jema and Keren conducted with the computer in their Enlightenment game in level five.

THE DOCUMENTARY DVD END “PRODUCT”

The goal or mandate of this DVD project was to assemble, for archival purposes, a documentary of the theatre art, along with “bonus features” that would create opportunity and promote innovation for *Messaging in the Noosphere*. I have already described a few points of innovation included in performance style and action, audience placement, and the relationship of the lighting and the scenographic design.

However, another role that electronic media products and services can play for theatre artists is as personal portfolio pieces. Making theatre art less transitory and instantly “presentable” in this way could lead to opportunities ranging from acceptance to conferences and theatre festivals, to employment, and instructional opportunities. In addition, if performances are shot and edited in an interesting manner, broadcast opportunities may arise but since the television industry is entrenched in predevelopment-level licensing agreements, film festivals would be more obvious screening venues. In my own situation, now that I have renewed my interest in live theatre and performance as a meaningful personal artistic statement I feel I have more stories in mind to tell and I’ll have a better chance of getting them produced if I can showcase my work on DVD — a product that I can proudly show as a material manifestation of my art.

THE DOCUMENTARY DVD SCREENING EVENT

On March 23, 2004, at the Kino Bunuel at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki, Finland, the production completed a full circle by becoming, once again, an event; only this time a cinematic event that I was able to watch on a huge screen with a group of media art students and film students. I had never seen the filmic production displayed bigger than my living room TV screen and despite its warm reception from the audience, I felt that the experience was unnecessarily large, causing every camera jiggle to feel like an earthquake.

Theatre historian W.B. Worthen says of film and theatre that they are distinct genres and that the sense of “duplication” of the real theatre can give character to the filmic aesthetic. (Worthen, 2004) This aligns with my goal to archive the theatre art as a documentary rather than apply criteria of film art to create a “movie” that has its own merit. Just as these sensibilities affected the primary decisions about production values and techniques, it easily extends to preferred delivery platforms and my impression, after the Helsinki screening and its resultant “earthquake” factor, is that this documentary ought to be watched on a wide-screen television or computer monitor rather than on a cinema-sized screen.

This revisits the concept of “distance of experience” that I introduced in chapter four as it relates to audience involvement. Total audience immersion in a “big black space” theatre was possible because of the audio-tactile experience of being completely surrounded in a volumetric ambiance of sound and movement with live actors presenting believable emotional truths at arm’s length. Total audience immersion was simply not available to these people in the cinema and in the discussion held after the screening, among the comments and questions was an observation that being in the middle of the theatre was no doubt a richer experience than being in the middle of the cinema.

Nevertheless, despite my perceived faults of this filmic art in cinema-sized proportions, there was a circumstance in which a giant screen image was appropriate.

And that was during my presentation that I gave about the making of this DVD — a repurposing of this chapter of thesis material as it were. I was the actor. I was the “performer with a script” — the live human against a scenography of the main menu of the *Messaging in the Noosphere* DVD Documentary. I was the “me” in the “media” That’s how I see the cycle of this project coming to full fruition, with a final layer of believable, and truthful live presentation.

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During my process of researching the creative works of other theatre artists who have worked in innovative ways with technology, I found that reading written descriptions about their work was more important, in many cases, than reading the “words” that were spoken in performance as “playscripts.” It’s my feeling that artists who are conscientious about providing sensorial experiences in the realms of physical, visual, and aural texts would be well advised to utilize an archival medium, such as documentary video, to chronicle their art to allow pedagogical expansion — as I have tried to do for *Messaging in the Noosphere*.