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*Live Performances in a Lockdown*

## Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	3
<i>Relevance of Research</i> .....	5
<i>Chapter 1: Methodology &amp; Theory</i> .....	6
<i>Chapter 2: Case Study Analyses</i> .....	11
<i>Case 1: Memento Mori</i> .....	12
<i>Sub-conclusion Case 1</i> .....	18
<i>Case 2: Romeinse Tragedies</i> .....	20
<i>Sub-conclusion Case 2</i> .....	24
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	26
<i>Works Cited</i> .....	28
<i>Appendices</i> .....	32

### *Introduction*

*“Technology made large populations possible; large populations now make technology indispensable” – Joseph Krutch*

The 21<sup>st</sup> century, at a mere two decades old it has already known a staggering number of technological advancements thus far. This increasingly rapid growth of technology continuously affects and shapes society in the way people communicate, learn, think, and interact (Allen). However, one event in particular has drastically changed and shaped the future of contemporary society, namely the Covid-19 virus also known as Corona. The outbreak of this highly contagious respiratory virus at the end of the year 2019 was officially declared a global pandemic in March 2020 (WHO). It plunged the world into chaos and despair; however, despite all the negative effects the virus has had on the world, it also marked a period of self-reflection, (re)innovation and (re)appreciation and artistic expression in different parts of the world (Karunathilake). The problems caused by the pandemic required solutions, and technological innovation played an important role in this (UN). It started various creative initiatives, initiated an increase of technological innovation and it changed the world. In the Netherlands, the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced all different types of facets of society, including the art sector, more specifically performance art. Because, since November 2020 all cinemas, theatres and museums in the Netherlands have been closed and were therefore no longer able to host any performances (Rijksoverheid). Consequently, for many live performance companies the question that has risen during the pandemic is: how to survive? With the Netherlands in lockdown people are no longer allowed to physically visit the theatre, the opera, a concert, or any other type of live performance. This forms a problem, as the very essence of performing live has always been that a performance has an audience who is physically present to experience it. This is where the subject of this thesis emerged from, namely: maintaining the concept of liveness by live performance art

acts and companies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the question that is sought to be answered in this research is “How do live performance acts and companies maintain an experience of liveness during the lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic?”. The method that will be used to try and answer this research question is a multiple case study that will be conducted, based on relevant literature regarding the topic. Namely, two different cases of Dutch online theatre performances have been chosen. The first one is *Memento Mori* by Nineties Productions and the second one is *Romeinse Tragedies* by Internationaal Theater Amsterdam. For each case study two sub-questions are sought to be answered. The first one is: “what elements does the concerned case contain that contribute to the liveness of the performance?”. The second one: “how do the defined elements that contribute to the liveness of the concerned case differ from the traditional form of live theatre performance?”. Maintaining the concept of liveness by Dutch live performance art acts and companies during the Covid-19 pandemic as research, is about how two different live performance companies and acts maintain their liveness through artistic and technological innovation during this period.

Firstly, performance is defined as something that only has a life in the present, something that “cannot be saved, recorded or documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan 146). Furthermore, “performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated”, nonetheless, it can be performed again, but this repetition is per definition different (146). Secondly, the concept of ‘liveness’ is defined as something that is brought to you as it really is, consequently creating a feeling of “being there” because the time of the event corresponds to the transmission (Feuer 14).

*Relevance of Research*

The thesis subject and research are relevant to the field of arts and culture, to the creative industries and technology, as it is treating a very actual topic. Namely, the way live performance art acts and companies manage to maintain the concept of liveness in their performances during the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, how they have turned the digital technological developments of an ever-increasing technological society to their benefit. Especially now, during the COVID-19 pandemic the world is experiencing, in which many people are forced to make more use of technology due to restrictions with regards to the pandemic. Adding to that, due to the restrictions during this period lots of live performances are compelled to change the way they are performed or otherwise potentially cancelled. These irreversible changes and the adaptation of technology in all aspects of life in society are the result of a continuously transforming world, which also means that it is likely for many of the changes to stay (Anderson et al.). Furthermore, this research contributes to mentioned fields by exploring on how important technological developments, such as live streaming, affect live performance art.

### *Chapter 1: Methodology & Theory*

This first chapter will provide the theoretical framework and methodology that will be used to do the actual analysis in Chapter 2. It will discuss important theories within the fields of live performance art and digital technology by consulting sources from the fields' main authorities. The methodological approach of this research is a multiple case study consisting out of two different cases that will be analysed on the base of relevant theories regarding the concepts of liveness and performance. The studied theory will help define the cases' liveness. The focus will be on the temporal and spatial dimension of the performance, its audience, and the performers themselves.

The first source is the book chapter "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction" from Peggy Phelan's book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (146-166). In this chapter she discusses the very essence of what is considered 'performance', namely she states that a live performance is something that only has a life in the present and "cannot be saved, recorded, or documented...once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (Phelan 146). Adding to that, she states that a performance can be performed again, but when this occurs the repetition itself, is per definition different (146). So, the concept of the repetition of the performance being different from the previous time it was performed, is what characterizes it as a live performance. Therefore, in a strict ontological sense, performance is nonreproductive, as it implicates the real through the presence of living bodies (148). Phelan compares performance art spectatorship to consumption, as she suggests that there are no leftovers, because the gazing spectator must try to take everything in (148). With these distinctive characteristics comes the vulnerability of charges of valuelessness and emptiness, but the strength of being independent from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically (148-149). She claims that

“Performance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward” (Phelan 149).

The second source is the book chapter “Live and technologically mediated performance” from Philip Auslander’s book *Part II – Body politics: the individual in history* (107-119). In this chapter, Auslander gives a definition of live theatre performance by quoting Kaoime Malloy, namely as being different from all other forms of theatrical presentation because it is live, this is considered the traditional view of live theatrical performance (107). Moreover, this traditional view suggests that live performance is “founded on an opposition between the immediate and the mediated”, where film is considered mediated and theatre unmediated (Auslander 107). For example, an audience witnesses theatre actors in the moment of performance but see performances by film actors long after the actors have done their work (107). Nonetheless, he does state that “Live performance is historically defined in that both our experience of liveness and our understanding of what counts as a live performance change continually over time in response to the development of new media technologies” (Auslander 109). Adding to that, he states that “culturally, the categories of technologically mediated performance and live, unmediated performance are not mutually exclusive” and that many performances blend elements of both, consequently blurring the distinction between the two (Auslander 109). Especially now, in modern-day times where technology plays a significant role in everyday life. Because of this, Steve Wurtzler suggests that “one can better understand live and technologically mediated performance in terms of a set of temporal and spatial variables in the relationship between performers and audience than as a settled binary opposition” (Auslander 109). To clarify this, Wurtzler has created a table containing these different variables, an example of this can be found in Appendix 1. Position I in Wurtzler’s table, temporal simultaneity, and spatial co-presence, is what Auslander refers to as “classic liveness” (Auslander 110). Position II,

temporal simultaneity, but spatial absence, is what Auslander refers to as “live broadcasts” (110). Position III is a third term that is worth considering in this context, namely “live recording”, this is when “the audience shares neither a temporal frame nor a physical location with the performers, but experiences the performance later (this is what Wurtzler calls “temporal anteriority”) and in a different place from where it first occurred” (Auslander 110). Position IV, temporal anteriority and spatial absence, is everything that is recorded, such as movies and previously recorded radio and television (110). The concepts “live broadcast” and “live recording” suggest that the definition of what is considered live has “expanded beyond its initial scope as the concept of liveness has been articulated to emergent technologies” (Auslander 110). Adding to that, Nick Couldry proposes two new forms of liveness: “online liveness: social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major Web sites, all made possible by the internet as an underlying infrastructure” and “group liveness: the ‘liveness’ of mobile group of friends who are in a continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting” (Auslander 111). Auslander states that liveness, in this case, is understood as an experience that is “not limited to specific performer-audience interactions; it is the feeling of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated co-presence with others known and unknown” (111). Even though Malloy and Couldry agree on the premise that liveness is about real-time interactions among human beings, their respective understandings of the concept contain crucial differences (Auslander 111). According to Malloy, the essence of live performance is unmediated contact between performers and audience, which demands physical co-presence, while Couldry emphasizes on the temporal dimension rather than the spatial one, as he states that liveness is the sense that one can be in contact with others at any given moment, regardless of distance (Auslander 111). So, in “Live and technologically mediated performance” Auslander defines what liveness in theatre entails

both traditionally and in modern-day times, therefore it is a solid base for analysing and assessing the liveness of the chosen theatre performances as cases.

Another source that has been consulted is the book chapter “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology” from Jane Feuer’s book *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology* (12-22). This book chapter, as the title already reveals, is mostly about the concept of television, but one of the most important elements regarding television, is liveness. Feuer refers to the concept of liveness as something that is unmediated and lives off the instantaneousness and uncertainty of the moment (13). Exactly this is the similarity between live television and live performance art, in that they share the concept of liveness, namely from a technological and perceptual point of view both live television and live performance art are live as events are transmitted as they occur (13). Nonetheless, regardless of this similarity, considering Wurtzler’s table live television would still not fall in the category of “classic liveness”, but in the second one, namely “live broadcasts” (Auslander 110). Feuer simplifies the concept of live and liveness by defining it as something that is brought to you as it really is, consequently creating a feeling of being there because the time of the event corresponds to the transmission (14). Moreover, she states that live is characterized by the uniqueness of it only happening once (15). This corresponds with what Phelan states regarding performance, namely that it cannot be repeated and that when it does it per definition is different (146).

Lastly, the research article “Theatre Audiences and Perceptions of ‘Liveness’ in Performance” by Matthew Reason has been consulted. In this research paper, Reason “employs techniques of discourse analysis to explore empirically originating understandings of how live theatre is constructed as live by audiences today” (Reason). Meaning, in this paper the method of discourse analysis is used to assess what makes theatre a live performance art. Discourse analysis here is defined as an analysis of language and the

meaning beyond the sentence, in this case looking for meaning by taking bigger chunks of texts or the text as a whole, as opposed to merely a single sentence (Tannen). He states that it is often presented as central to its definition that theatre is performed live, especially in contrast with non-live performances such as films or certain television programs (Reason). Nonetheless, there has been little research conducted on how different forms of performance might be experienced differently by audiences, largely due to the subject's elusive nature (Reason). Furthermore, he discusses Phelan's and Auslander's arguments regarding the concept of liveness by comparing them to one another. For example, where Phelan defines performance as ontological, Auslander argues that performance is historically contingent. Moreover, Reason highlights different techniques that can be used to contribute to the perception of liveness by audiences, such as the synthesised version of clapping hands at a performance or a large screen showing replays at a sports event or at a rock concert (Reason). Adding to that, he states that within performance theory the relationship between memory and the ephemeral event is often presented as central to the experience of live performance, it defines itself through the work of living memory (Reason). Eugenio Barba builds on Phelan's theory by stating that "the unrepeatable nature of live performance places particular emphasis on the present moment of its experience and subsequently on audience memory in a manner that is distinct and different to that of the inherently reproducible non-live performance" (Reason). The participants of the research, despite their preference for non-live performances that they have spoken out, did construct theatre as temporally unique in a different way than non-live performance (Reason). Moreover, the research indicates that the experience of liveness by an audience is socially established rather than experientially produced. However, in conclusion, Reason does state that in order to draw valid conclusions more research on this topic needs to be conducted in the future.

## Chapter 2: Case Study Analyses

In the introduction the research itself, including the methodology, has been explained together with necessary background information, and in the first chapter the relevant theories regarding the research have been highlighted and explained.

This chapter will be the actual analysis of the two mentioned case studies. Each case study will be analysed by going through the same two steps, namely by answering the sub-questions. The first step will be assessing the concerning case its liveness based on the mentioned theoretical framework, by answering the question: what elements does the concerned case contain that contribute to the liveness of the performance? The second step will be defining how these elements and techniques differ from the traditional form of live theatre performance, where the audience and the performers share a spatial co-presence, through answering the question: how do the defined elements that contribute to the liveness of the concerned case differ from the traditional form of live theatre performance?

As mentioned in the introduction, this research consists out of two different live performances as case studies that will be analyzed and compared, based on the discussed theories. The two cases have been chosen carefully, as they are great examples of creative outputs during the Covid-19 period and both are relevant and actual theatre performances with similarities and differences. The first one is *Memento Mori* by the Dutch theatre company Nineties; this live theatre performance is about celebrating the passing of things and an ode to the transience of human life. This theatre performance was created during one of the lockdowns in the pandemic and especially designed for an online audience and makes use of various digital performing techniques, the most prominent one being the green screen (Nineties Productions). However, this theatre performance can, when Covid-19 rules and regulations allow it, also be attended live physically in the theatre. The reason for choosing this particular performance, is because it was created especially as an online live performance

and its unique combination of live and non-live elements, on which will be elaborated more later in this chapter. Adding to that, *Memento Mori* also is a performance that I have experienced myself.

The second one is *Romeinse Tragedies* by the Dutch theatre company Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, which is a modern-day adaptation of three of Shakespeare's *Roman Tragedies* and tells the story of four important individuals in Roman times and their political games and issues. This theatre performance was originally created years before the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, but during the pandemic it has been adjusted and digitalized so that people are now able to watch it online via a livestream. The adjusted and digitalized version has therefore never been played offline, by offline is meant played live in the theatre with the audience physically being present, as it was specifically created for an online audience (van Hove). The reason for choosing this performance as a second case is because the original performance has been adapted to be performed for an online audience, so that it could still be experienced as live during the lockdowns.

#### *Case 1: Memento Mori*

The first case study is on the theatre performance *Memento Mori* by the Dutch theatre company Nineties Productions. This nomadic theatre company's kern consists out of five people who often work together with different performers, musicians, and visual artists from what they call the 'Nineties-family' and thereby continuously creating new temporarily artist collectives (Nineties Productions).

The description of the performance *Memento Mori* provided by Nineties Productions themselves is that it is not just a theatre performance, but a cross-over between performance, dance, music, poetry, and web-art that is constructed and performed live for an online audience (Nineties Productions). As mentioned before, this performance was mainly created

for an online audience, due to the lockdown because of Covid-19. However, it can also be attended live in the theatre when rules and regulations allow for it. Important to note here, is that the online and 'offline' (the live theatre version where the audience is physically present) version of the performance differ visually. In this performance, two digital technologies play a major role, namely the chroma key or green screen and the livestreaming service Zoom. These two techniques are used throughout the entire performance. The former, the green screen, is typically used in the film industry and generally not within live performance art, as it often requires editing and only works with a screen. It is, however, this green screen technology that makes the performance *Memento Mori* unique. As with the online performance, one can see the effect of the greenscreen but nothing else, as where the offline version shows both versions. Namely, when attended live in the theatre, the online version (with green screen effects) is shown simultaneously on a screen hanging above the stage, so that the audience can experience how the performance is being created live in front of them (offline) and see the difference between the performance without the effect of the green screen and with the effect of the green screen at the same time. The second digital technology is the livestreaming service Zoom, which allows for the performance to be watched live online and it also provides the audience with the possibility of interacting. As everyone who is watching the performance online is in the same Zoom call and has their own little window in which they can move around freely and even comment in the chat box without disturbing the performance. Hence, creating an immersive and interactive performance where the audience can partake in, albeit from a distance.

The first sub-question is: "what elements does *Memento Mori* contain that contribute to the liveness of the performance?". The second sub-question is: "how do the defined elements that contribute to the liveness of *Memento Mori* differ from the traditional form of live theatre performance?". To answer these questions for the performance *Memento Mori*,

the theories discussed in Chapter 1 must be consulted. Firstly, *Memento Mori* is not recorded, saved, or documented and can only be seen at the very moment the performance is given. Phelan states that a live performance is something that only has a life in the present and cannot be recorded, saved, or documented and that when it does, “it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan 146). According to this definition, one could say *Memento Mori* is live, simply because of the fact it is not being recorded. However, one could argue that strictly speaking because it is being streamed live via Zoom, it would not be considered a proper live theatre performance, as the possibility of someone recording the performance without anyone else noticing it is present. As Phelan states that in strict ontological sense a performance is nonreproductive (148). When someone would happen to record the performance, then it becomes reproductive and thereby immediately does not measure up to Phelan’s classic definition of performance anymore. Hence, the question whether *Memento Mori* can be considered live remains, at least according to Phelan’s definition of performance.

According to Feuer, the definition of liveness is something that is unmediated and lives off the instantaneousness and the uncertainty of the moment (13). This is the case with *Memento Mori* because the performance can only be seen at the very moment it is given. Moreover, she compares live television and live performance art in that they share the concept of liveness, as from a technological and perceptual point of view both are transmitted as they occur (13). Anything that happens during the performance *Memento Mori* is directly transmitted to the audience, regardless of their location. For example, another element that Zoom adds to the performance as an experience is the fact that the audience can see all the other spectators throughout the performance, as everybody is asked to turn on their webcam. Arguably, this contributes to the overall experience of liveness by the audience, because of the possibility of seeing the entire audience throughout the show. Opposed to the theatre where one cannot longer see the rest of the audience when the performance starts, as the

lights are turned off. The audience are urged to mute their microphone during the performance, so that it will not be disturbed by any unwelcome noises. This immersive and interactive element within the performance is likely to provide the audience with a strengthened sense of liveness, as the audience themselves can interact with the other spectators and the performers can see every single spectator too. Adding to that, after the performance the performers do not only talk to the audience, but with the audience. This interaction, the communicating and mingling of the performers with the audience is a unique characteristic of live performances. The only thing that could stand in the way of this direct transmittance and interaction would be technological malfunctions, such as an inadequate internet connection.

An interesting part of the performance *Memento Mori* is what Nineties Productions themselves already refer to as a cross-over between performance, dance, music, poetry, and web-art (Nineties Productions). Because Auslander gives a traditional definition of live theatre performance by Malloy, namely that theatre is different from all other forms of theatrical presentation, because it is live and that it is founded upon a binary opposition between the immediate and the mediated (Auslander 107). Malloy also states that the essence of live performance is unmediated contact between performers and audience, which demands physical co-presence (Auslander 111). According to this definition, *Memento Mori* could only be considered live to those who are attending the performance in the theatre where they are physically present in the same space as the performers and cannot be considered live to those watching it online due to a lack of co-presence. However, Auslander also states that “culturally, the categories of technologically mediated performance and live, unmediated performance are not mutually exclusive” and that many performances blend elements of both, consequently blurring the distinction between the two (109). Especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, because of which technology plays an increasingly significant role in everyday

life. This blending of live and non-live elements is also the case with the performance *Memento Mori*. For example, the combination of the use of the green screen, which is considered to be a technique typical for mediated performances such as film, and the interaction of the performers with the audience, which can only happen with live performances. Steve Wurtzler points out that the definition of what is considered live has “expanded beyond its initial scope as the concept of liveness has been articulated to emergent technologies” (Auslander 110). Therefore, Wurtzler suggests that “one can better understand live and technologically mediated performance in terms of a set of temporal and spatial variables in the relationship between performers and audience than as a settled binary opposition” (Auslander 109). When looking at the Wurtzler’s table in Appendix 1, the elements that the performance *Memento Mori* contains are present in both Position I and II. Namely, those who are watching the performance at the theatre and are physically present fall in the category of Position I, which is considered as classic liveness, as there is temporal simultaneity and spatial co-presence. Those who are watching the performance online fall in the category of Position II, which is referred to as live broadcast, as there is temporal simultaneity but spatial absence. So, there is a division between audience members, namely those who are categorized in Position I, to whom *Memento Mori* is considered live according to the traditional view of liveness by Malloy, and those who are categorized in Position II, to whom *Memento Mori* cannot be considered live according to Malloy’s traditional definition of liveness. Nick Couldry proposes two new forms of liveness: “online liveness: social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major Web sites, all made possible by the internet as an underlying infrastructure” and “group liveness: the ‘liveness’ of mobile group of friends who are in a continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting” (Auslander 111). One could argue that the performance *Memento Mori* falls into one of these new forms

of liveness, namely the group of “online liveness”, as everyone in the audience partakes in the Zoom livestream online and has the possibility of interacting with one another through the chat box. Liveness in this case is “not limited to specific performer-audience interactions; it is the feeling of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated co-presence with others known and unknown” (Auslander 111). The latter is what is occurring during the entire performance because it is interactive, and the audience is in constant connection with one another. So, although Malloy and Couldry agree upon the premise that liveness is about real-time interactions among human beings, the case of *Memento Mori* clearly shows the crucial differences in their respective understandings of the concept.

There are several techniques that can be used during a performance to enhance the perception of liveness by the audience, one of them is hanging up a big screen above the stage where the performance takes place, as the audience then will have a clearer view on the performance and the performer(s) (Reason). This is basically the case with *Memento Mori* to those audience members who are watching the performance live in the theatre, as a big screen is hanging above the stage where the audience that is physically present can see the online version of the performance. Yet, in *Memento Mori* the green screen allows the performers of Nineties Productions to play out and create images online that they would never be able to create when they would perform solely offline. Because of this, an almost cinematic effect is created for the online audience. Due to this effect, a feeling of distance for the online audience might be created, in the sense that it might feel as if it is not happening live, but as if it has been pre-recorded or mediated. Consequently, taking it further away from a live experience of the performance and bringing it more towards an experience of a mediated performance. As Auslander defines it, the performer/audience relationship is mediated by the camera and the rest of the filmic apparatus, as where in theatre this relationship is seen as

direct and unmediated (107). Mediated here, is defined as something that has been influenced for it to be able to happen (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary).

My personal experience regarding this performance, as I have seen the performance *Memento Mori* physically at the theatre, was that seeing the performance online is quite different from seeing it offline. Because solely focussing on the online streaming version gave me the feeling as if I was watching live television or a film rather than a live theatre performance. As opposed to solely focussing on the performers right in front of me and not looking at a screen, which gave me the feeling of watching an traditional live theatre performance. Though, I must admit that I had the feeling that *Memento Mori* is more about spectacle, to distinguish itself as something new and fresh, rather than the concept of liveness being the highest priority of the performance.

#### *Sub-conclusion Case 1*

Case study 1: *Memento Mori* is a theatre performance that has been created for an online audience, however, it can also be experienced whilst being physically present in the theatre. Because it is intended as an online theatre performance, multiple digital techniques are used, the most important ones are the green screen and the livestreaming service Zoom.

*Memento Mori* would be considered live according to Phelan's definition of performance when looking only at the fact that it is not being recorded. However, strictly ontologically speaking, simply because of the possibility of someone secretly recording the performance whilst watching it online, there is a chance that the performance becomes reproductive, and consequently does not longer measure up to Phelan's definition of a live performance. According to Feuer's definition of liveness, *Memento Mori* can be considered a live performance, as everything transmitted as it occurs. Moreover, the interaction between the audience and the performers during and after the performance *Memento Mori*, which is a

unique characteristic of live performances, enhances the sense of liveness of the performance. Yet, when looking at Malloy's definition of live theatre performances, *Memento Mori* would only be considered live to those who are watching the performance live in the theatre, and not to those who are watching it online. Because the audience that watches the performance online is not physically co-present with the performers. However, Auslander states that liveness is historically contingent and that its definition changes. Hence, Wurtzler created a table helping to better understand and define live and technologically mediated performances. When looking at Wurtzler's table, *Memento Mori* could be categorized in Position I & II, respectively standing for classic liveness and live broadcasts, as it contains elements of both. This entails that there is a division between those watching the performance live in the theatre and those who are watching it online. Namely, according to Malloy's definition to those who are watching the performance live in the theatre, Position I, it can be considered a live performance. But to those who are watching the performance online it cannot be considered a live performance. Nonetheless, *Memento Mori* does fall into the, by Couldry newly proposed, category of online liveness. The use of Zoom makes it an interactive and immersive performance because it allows the audience to interact with both the performers and other spectators, consequently contributing to the perception of liveness by the audience.

Concluding, whether *Memento Mori* can be considered a live theatre performance depends on which definition of live and liveness is used. According to the traditional definition of liveness it cannot be considered live, but according to more modern definitions it can.

### *Case 2: Romeinse Tragedies*

The second case study is on the performance *Romeinse Tragedies* by Internationaal Theater Amsterdam. This renowned Amsterdam based theatre company consists out of twenty-one actors and ten directors and are one of the leading theatre companies in the Netherlands (“ITA-Ensemble”). On yearly basis, Internationaal Theater Amsterdam produces a high-quality program with up to 600 pluriform national and international theatre and dance performances (“About ITA”).

Originally, *Romeinse Tragedies* was an almost six-hour long live theatre performance that was solely performed in theatres in the Netherlands, but after continuing success and winning multiple prizes it was also performed in several major cities around the globe (“romeinse tragedies”). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, during which people were no longer allowed to physically visit the theatre, the chief director of Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, Ivo van Hove, created an online version of the performance that is suitable for livestreaming (“Romeinse Tragedies”). Just like with the original offline version, people who want to see the performance buy their tickets online and an hour in advance they receive a link with a password to the livestream (“ITALive”). Adding to that, like in the theatre and with the performance *Memento Mori*, also *Romeinse Tragedies* is not recorded, documented, or saved in any way. Because of its popularity and success, the Dutch public broadcasting company VPRO decided to create a ten-part adaptation of the performance in collaboration with Internationaal Theater Amsterdam especially for television, which even can be watched online for free (“Romeinse Tragedies”). This ten-part television adaptation is interesting, as it shifts the concept of a live theatre performance to live television, hence it is referred to as new genre ‘TV-theater’, which translates to television theatre (“Romeinse tragedies”).

Again, both sub-questions are sought to be answered in this analysis. The first sub-question is: “what elements does *Romeinse Tragedies* contain that contribute to the liveness

of the performance?”. The second sub-question is: “how do the defined elements that contribute to the liveness of *Romeinse Tragedies* differ from the traditional form of live theatre performance?”. To answer these questions for the performance *Romeinse Tragedies*, the theories discussed in Chapter 1 have been consulted.

Here too, the digital technology of livestreaming plays an essential role within this performance with regards to the concept of liveness and being live. Just like it does with the performance discussed in the previous case study, *Memento Mori*. However, with *Romeinse Tragedies* it is not the livestreaming service Zoom that is used for livestreaming, but a livestream created by Internationaal Theater Amsterdam itself for the six-hour long performance, and a media streaming service for online television created by the Dutch public broadcasting company VPRO. At first, the VPRO media streaming service looks rather similar to streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. However, there is an important difference between the VPRO streaming service and the other mentioned media streaming services, namely that *Romeinse Tragedies* on VPRO can only be watched live in real-time and not just at any given time, just like the six-hours version of the performance, which means one cannot pause, fast-forward or rewind the performance (“ITALive). Whereas the other mentioned media streaming services do hold the option of watching media on demand, which entails that its users are allowed access to “video, audio and other types of content without the constraints of a predetermined release schedule” (Marketing Dictionary). The fact that *Romeinse Tragedies* can only be watched in live in real-time, when it is being performed, is what makes it live according to Feuer’s definition of liveness. As she states that the concept of liveness entails, that events are transmitted as they occur, something that is brought to you as it really is, which creates the feeling of being there (13-14). Moreover, because *Romeinse Tragedies* is not recorded, it can be said that it only happens once, as each time it is performed it is at least slightly different from the previous time. This does not mean

it cannot be repeated and performed again, on the contrary, as Phelan states a performance can be performed again, but the repetition is per definition different (146). This uniqueness is what Feuer defines as a characteristic of live and liveness (15). This characteristic of being nonreproductive is what distinguishes a performance and honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward (Phelan 148-149). In that sense, according to Phelan's definition of performance, *Romeinse Tragedies* can be considered as live. However, just as with *Memento Mori*, because it is performed online there always is the chance of somebody secretly recording the performance. Consequently, the possibility of the performance becoming reproductive arises. Therefore, the question whether *Romeinse Tragedies* can be considered live remains, at least according to Phelan's definition of performance.

Internationaal Theater Amsterdam also has an on-demand media streaming service named 'ITA On Demand', where people can watch theatre performances that have been recorded ("Theater aan huis"). This concept already existed but became increasingly popular during the first lockdown in the Netherlands, because people could still watch and enjoy theatre performances whilst being in quarantine, only now attending the performances digitally from their own home ("Theater aan huis"). Due to its success, the on-demand service continued to operate, and it is here to stay ("Theater aan huis"). The difference between the VPRO live streaming service and the on-demand streaming services is essential because it separates the performance *Romeinse Tragedies*, both the six-hour version and the television adaptation, as a live performance from the category of mediated performances. As Feuer states, the concept of liveness is referred to as something that television, live performance art and real life have in common, namely that they all live off the instantaneousness and uncertainty of the moment and that they are unmediated (13). Nonetheless, important to note here is the difference between live television and live

performance art. Namely, Malloy states that the essence of live performance is unmediated contact between performers and audience, which demands a physical co-presence (Auslander 111). This is what Auslander refers to as a traditional view of live theatrical performance (107). With live television there never is a physical co-presence, except for those present in the studio, but neither is there with online live performances. Hence, according to Malloy's definition of live performance, *Romeinse Tragedies* cannot be considered live. Couldry, on the other hand, emphasizes on the temporal dimension rather than the spatial one and states that liveness is the sense that one can be in contact with others at any given moment, regardless of distance (Auslander 111). So, following Couldry's definition of liveness *Romeinse Tragedies* can be considered live. Using Wurtzler's table of spatial and temporal variables and relationships, *Romeinse Tragedies* would fall in the category of Position II, temporal simultaneity but spatial absence, which is referred to as live broadcasts (Auslander 110). This category is considered a modern-day definition of liveness and according to which the performance *Romeinse Tragedies* would be considered as live.

Both versions of the performance *Romeinse Tragedies* can always be subtitled in English, and the six-hour long livestream version even in French ("ITALive"). Subtitles are something that a lot of people will likely associate with film, and television, but probably not so quickly with live performances, especially not live theatre performances. Hence, an element like subtitles is likely to weaken the perception of liveness whilst watching a performance, as there is a significant chance that the audience will have the feeling of watching a film instead of a live theatre experience.

Personally, I would consider *Romeinse Tragedies* as a live performance, as it can only be experienced at the exact same moment it is performed. Nonetheless, as a millennial I am likely to be somewhat biased when it comes to my stance towards digitalization and technology, which is predominantly positive.

*Sub-conclusion Case 2*

Case study 2: *Romeinse Tragedies* is a theatre performance that can solely be experienced online via livestreams and not physically in a theatre. Both a six-hour version and a ten-part tv-adaptation are available online. The performance can only be viewed in real-time and cannot be paused, fast-forwarded, or rewound, unlike performances that are provided by on-demand streaming services where mediated performances can be viewed at the user's convenience.

*Romeinse Tragedies* would be considered live according to Feuer's definition of liveness, as everything that happens during the performance is transmitted as it occurs, so it is brought to you as it really is. As according to Phelan, another element that makes it live is the sense of it being unique, as it is not recorded and therefore can only happen once, because every time it would be repeated it would be different. Nonetheless, just like with the performance in case 1, *Memento Mori*, with the online livestream of *Romeinse tragedies* there always is the possibility of someone secretly recording it, with as its consequence the performance becoming reproductive. Thus, according to Phelan's definition *Romeinse Tragedies* would not be considered as live. Neither would it be considered live according to Malloy's definition of live performance, because of the lack of physical co-presence of the audience and the performers. Couldry, on the other hand, emphasizes on the temporal dimension instead of the spatial one and states that liveness is the sense of being in contact with others at any given moment, regardless of distance. Hence, following Couldry's definition of liveness, *Romeinse Tragedies* would be considered live. As well as according to Wurtzler's definition of liveness, which is a modern-day definition of liveness referred to as live broadcasts. *Romeinse Tragedies* does, however, have the option of subtitles, which might contribute to the feeling of the audience of watching a movie rather than a live theatre performance.

Concluding, whether *Romeinse Tragedies* can be considered a live theatre performance depends on which definition of live and liveness is used. According to the traditional definition of liveness it cannot be considered live, but according to more modern definitions it can.

### *Conclusion*

The Covid-19 virus caused a global pandemic that consequently also struck the Netherlands and its cultural sector, part of which are the theatre companies and performances. Due to the lockdown, theatres had to be closed and people were therefore no longer able to visit performances in the theatre. In this thesis, I have delved deeper into the concept of liveness and the underlying theories that define it, and with that the technological advancements that shape the landscape of contemporary live performance art. By doing so, I have sought to answer the research question: “How do live performance acts and companies maintain an experience of liveness during the lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic?”. In the pursuit of doing so, two case studies on two different theatre performances that were created during the lockdown, by two different Dutch theatre companies, have been conducted. Furthermore, for each case study two sub-questions have been answered. The first one: “what elements does the concerned case contain that contribute to the liveness of the performance?”. The second one: “how do the defined elements that contribute to the liveness of the concerned case differ from the traditional form of live theatre performance?”.

In the first chapter eminent theories around liveness and live art performances have been highlighted and explained. Alongside with this, definitions of concepts and relevant techniques regarding the research topic have been elaborated on. All of this with the object of finding answers to properly analyse the cases.

The first case study, *Memento Mori*, is a theatre performance especially created for an online audience but can simultaneously be experienced in the theatre by a small audience. The two most important digital techniques used are the green screen and the livestreaming service Zoom. According to Feuer’s definition of liveness the performance can be considered as live, as it is transmitted as it occurs. And so it would according to Phelan’s definition of performance. But because of the possibility of someone secretly recording the performance

whilst watching it online, it does not measure up to the definition anymore, as according to Phelan it then becomes reproductive. Neither can *Memento Mori* be considered live according to Malloy's definition, only to those attending the theatre physically, because of the lack of physical co-presence of the audience and the performers during the online performance. However, when making use of Wurtzler's table, *Memento Mori* could be considered as live, because it would fall in the category of Position I, to those who are physically attending the theatre to experience the performance, and in Position II, to those experiencing the performance online. The Positions I & II respectively stand for classic liveness and live broadcasts, classic liveness corresponds with Malloy's definition and live broadcasts is a modern definition of liveness that emphasizes on the temporal dimension of a performance rather than the spatial. Lastly, *Memento Mori* also falls into the by Couldry newly proposed category of online liveness.

The second case study, *Romeinse Tragedies*, is a theatre performance that has two versions, a six-hour version and a ten-part tv-adaptation, that both can solely be experienced online via livestreams. It can only be viewed in real-time and cannot be paused, fast-forwarded, or rewound, unlike performances that are provided by on-demand streaming services where mediated performances can be viewed at the user's convenience. According to Feuer's definition *Romeinse Tragedies* would be considered live, as everything happens as it occurs, and it is brought to you as it really is. Nonetheless, although it is not recorded and therefore unique, as each repetition per definition would be different, it still cannot be considered live according to Phelan's definition of performance. Because there always is the possibility of someone secretly recording it, with as its consequence the performance becoming reproductive. Neither would it be considered live according to Malloy's definition, because of the lack of physical co-presence of the audience and the performers. Couldry, on the other hand, states that liveness is the sense of being in contact with others at any given

moment, regardless of distance. Therefore, according to this definition *Romeinse Tragedies* would be considered live. As well as according to Wurtzler's definition of liveness, which is a modern-day definition of liveness referred to as live broadcasts.

When looking at the two case studies and comparing the outcomes of the two case studies, it can be said that both theatre performances contain various elements that either support or contradict the liveness of the performances. Hence, to both cases applies that to establish whether the performance can be considered a live theatre performance, it depends on which definition of live and liveness is used. Therefore, according to the traditional definition of liveness neither case would be considered live, but according to more modern definitions both cases would be considered live.

In conclusion, it can be said that both *Memento Mori* and *Romeinse Tragedies* can be considered as live theatre performances that were able to maintain their experience of liveness during the lockdown, provided that it is on the base of the modern definition of liveness.

Therefore, personally, I would consider both cases as live performance acts, as they can only be experienced at the exact same moment they are performed.

Ultimately, the question that has arisen after this research is whether the traditional definition of live and liveness still upholds in contemporary society?

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*Appendices*

Appendix 1: Wurtzler's table of spatial and temporal variables and relationships

	<b>Spatial Co-presence</b>	<b>Spatial Absence</b>
<b>Temporal Simultaneity</b>	LIVE I	II
<b>Temporal Anteriority</b>	III	RECORDED IV

Some associated representational technologies/practices:  
 Position I: Public address, vaudeville, theatre, concert  
 Position II: Telephone, "live" radio, "live" television  
 Position III: Lip syncing, Diamondvision stadium replays  
 Position IV: Motion pictures, recorded radio and television

(Auslander 110).