# Theatre faces divide as AI avatars ignite debate over the future of live performance



The future of theatre is poised for a radical transformation, with discussions around the use of AI-generated avatars gaining traction among industry leaders. Recent proposals from the Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre suggest the integration of digital "virtual understudies," raising the prospect of on-demand performances where substitute avatars could step in for absent actors. This concept, while seen by some as a means to enhance accessibility and reduce costs, has ignited a fierce debate among professionals who fear that such technological advances could threaten the livelihoods of traditional performers.

Claire Hodgson, co-artistic director of Diverse City, emerged as a supporter of this hybrid theatre model during a recent panel discussion. She expressed optimism about the coexistence of human actors and responsive avatars, suggesting that by 2050, audiences may witness a blend of live performances and digital representations. Hodgson asserted that for cash-strapped theatres, particularly subsidised ones struggling to maintain a full roster of understudies, the introduction of avatars could be a significant financial relief. Her remarks highlight a growing interest in leveraging technology to address real-world challenges within the theatre sector.

However, not all industry figures share this vision. Director Suba Das expressed scepticism about the practical application of this technology in traditional venues, citing the constraints of existing theatre infrastructure. He observed that while modern immersive experiences, such as ABBA Voyage, have successfully deployed holographic avatars in custom-built environments, many theatres remain ill-equipped to support such innovations. Das’s concerns echo a fundamental question within the industry: can technology genuinely replicate the artistry and spontaneity of live performances?

Critics of the AI avatar initiative raise substantial ethical concerns, particularly regarding professional integrity and the essence of live theatre. Theatre blogger Carl Woodward articulated a common sentiment among performers, emphasising the critical role of understudies in maintaining the dynamic spirit of live events. He argued that the magic of theatre lies in its unpredictability, and replacing living actors with digital stand-ins risks diminishing the soul of the art form itself. This perspective aligns with broader worries shared by many in the performing arts community, which has increasingly mobilised to protect against what they perceive as the encroachment of AI technologies.

In response to the rising anxieties surrounding AI in the entertainment sector, legislative changes are starting to emerge. For instance, California recently enacted laws requiring explicit consent for the use of an actor's likeness in AI-generated content, signifying a cautious step towards safeguarding performers' rights in an evolving digital landscape. This regulatory framework aims to address industry fears about potential job losses and erosion of creative control, echoing similar sentiments expressed by union leaders of both SAG-AFTRA and Equity. These organisations represent a growing consensus among artists that proactive measures are necessary to protect their livelihoods against the burgeoning influence of AI.

Moreover, initiatives within the industry, such as the recent agreement between the Screen Actors Guild and Replica Studios, illustrate efforts to establish ethical standards for AI use in voice acting. By setting guaranteed minimum payments and requiring consent for digital voice replication, these developments showcase an increasing recognition of the need for artist protection as technology continues to advance.

The conversation surrounding AI avatars in theatre is far from settled, reflecting a broader cultural clash between innovation and tradition. Some endorse the potential for avatars to democratise access to theatre, enabling resources to be shared more efficiently, while critics warn of the risks associated with diminishing the human aspect of performance. With many performers asserting that the unpredictability and shared experience of live theatre are irreplaceable, the future landscape of performing arts remains in a delicate balance.

Ultimately, as discussions illuminate various aspects of this complex issue, key stakeholders in the theatre community must navigate the difficult terrain between embracing new technology and preserving the rich tapestry of live performance that has captivated audiences for centuries. As theatre grapples with these rapid changes, the outcomes will likely define not only its future but also the broader cultural dialogue around the role of technology in art.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-14762027/theatre-industry-replace-actors-AI-avatars.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/california-governor-signs-legislation-protect-entertainers-ai-2024-09-17/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-14762027/theatre-industry-replace-actors-AI-avatars.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://time.com/6297575/even-ai-filmmakers-think-hollywoods-ai-proposal-is-dangerous/), [[7]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/19/ai-actors-fear-sag-strike-hollywood/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.axios.com/2024/01/09/actor-union-deal-ai-voice), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-61166272)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/california-governor-signs-legislation-protect-entertainers-ai-2024-09-17/), [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/222111f4-6789-4e95-9603-2104eaab7051)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/222111f4-6789-4e95-9603-2104eaab7051)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-14762027/theatre-industry-replace-actors-AI-avatars.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://time.com/6297575/even-ai-filmmakers-think-hollywoods-ai-proposal-is-dangerous/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-14762027/theatre-industry-replace-actors-AI-avatars.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/california-governor-signs-legislation-protect-entertainers-ai-2024-09-17/> - In September 2024, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed two bills into law aimed at protecting actors and performers from unauthorized use of their digital replicas by artificial intelligence. The first law requires contracts to specify the use of AI-generated digital replicas of a performer's voice or likeness, with the performer being professionally represented during negotiations. The second law prohibits the commercial use of digital replicas of deceased performers in various media without obtaining consent from their estates. This legislative move addresses growing concerns within the entertainment industry about AI's potential misuse of performers' likenesses and broader fears about AI's implications, such as disrupting democratic processes, escalating fraud, and causing job losses. Efforts to regulate AI have faced challenges in the U.S. Congress, highlighting the importance of state-level initiatives like those in California and Tennessee.
3. <https://time.com/6297575/even-ai-filmmakers-think-hollywoods-ai-proposal-is-dangerous/> - A proposal by Hollywood producers to utilize AI for creating digital replicas of actors is being criticized by the SAG-AFTRA union for potentially replacing background actors entirely. Studios already employ AI to render scenes and characters, promising efficiency and cost reductions while raising ethical concerns. Actors and AI experts, including Tye Sheridan and Nikola Todorovic, caution against such practices, highlighting the risks to actors' livelihoods. AI tools empower independent filmmakers, allowing small-scale creators to produce highly realistic content without significant budgets. However, industry fears persist regarding workers' protections and potential widespread job losses. Prominent actors and union leaders, like Fran Drescher, argue for fair treatment and informed consent in AI usage, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding actors' careers and reputations amidst inevitable technological changes.
4. <https://www.axios.com/2024/01/09/actor-union-deal-ai-voice> - In January 2024, the Screen Actors Guild reached an agreement with Replica Studios to set guaranteed minimum payments and require consent when actors' voices are digitally replicated for voice-overs. This deal addresses concerns about AI's impact on voice actors, providing a framework for ethical AI use while supporting creators. Replica Studios positions itself as an 'Ethical AI' platform, setting a potential precedent for other studios. Video game actors have been particularly vocal about the issue. The agreement follows the introduction of significant AI provisions in Hollywood contracts, but challenges remain. Union executive Duncan Crabtree-Ireland emphasized that blocking AI technology is not a viable strategy.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-61166272> - In April 2022, the performing arts workers union, Equity, launched a campaign titled 'Stop AI Stealing the Show' to protect actors' voices and likenesses from being used without consent. The union highlighted concerns about AI generating content such as deep fakes and digital avatars, potentially replacing skilled professional performers. Equity emphasized the need for copyright law to adapt to these technological advancements to prevent actors from losing control over their work and ensure fair compensation. The campaign was supported by various artists who expressed worries about the devaluation of their work due to AI technologies.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/222111f4-6789-4e95-9603-2104eaab7051> - In March 2025, London-based AI startup Synthesia offered shares to actors who help create its AI models, a radical move in the industry reconsidering how to compensate workers who assist in training cutting-edge technologies. With a valuation of $2.1 billion, Synthesia announced a $1 million share pool to reward actors with equity for the use of their image and collaboration in product development. Actors consent to the use of their image for three years and receive payments for a day's work, with the option to stop using their appearance at any time. This initiative responds to concerns about fair pay in creative industries, where artists are often compensated with one-time fees while their work is used indefinitely. The move comes as tech leaders seek multimillion-dollar deals with media and face lawsuits over copyright infringement. Additionally, Synthesia has been criticized for the non-consensual use of avatars in political propaganda but has implemented stricter moderation measures.
7. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/19/ai-actors-fear-sag-strike-hollywood/> - In July 2023, the Washington Post reported on the growing concerns within the entertainment industry regarding the use of AI to replicate actors' likenesses. The article highlighted the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) negotiations with Hollywood studios, focusing on ensuring actors receive fair compensation and consent for the use of their likenesses and performances by AI. The article also discussed the potential impact of AI on background actors, with studios using body scans to create digital clones, raising fears of job displacement and loss of creative control. The piece emphasized the need for clear regulations and agreements to protect performers in the evolving landscape of AI in entertainment.