# Theatre faces ethical crossroads as AI avatars threaten to replace human performers



The theatre industry stands on the brink of a technological revolution, as discussions intensify regarding the potential integration of AI-generated avatars to fill roles traditionally occupied by human actors. This proposal, buoyed by advocates from leading theatre organisations in the UK, raises significant ethical and artistic questions that could reshape the fabric of live performance.

During a recent panel hosted by the Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre, industry voices expressed varying degrees of optimism and concern. Advocates for the use of digital avatars, including Claire Hodgson, co-artistic director of Diverse City, envision a future where AI can serve as 'virtual understudies.' Hodgson suggested that these avatars could provide vital support in performances when human actors are unavailable due to health issues or other responsibilities. She stated, “I think by 2050 we will have live performers and avatars. I'm not particularly worried about this.” This sentiment reflects a broader hope that AI can reduce costs and enhance accessibility in an industry often plagued by financial constraints.

However, this vision is met with resistance from many within the industry. Director Suba Das expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of AI in capturing the nuances of live acting, particularly in older venues that may not accommodate advanced technology. "Theatres are not set up in that way," he remarked, referencing the sophisticated setup of recent high-profile performances such as ABBA Voyage, which use holographic avatars within specially designed arenas to create a seamless interaction between live and digital performances.

Critics extend beyond technical limitations, pointing to the broader implications of replacing human actors. Theatre blogger Carl Woodward articulates a concern rooted in the essence of theatre itself. He argues that "live theatre is live - it's about people coming together in the same space," and warns that replacing integral roles such as understudies with avatars could strip away the soul of performance. Similarly, actor Edward Akrout vehemently denounces the idea as “naff” and “cheap,” emphasising that the unpredictable nature of live performance is what captivates audiences. He advocates for the importance of every actor's opportunity to perform, stating, "Understudying is a form of social elevation… You get your shot."

The ethical implications of using AI to replace human actors are further complicated by current discussions surrounding copyright and consent. The ongoing SAG-AFTRA strike underscores how technology has become a battleground, with actors expressing fears about the future of their livelihoods. Many have raised alarms over the practice of scanning performers’ likenesses to create digital replicas without explicit consent, prompting urgent calls for stronger protections within the industry.

A broader concern highlights the impact of AI on diversity and representation in theatre and film. Critics argue that dehumanising actors through digital avatars risks eroding the empathetic connections that are essential for storytelling, potentially leading to a less authentic artistic landscape. As one article notes, the technological advances that enable the creation of AI performers might exacerbate existing disparities in representation, thus stalling cultural progress.

Amidst these debates, there remains a glimmer of hope that AI can be harnessed to tackle practical issues within the theatre industry itself. Kate Town, director of the Theatre Royal Wakefield, remarks that while the complexities of integrating AI are many, advancements could potentially alleviate logistical inefficiencies, such as reducing wait times at bars during performances.

As conversations about the future of theatre unfold, the resolution lies not just in technological advancement, but in ensuring that the core values of live performance—the human experience, emotional connection, and authentic storytelling—remain preserved. The Society of London Theatre has been approached for further comment, leaving the theatre world to ponder whether the introduction of AI avatars will ultimately enhance or diminish its cherished traditions.

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* 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), [[4]](https://www.mixedasianmedia.com/why-ai-replacing-actors-is-a-threat-to-diversity-and-cultural-progress)
* 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.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/19/ai-actors-fear-sag-strike-hollywood/), [[3]](https://www.npr.org/2023/08/02/1190605685/movie-extras-worry-theyll-be-replaced-by-ai-hollywood-is-already-doing-body-scan)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/19/ai-actors-fear-sag-strike-hollywood/), [[6]](https://www.npr.org/2023/08/02/1190605685/movie-extras-worry-theyll-be-replaced-by-ai-hollywood-is-already-doing-body-scan)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/19/ai-actors-fear-sag-strike-hollywood/), [[6]](https://www.npr.org/2023/08/02/1190605685/movie-extras-worry-theyll-be-replaced-by-ai-hollywood-is-already-doing-body-scan)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://www.mixedasianmedia.com/why-ai-replacing-actors-is-a-threat-to-diversity-and-cultural-progress)
* 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)

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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.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/19/ai-actors-fear-sag-strike-hollywood/> - This article discusses the growing concerns among actors and industry professionals about the potential replacement of human performers with AI-generated avatars. It highlights the use of AI in creating digital replicas of actors, raising questions about consent, compensation, and the future of acting in Hollywood. The piece also touches upon the ongoing SAG-AFTRA strike, emphasizing the tension between technological advancements and the preservation of human roles in the entertainment industry.
3. <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/02/1190605685/movie-extras-worry-theyll-be-replaced-by-ai-hollywood-is-already-doing-body-scan> - This NPR article explores the practice of scanning background actors to create digital replicas for use in films and television. It focuses on the experiences of actors who had their faces and bodies scanned without clear consent, raising ethical and legal concerns about the use of AI in replacing human performers. The piece also delves into the broader implications for the entertainment industry and the rights of actors in the age of digital technology.
4. <https://www.mixedasianmedia.com/why-ai-replacing-actors-is-a-threat-to-diversity-and-cultural-progress> - This article examines the potential impact of AI replacing human actors on diversity and cultural representation in the entertainment industry. It argues that the dehumanization of actors through digital avatars could lead to a loss of empathy and authenticity in performances, affecting audience engagement and societal values. The piece also discusses the importance of human presence in storytelling and the risks of eroding cultural progress through technological advancements.
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