# Theatre faces backlash over plans to replace actors with AI avatars



The theatre industry is standing on the precipice of a significant transformation, one that envisages the stage populated not merely by flesh-and-blood actors but by digital avatars crafted from pixels and code. This bold futurism, championed by the Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre, has ignited a fierce debate among industry professionals who express concern that such technological advancements may jeopardise the livelihoods of dedicated performers.

At a recent panel discussion, prominent figures in theatre proposed the concept of "virtual understudies"—digital entities designed to fill in for actors who are absent. Proponents argue that such innovations could not only ease the financial burdens faced by cash-strapped productions but also enhance accessibility for audiences. Claire Hodgson, co-artistic director of Diverse City, is optimistic about this hybrid future. She suggested that by 2050, audiences might regularly enjoy both live performances and virtual counterparts. “It would be a massive benefit to put an avatar on stage for someone who wasn't able to perform that night due to health issues or caregiving responsibilities,” she remarked, highlighting the potential for technology to alleviate the pressures on understudies in financially limited venues.

While the convenience of casting digital replacements may seem appealing, not all industry veterans share Hodgson's enthusiasm. Director Suba Das voiced scepticism about the ability of AI to replicate the nuanced artistry of live performances. He expressed concerns over the technological constraints specific to older theatre venues, noting that many are ill-equipped to integrate advanced holographic displays as seen in high-profile productions like ABBA Voyage, which relies on a specially constructed arena to showcase hi-tech avatars.

Critics outside the panel have raised alarms that the profession's very essence could be at risk. Carl Woodward, a theatre blogger, passionately argued against substituting live actors with virtual avatars, insisting that the spontaneity and shared experiences that define live theatre cannot be replicated in a digital format. Edward Akrout, an actor and founder of ArtShield, dismissed the hybrid concept as “naff” and claimed that if performances were scripted and replayed, the magic inherent in live theatre would be irrevocably lost. He stressed the importance of opportunities afforded to understudies and the social significance of their roles, describing understudying as a vital pathway for emerging talent.

This system of virtual replacements is not occurring in isolation. Recent legislative developments in California reflect a growing recognition of the need to protect performers' rights amidst these shifts. Governor Gavin Newsom recently signed into law bills requiring contracts with artists to explicitly address the use of AI-generated likenesses, ensuring that performers are represented in negotiations regarding their digital counterparts. Similarly, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) has been vocal about safeguarding its members against the threats posed by AI, notably filing complaints against companies that employ AI to replace voice actors without consent.

As the conversation around AI in theatre continues to evolve, competition from other sectors like music and gaming poses additional challenges. High-profile musical acts such as Kiss and Donny Osmond have already begun utilising digital avatars for performances, which raises further questions about audience engagement and the market's direction. Meanwhile, video game voice actors have taken to protesting against studios employing AI models that mimic their work without fair compensation—a battle emblematic of broader labour concerns in an industry undergoing rapid transformation.

In response to these technological encroachments, some theatre professionals maintain hope that AI could solve practical problems within the sphere, with Kate Town, director of Theatre Royal Wakefield, suggesting that it could help streamline logistical issues beyond performance.

As these discussions unfold, the Society of London Theatre has yet to comment on the mounting opposition or to clarify how they envision integrating AI without diminishing the artistry that has long defined theatre. The quest for a harmonious blend of innovation and tradition remains a pressing challenge for the industry, reflecting a tug-of-war between artistic integrity and technological progress that will shape the future of live performance.

## 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)
* 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), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/california-governor-signs-legislation-protect-entertainers-ai-2024-09-17/), [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/627d9adac6d4007b3bc489e511c1beb8)
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* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://time.com/6297575/even-ai-filmmakers-think-hollywoods-ai-proposal-is-dangerous/), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/striking-us-video-game-actors-say-ai-threatens-their-jobs-2024-08-01/)
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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 the 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 without obtaining consent from their estates. These legislative measures address 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. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/california-governor-signs-legislation-protect-entertainers-ai-2024-09-17/?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://apnews.com/article/627d9adac6d4007b3bc489e511c1beb8> - On May 19, 2025, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) filed an unfair labor practice charge against Llama Productions, a subsidiary of Epic Games, alleging the company replaced actors' work by using artificial intelligence to generate Darth Vader's voice in Fortnite without notice. The union accused the company of making unilateral changes to employment terms without providing notice or the opportunity to bargain, thereby replacing unionized voice actors with AI-generated voices. This complaint comes amid an ongoing SAG-AFTRA strike against major gaming companies, which began in July following a breakdown in negotiations concerning AI's role in interactive media. SAG-AFTRA emphasized its commitment to protecting the rights of its members and their estates over digital replicas and asserted its right to negotiate over technologies that aim to replicate human performance, particularly concerning the unique rhythm and tone associated with iconic characters like Darth Vader. Epic Games has not yet responded to the allegations. ([apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/627d9adac6d4007b3bc489e511c1beb8?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/222111f4-6789-4e95-9603-2104eaab7051> - Synthesia, a London-based AI start-up, is offering shares in the company to actors who consent to the use of their likenesses for generating digital avatars. This initiative is a radical move in the AI industry, reconsidering how workers who help train cutting-edge technologies should be compensated. With a valuation of $2.1 billion, Synthesia has announced a $1 million share pool to reward actors with equity for the use of their image and collaboration in product development. Actors, who consent to the use of their image for three years and receive payment for a day's work, can opt to stop using their appearance at any time. The 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. This move occurs as tech leaders seek multimillion-dollar deals with media and face lawsuits for copyright infringement. Additionally, Synthesia has been criticized for the non-consensual use of avatars in political propaganda but has implemented stricter moderation measures. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/222111f4-6789-4e95-9603-2104eaab7051?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://time.com/6297575/even-ai-filmmakers-think-hollywoods-ai-proposal-is-dangerous/> - A proposal by Hollywood producers to utilise AI for creating digital replicas of actors is being criticised 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, emphasising the importance of safeguarding actors' careers and reputations amidst inevitable technological changes. ([time.com](https://time.com/6297575/even-ai-filmmakers-think-hollywoods-ai-proposal-is-dangerous/?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/striking-us-video-game-actors-say-ai-threatens-their-jobs-2024-08-01/> - Striking U.S. video game voice actors and motion-capture performers protested in front of Warner Bros. Games, highlighting artificial intelligence (AI) as a significant threat to their careers. These performers emphasised that AI models are being trained on their voices without consent or compensation. This action follows a broader trend of labour strikes in Hollywood, with previous strikes by union writers and actors over similar concerns regarding AI. Major video game companies such as Activision, Electronic Arts, Epic Games, Take-Two Interactive, Disney Character Voices, and Warner Bros. Discovery have been involved in ongoing negotiations. The strike advocates for the NO FAKES Act, a bipartisan bill aimed at making it illegal to create AI replicas of someone's likeness and voice without permission. Supported by SAG-AFTRA, the Motion Picture Association, and other industry leaders, this legislation seeks to address the significant risks posed by AI and protect professionals' rights in the entertainment industry. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/striking-us-video-game-actors-say-ai-threatens-their-jobs-2024-08-01/?utm_source=openai))