

# Whitney Houston: Will Gompertz reviews hologram show in Sheffield

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**The show didn't start well. The audience of largely middle-aged couples were palpably underwhelmed when the hotly anticipated hologram image of Whitney Houston first appeared briefly at the back of the stage as the real-life band struck up the opening notes of Higher Love.**

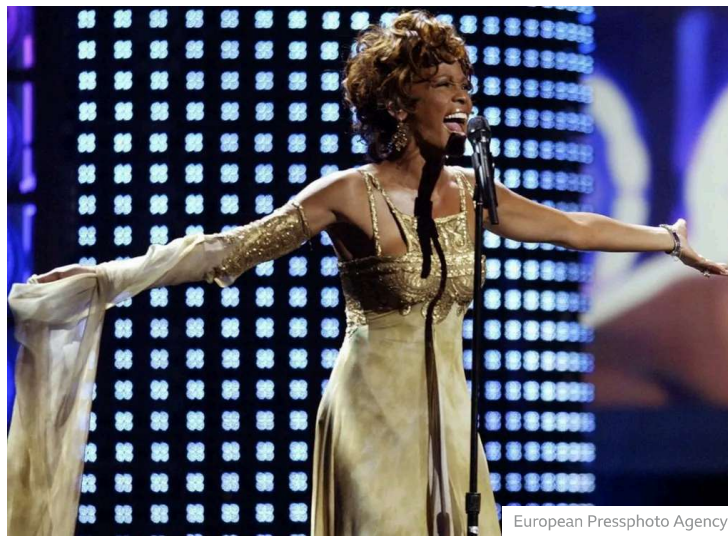
The crowd were expecting a big reveal not a distant flicker.

All was not lost, though.

A few moments later the digitised icon reappeared mid-stage in a splendid, golden evening gown and really looked the part.



The Whitney Houston hologram tour didn't exactly wow the superstar's fans



The real Whitney Houston performing at the 2004 World Music Awards in Las Vegas in 2004

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Any remaining scepticism among the fans was on the point of being dispelled. Nobody seemed to care that she was strangely elongated and a little passive; the quality of the illusion by its creators **BASE** Hologram was impressive.

Almost believable, even.

Until, that is, Digital Whitney went and blew it with her opening banter: "Good evening to Whitney Houston very much live!", she said, emphasising the word "live".

That was a mistake.

There is a place for irony, but Sheffield's City Hall at 20:45 on a wet winter Tuesday night isn't it. The audience, who had already invested plenty in their tickets (£40 - £70) and in the venue's bar, was not in the mood for being patronised with flippant remarks.

Their intelligence had been insulted, the gauntlet had been laid down.

Any prior willingness to suspend disbelief evaporated and was replaced by a mocking mischievousness. "Live" you say, well, let's

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"Blow me a kiss," one wag shouted.

"Get off!" yelled another. They knew automated Whitney would have no response. They were showing her up for what she was: a pre-recorded fake.



The show is bafflingly billed as an Evening with Whitney, which it obviously isn't. We all know she died in 2012.

What it actually consists of, along with the technically excellent hologram, is digitally re-mastered recordings of Houston's vocals accompanied by a real band, some real backing singers, and a handful of real dancers, all of whom perform on a multi-level set.

On occasion, as the show develops, the dancers and backing singers come further upstage to interact with the hologram, which has the paradoxical effect of bringing some life to a surprisingly passive show, while conversely accentuating the lifelessness of the technologically recreated star.



Having live dancers, band and backing vocalists made the show seem more disjointed

It became obvious by the end of Saving All My Love for You, the second number, that Houston's holographic reincarnation was not going to do any justice to the singer's legacy as a live performer.

The creepily detached digital Whitney in this show has more why-factor than X-factor.

Maximising the financial potential of the back-catalogue will be one reason. CDs are not the future, streaming can be less lucrative, and juke-box musicals can lead to copyright hell. A theatrical show **based** around a hologram, on the other hand, can deliver a streamlined shared "experience" without having to fork out for actors, scriptwriters and fancy stage sets.



The organisers say the show gives fans who never saw Whitney a chance to experience what a live show might have been like

But it does run the risk of appearing macabre and exploitative.

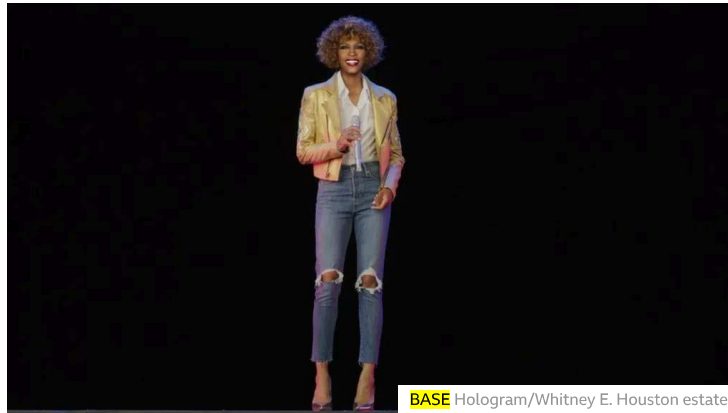
Whatever happened to the notion of Rest in Peace?

This is what runs through your mind as you watch an oddly green-faced projection of Whitney Houston, who was recently, posthumously, inducted into Rock and Roll's Hall of Fame.

The pre-programmed moves of her on-stage avatar are horribly computerised, turning a performer who was once so full of life into a dead-eyed automaton from a 1990s sci-fi B-movie.

I can't imagine this show winning over a whole new generation of fans, but classic recordings like I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me) and I'm Every Woman were enough to get some of the livelier audience members in Sheffield on their feet (to the disapproval of others who had come to quietly sit and listen).

Houston's famous version of Dolly Parton's power ballad I Will Always Love You should have been a high point of the night but descended into satire as some karaoke-hardened ladies at the back of the room couldn't resist finishing off lines while holographic Whitney paused for emotional effect.



A surreal night turned totally weird at one point during Run To You when Whitney was beamed back on to stage in a new costume with a massive video screen behind her featuring knobbly cloud forms with purple patches. I think it was attempting to conjure up a sense of ominous drama, but in fact made our star look like she was standing in the middle of a blueberry muffin.

The show ended as abruptly as it started.

There was no stamping of feet for an encore, no chants of "Whitney, Whitney".

Instead, our Hologram host disappeared into the stage, waving to who knows who as she went, and that was it. House lights went up on a curious evening, in which most of the memorable live entertainment was provided by the audience.

**SET LIST:***ACT 1*

- Higher Love
- Saving All My Love For You
- All The Man I Need
- I Have Nothing

*ACT 2*

- I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)
- It's Not Right But It's Okay
- I Believe In You And Me
- Run To You
- My Love Is Your Love

*ACT 3*

- The Greatest Love Of All
- Exhale (Shoop Shoop)
- I Will Always Love You

*ENCORE*

- Queen Of The Night
- I'm Every Woman

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