

Final Report on

"WUNDERLAND

VR production of Schauspielhaus Graz

April 2024



**SCHAUSPIEL
GRAZ**

ACuTe



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PREVIEW

Almost every new technology has enriched the theatre and contributed to the fact that material could be worked on more intensively, presented in a more interesting way or interpreted differently. This is true for the revolving stage, the ever-evolving lighting technology, even the most recent development - video technology, which has been on stages since the 90s: all this has come to stay.

With the digital possibilities, we are currently still in a phase of probing: it is not yet clear what exactly will become part of the permanent repertoire of our technical possibilities and what, on the other hand, will disappear.

This report is an attempt to honestly and unsparingly describe the genesis and thoughts on the Acute production "Wunderland" at Schauspielhaus Graz, realized in season 2023/24. It begins with a prehistory of the production, then describes the course of work on this project and ends with a discussion of mistakes and open questions.

THE BACK STORY

A virus appears out of nothing and turns everything upside down

On 20 March 2020, a new era began for many theatres, and ours was no exception. An order had been issued by the authorities a few days earlier, according to which no more public performances were allowed to take place. A few days later, the situation worsened considerably. We had already been irritated by the cancellation of performances, but on Friday 20 March we were suddenly told that we were not allowed to hold any more rehearsals either, that the theatre would have to remain closed until further notice and that everyone should stay at home, preferably behind closed doors.

Thankfully, we found out about this plan about two hours before the official government declaration, which we then watched spellbound in front of the TV in the canteen at 1 pm. These two hours were worth their weight in gold to book flights and train tickets for the numerous guests from abroad (German or Swiss) so that they could return safely to their home countries, because after that, it was said, the borders would close, no more in, no more out, travel would become difficult, if not impossible.

The moment we announced this message to the theatre's staff was symbolic: a staff meeting hastily called for 12 o'clock interrupted the stage rehearsals of Shakespeare's "Macbeth", where a run-through was taking place that included gallons of fake blood. The architecture of our theatre requires that the staff from the so-called backhouse (those who work behind the scenes and in the offices) have to walk across the side stage to get to the auditorium.

The actors on stage, who hadn't noticed the upcoming staff meeting because the director understandably wasn't supposed to interrupt his run, thus noticed a

kind of migration of people across the stage out of the corner of their eye as they played: about 100 staff members, quite a few of whom stopped briefly to watch from the side what funny stuff the artists were rehearsing again.

Until the artistic director Iris Laufenberg stopped the rehearsal and explained what it was all about. The actor playing Macbeth, who ran against the revolving stage in a frenzy, covered in blood and dragging a king's coat weighing about 50 kilos behind him due to the blood, described this surreal situation as follows: "It felt like we were playing on the Titanic until we went under."



Macbeth

„Macbeth“ finally came out more than two years later, in May 2022 after having spent the whole pandemic in the freezer and having survived numerous digital experiments.

The beginning of interesting times

A Chinese curse is said to be "My you live in interesting times". That's exactly what began for us on 20 March 2020: interesting times. A brief moment of shock was followed by an intense period of reflection, triggered by the unaccustomed calm and tranquillity that replaced the often hectic theatre life, triggered by all kinds of deadline pressure and always with a goal in mind.

Our artistic director Iris Laufenberg, who always has her finger on the pulse of the times but cannot exactly be called a confirmed technology freak, surprised us with her wish to take a closer look at VR and AR technology. Or rather, to have it explained to us first. The reason for this was a meeting with the head of the Children's Museum in Graz, who had just experimented with this technology for an exhibition and had told her about it.

The head of the Children's Museum organised a meeting with Prof. Dr. Andreas Nischelwitzer, the departmental coordinator of the Digital Media Technologies area at the Information Management programme of the Joanneum University of Applied Sciences. In May 2020, we met with him in the disused Graz theatre – at a time when we all still thought we were automatically putting our lives in danger if we met other people and if not, we were at least committing a crime. This clandestine meeting was attended by the following people from the theatre: Iris Laufenberg, our artistic director and the originator of the idea, her consultant and our press officer Isabella Cseri, our technical director Christoph Steffen and Karla Mäder, head dramaturge. Fearlessly, VR- and AR-goggles changed from one nose to the other, and indeed no one got sick or arrested.

Professor Nischelwitzer, also someone who was not allowed to work at that time with his students, spent a whole morning explaining the developments in this technology to us unsuspecting laypeople with the fire of a good educator and showed us the various possibilities that AR and VR technology hold. Among other things, we stood on the edge of a cliff with VR goggles on our noses and

encountered a skeleton with AR goggles that suddenly appeared in our foyer where the meeting was taking place.

And now what?

We had learned a lot that morning and now what? From a dramaturgical point of view, the simplest thing seemed the most effective and also doable for us – working with a 360° camera. What are the strengths of this? It is immersive, transports atmospheres very intensively and can emotionally overwhelm in this way. It allows interaction between viewers and virtual content. The 3D effect makes you feel like you are really there. It is a relatively young medium with a lot to discover.

Our technical director immediately caught fire and started to take a practical look at the whole thing. He researched what VR goggles cost, how to use them, what the cameras look like, etc.

At the same time, we developed a dramaturgical concept of how we could quickly and easily start a test run. In addition to expanding our aesthetic space of possibilities, we also had "our" audience in mind, to whom we wanted to give something, even if they can't visit the theatre. We had already tried numerous online formats – from films that the actors shot with their mobile phone cameras at home to zoom conferences in which we got to know the subscribers from a completely different side (namely with their homes in the background). Now it was time for a new experience.

Why 360°?

Why did we spontaneously, out of a clear impulse, decide on the "simplest" technique (which nevertheless brought us to the edge of affordability, as you will read in a moment)? Because it comes closest to what theatre is.

Theatre, that is: "A pretends to be B, and C watches". That is the minimal definition of theatre. According to another famous theory that is still effective today, Aristotle's theory of drama, catharsis is the goal of drama. The Greek word, which is difficult to translate, describes a mental detox process that takes place on the occasion of witnessing a theatre performance and afterwards releases the person mentally "cleansed" into reality. Eleos and phobos, fear and pity, or in more recent translations "lament and shudder" are the two main emotions used to achieve this effect.

Although Aristotle's theory was written around 335 b.c., it remains unchallenged and influential, even into today's Hollywood dramaturgy. The strong inner, emotional involvement of the audience is also a purpose of the play in theatre to this day and a means of generating knowledge or cognition.

VR technology makes it possible to experience a play on a completely different level and even become part of the performance. Through immersion, one can be embedded so directly in the action, as happens only in exceptional cases in the theatre. Consequently, the emotions you experience can be much stronger than in the theatre, where you have to focus your attention differently and distractions are possible at any time.

Based on this instinctive consideration, we spontaneously turned to the 360° technique and developed three different VR films, all of which led to "Wonderland" and will be briefly outlined here.

VR AT SCHAUSPIELHAUS GRAZ

First experiment: „Judas 360°“

Coincidence would have it that we have had an show in our programme that has been running very well for years, the play "Judas" by the Dutch author Lot Vekemans, which we play exclusively - with only one actor and very little effort - in churches. At that time we had performed the play in about 50 different churches - from small village churches to imposing baroque cathedrals. Because of this flexibility, the actor was very quickly able to get used to a new situation - the play with the 360° camera.



Fredrik Jan Hofmann as Judas

For the recordings of our 360° Judas, we chose the oldest church in Graz, a beautiful early Gothic church with which we had the best relations thanks to our

church contacts. There we held three rehearsals to restage the piece in order to respond to the possibilities of the camera, and then had two recordings.

The most difficult thing - unusual and unfamiliar - for the actor was playing without an audience. Actors thrive on the attention of living people with whom they share the same space. They also need the feedback of a director in order to understand what they are doing. In this case, the actor had to play through the play alone for an hour, while the dramaturge, technical director and sound engineer were hidden in the organ loft so as not to be in the picture. An unsatisfactory experience from an acting point of view. We learned that shooting with a 360° camera is very different from shooting with a normal camera.

Looking back, "Judas" was a very simple experiment that nevertheless found its audience. Thanks to the many „Judas“ fans we were able to reach through the churches, our VR goggles were borrowed several times or ordered home by bicycle courier.

Second experiment: „Krasnoyarsk“

Our guess was that not all texts are suitable for technological real simulation via 360° camera and 3-D sound; the play "Krasnoyarsk" by the Norwegian playwright Johan Harstad, however, is perfect for it and was a logical second VR production for us. It is a dystopian one-act play consisting of blocks of monologues and twelve "reports". The author explicitly encourages theatres to do with it what they will. Delete, add, rearrange, whatever. Which living author - Harstad was born in Stavanger in 1979 and has already won several awards for his work - allows so much freedom? Except Elfriede Jelinek, of course.

"Krasnoyarsk" is set after a global catastrophe that has almost destroyed the entire surface of the earth. The few survivors have taken refuge in the Siberian

city of Krasnoyarsk, hoping to build a new civilisation. The play is set in the vast land between China and Russia, where an anthropologist, equipped with a tent, GPS and an RFID transponder, searches for traces of human life. He has been doing this for years, and every day he radios back to Krasnoyarsk what he has found: nothing.

One day, however, he comes across a young woman in the wilderness who has two suitcases with her containing artefacts of the vanished world, testimonies of man in the form of handwritten reports from all over the world. Documents of struggle, love and failure: "clear evidence that the people on the vanished continents had not only lived ... but also that their lives had been meaningful, full of victories, sorrows and losses, irrevocable defeats". Later they also come across an old vinyl record and a record player and believe they have found what "more than anything else was an expression of human existence": music and writing.

Once again we shot this film with 360° camera, but a lot more elaborately than "Judas" at various locations, which included outdoor venues (with cold and bad weather). The 3-D and Dolby Surround effect of the VR technology creates the feeling of being in the film yourself, roaming the tundra with the lonely anthropologist, crouching next to him and the hungry woman at the campfire, sheltering with them in an empty barn hall like war refugees with the enemy on their trail.

The artificially created reality offers the immersion experience par excellence: to immerse oneself in the action, in the landscape, in the virtual and yet so lifelike space. If you turn your head to the left or right or all the way around, the landscape continues, the sound provides focus and orientation as to where the action continues. Or it suddenly comes up with completely different spaces and scenery. The theatre film team worked impressively with suggestive cross-fades or animations that remind us of the urban gears of civilisation or of being lost in

a family in designer flats. Filming took place, among other places, in November 2020 in the area around Lake Neusiedl in eastern Austria - in a fantastic end-time wasteland.



Sound designer Eli Frauscher with her equipment and the 360° camera in front

"All stories are worthless at the end of the day if you can't tell them to anyone," says the young woman at one point (who, by the way, wrote all the life stories in the suitcases herself). And so the play continued in reality: the theatre education department developed a workshop with which viewers of the VR film could write their life report analogous to the narrative in the film, the content of which was the most significant event of their lives.

On 16 February 2021, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a major national German daily newspaper, wrote about "Krasnoyarsk": "Narrative experiments like this [can only be] approved of, even if such a virtual reality film cannot of course replace the live theatre experience. But one can also praise the curiosity and the ability of the theatre to work professionally with new, intermedial technologies and visual languages and thus expand its repertoire. A lot has happened within a pandemic year."



One of the sites of the film: an abandoned brick kiln close to Graz



Actress Katrija Lehmann with wet feet in november



In fact, we celebrated an outstanding success with "Krasnojarsk". One reason will have been that we were "ahead of the wave", so to speak, i.e. at a very early stage, before other theatres jumped on this technology, and were able to present a convincing project with it. The VR goggles were invited to various festivals from Russia to the USA, and some online festivals around the world, and thanks to the ETC they were also sent

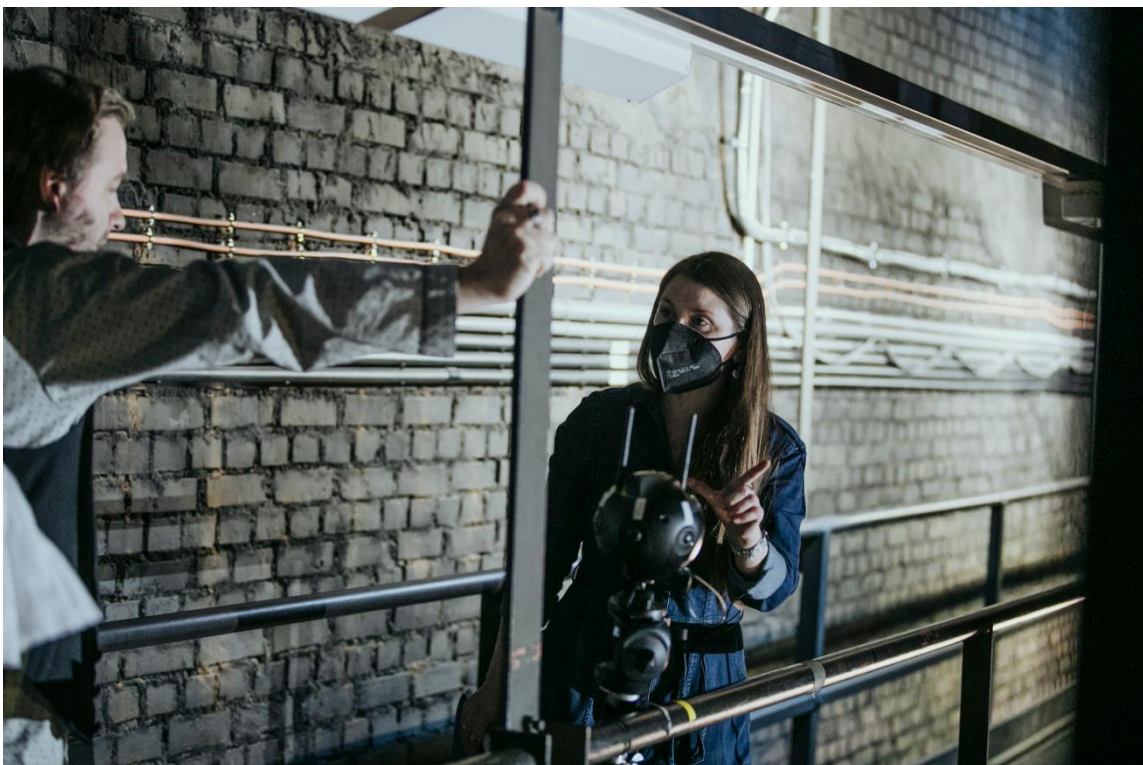
to about forty member theatres all around Europe as part of a conference. The VR production was also awarded the prestigious Austrian theatre prize „Nestroy“.

With this project, we were also able to professionalise our distribution decisively: In German-speaking countries, the goggles were sent to the audience by post with the help of a German-based start-up. Because one of the problems of VR in the context of theatre is that theatre is not only analogue, but also local. It is essentially aimed at the local population. Communication and distribution channels beyond that have to be painstakingly found and newly developed. No small task ...

Third experiment: „The Construction“

One of the things we learned from the successful "Krasnoyarsk" was that the film was simply too long! VR films, they say, should currently be no longer than 30 minutes. The intense experience feels longer and beyond half an hour is often considered "too exhausting".

So we shot another, similarly to "Judas", less elaborate production, also based on a dramaturgically sensible idea: a VR adaptation of Kafka's story "The Construction", in which a creature entrenches itself in a construction of long corridors, hides supplies and is on the trail of a mysterious "hisser". This film was shot with only one actor in the theatre, which was once again closed at the time due to a lockdown, and took the audience into all kinds of backstage spaces: from the under-stage under the turntable to the chandelier loft (the space above the chandelier in the roof).



director Elena Bakirova with actor Florian Köhler on the working galleries above the stage



Camera operator Markus Zizenbacher above the stage

AND FINALLY: „WONDERLAND“

The set up of a professional 360° film shoot

With all the knowledge gained from no less than three VR productions, with a cameraman / editor with experience in 360° and a sound technician who is a specialist in 3D sound, we felt equipped for another experiment, with which we wanted to overcome all the shortcomings of past projects in one fell swoop. This was only partially successful.

As chance would have it, our cameraman Markus Zizenbacher has a girlfriend whom we met when she was still a film student at the University of Applied Sciences in Vienna. In February 2022, Kurdwin Ayub received the prestigious debut prize at the Berlin film festival Berlinale and from then on was considered the rising star of Austrian film. She happily accepted our offer to make a VR film, despite the many offers she received after the Berlinale from broadcasting companies and others. Our idea to deal with "Alice in Wonderland" also fell on fertile ground with her.

Kurdwin Ayub is a master student of the famous Austrian director Ulrich Seidel, and works just like him with written scripts that are filled in by the actors in improvised scenes. For "Wunderland" our idea was to tell the story of Alice from the child's perspective. Kurdwin wrote a story that depicts the everyday life of a couple of visual artists with a young daughter in eight scenes. The special thing (perhaps inspired by her own situation) is that the mother is a lot more successful than the father, which leads to tensions, conflicts and quarrels that are played out in front of the child. The whole thing leads to a nightmare that the child dreams and an awakening in the bed of the parents who stay together too long - "far too long together, as many parents do", as Kurdwin writes. The

pictures of the artist-mother in the film are by Sophia Süssmilch, an actually enormously successful Viennese painter. The pictures of the artist-father in the film, portraits of people as monkeys, are by Valentin Postlmayr, the actor.

Three actors, two children and a professional film crew were involved in the film. The theatre acted more in the background and was only conceptually involved in the realisation

The film was shot in November 2022 within five days, at an outdoor venue, in a rented flat that was scenographically transformed. In parallel, an animation studio created an animation that is part of the film. Afterwards, the film was edited and the sound implemented. During this phase, feedback was given but of course film has its own rhythms and not everything can be changed by then.





sound designer Eli Frauscher, in front the 360° camera



director Kurdwin Ayub with actor Valentin Postlmayr, on the floor Eli Frauscher and Markus Zizenbacher



Kurdwin Ayub with the actors



Markus Zizenbacher and Kurdwin Ayub with the actors



scene from the film:

Valentin Postlmayr as the father with his own paintings in the back



scene from the film:

Maresi Rieger as the mother with the paintings of Sophia Süssmilch in the back

The premiere

"Wunderland" premiered on 22 March 2023 at the Diagonale, the festival of Austrian film in Graz. The Diagonale, which is after all the most important film festival in Austria, was very interested in showing the film as director Kurdwin Ayub opened there last year with her film "Sun".



„Wunderland“ premiere in the movie theatre Annenokino during the film festival Diagonale

On the picture: Sebastian Höglinger and Peter Schernhuber, the Artistic directors of the Diagonale, Karla Mäder and Iris Laufenberg, head of dramaturgy and intendant of Schauspielhaus Graz, Markus Zizenbacher, camera operator and editor – and in his phone Kurdwin Ayub who was shooting a movie in the middle east during those days and thus could not be present in person at the premiere in Graz.



Inside the „Wunderland“ tent

Our head of stage design at the theatre, Philipp Glanzner, had designed a tent for the screenings at the Diagonale, which was set up as a children's room. It stood in the foyer of a cinema where parts of the festival programme were shown. There, the VR film could be watched continuously during the festival days, always by two people at the same time. Within five days, about 150 people watched the film and there were several (very good) reviews.

In April 2023 we created and implemented English subtitles in order to make the VR production accessible via a professional rental company (negotiations are underway) and to be able to show it as part of the ETC conference in Opole in May 2023. It will also be shown again in Graz at the end of June 2023 as part of the International Playwright's Festival.

CRITIQUE AND OUTLOOK

Critiquing the result in a dramaturgically way

Despite the positive coverage, we are not satisfied in all respects with our outcome of the project. Perhaps our insights can be valuable to those who still have the bulk of the work process ahead of them:

The film is not really artistically intended for VR by the director; in our opinion, it falls short of the medium's possibilities. This is especially a pity because both the cinematographer / editor and the sound designer were involved in two other of our VR productions and we also wanted to use their expertise to raise our latest VR product to another level.

On the other hand, the professionalisation of the film shoot (including the engagement of a production manager) has taken an enormous amount of pressure off the theatre. Whereas with "Krasnoyarsk the theatre was really stretched to its limits and everyone (including the directing team) was incredibly stressed, this time the work went absolutely according to plan and calmly. However, we got the impression that the theatre director was much more impulsive and thus also more permeable to impulses from outside - while the film director controlled the product from beginning to end and did not want to delegate any decisions. The end result was that there was no real collaboration - a very frustrating experience for us theatre people who are used to working in a more collaborative way. (Whether this is a general characteristic of film, however, we don't know, we lack the experience).

Perhaps it was a mistake to work with a professional film team who think and organise everything from the film. Accordingly, there was little interaction between film and theatre people and many of our dramaturgical suggestions were listened to and considered, but ultimately discarded. Probably in the

future we should better rely on (the few) specialised theatre directors who are interested in the medium of VR but have a fundamental interest in the specific characteristics and also possibilities of theatre.

Cooperation with Saxion University

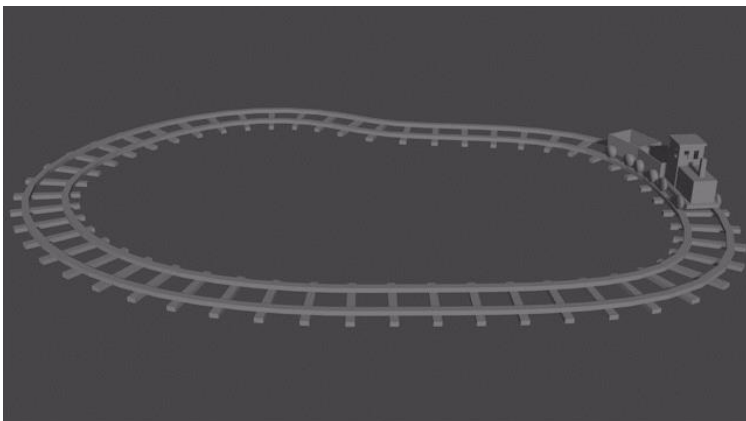
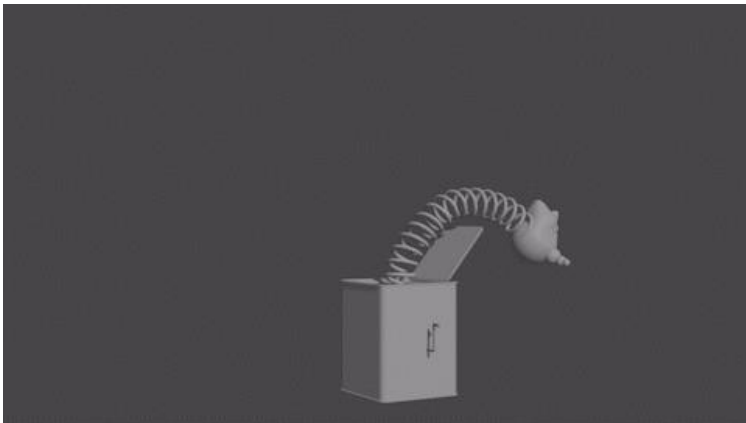
Within the AcuTe project there was a cooperation with Saxion University in Enschede / Netherlands, which came about at very short notice after the first kick-off meeting of the Acute partners in Linz in September 2022. Here, too, there would be room for improvement.

We thought the students could help us to solve specific tasks that we had identified in advance after the cooperation between theatre and university had been founded: e.g. to make paintings come alive, to make cuddly animals fly through the room, to make a comic film scene come alive in the laptop, etc. The students, however, were underchallenged by our tasks, underwhelmed by our requests and perhaps had little desire for specific tasks. For them, thinking about VR was about interaction, about breaking up the chronology through choices. But this was all off the mark from what our director wanted. The students are also highly specialised and had specific learning goals they had to fulfil in the seminar, which didn't necessarily align with what we wanted. In addition, the students were not really interested in getting involved in the content of an artistic project that was already so far advanced and was also very centrally controlled by the director.

In the end, the students did two projects that could not be included in the production, which we helped to supervise, but which basically did nothing for the theatre:

The playground and the room that appears in the film were digitally recreated with the help of so-called "clean plates" (shots without people submitted to the

students by the camera operator). The students made great suggestions about what horror elements could have been animated into it (Jack in a Box, train running through the room) and created small, sketchy demos of it.



In the other group, a student developed a software for disposition. This software was linked to an archiving website that another participant had built. This had nothing to do with the film at all, but was an impressive thing that would certainly have market chances if people continued to work on it.

Looking back, we think we could have worked better with the students if we could have used them earlier as a knowledge resource for what is technically possible. Then we could have outsourced certain services. They could have helped us to know what we want. For example, an idea like "Jack in a Box", which was developed by the students, could have been realised by us with the help of a professional studio. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the time schedule.

Nevertheless, the contact with Saxion University and the students was a valuable, interesting encounter that made us think about the possibilities of the medium VR. Even if in the end the assumption remains that we should rather reflect on our own strengths and try less to emulate the high end productions.

Tasks and questions for the future

VR and theatre - this is a special niche in which only a few are currently active - the whole thing is too complicated, too expensive and requires too many prerequisites. In our experience so far, the medium has potential, but only if theatre solves the following things in a meaningful way:

- 1) The story comes first! Theatre is always about the story. It has to make sense and justify the effort.
- 2) What dramaturgy makes sense and can raise storytelling to a new level?
- 3) The effort is quite different compared to theatre productions. It needs a different kind of professionalisation of this narrative form, which is neither film

nor theatre. Professional film, if paid fair, is expensive, and theatre can only help so much with its possibilities. Where do synergies lie?

4) Playing in hybrid spaces can neither be compared to live playing on stage nor to camera acting, it has elements of both. For this, a special playing technique and an expanded understanding of acting must be developed, but this is still in its infancy now.

5) The fear of the digital must be taken away from the audience if one does not want to remain stuck in the niche. The curious people must be drawn together. Technology must be explained and presented to those who hesitate. The gesture must be that there are no conditions to get to know VR.

6) Communication is part of success: how do you manage to meet a potentially globally dispersed audience?

Where do we go from here? To Berlin!

At the end of this season, our artistic director Iris Laufenberg is going to the Deutsches Theater Berlin. We will definitely migrate the project there and continue to work with it on the basis of the existing material. So the Deutsches Theater Berlin (succeeding the Schauspielhaus Graz) will remain part of the Acute network.

We have wrested a promise from the director Kurdwin that the students can continue to deal with the material "Wunderland" in a student context: reinterpret it, remix it, put it into a new context.

Now that we know more precisely what the students are interested in, we would possibly like to continue working with them from the Deutsches Theater in the future -maybe in season 24.25 a follow-up with more time for preparation is thinkable? We hope that Saxion will be interested in letting the students continue to work on the basis of the existing material.

In January 2024, we will have a two-week residency at Azkuna Zentroa. We would be interested in exploring forms of presentation for the film / the project / the material in this context. How does VR get to the viewers, what could be a suitable setting, what would be a good supporting programme, which viewers are interested in something like this, how do you tap into new target groups?

This is a question directly linked to our education department at Deutsches Theater, who will deal with the questions and collaborate with Azkuna Zentroa.

Conclusion

If the theatres had hoped for something from the otherwise rather depressing Corona pandemic, it was a digitalisation push. And for a while it looked as if something was going to happen in the theatre landscape. But at the latest with the end of the Corona measures, not so much of the Euphoria remained and events shifted back to the analogue realm.

We see our involvement with VR technology as something that is always called for in theatre: namely, to examine new technologies to see to what extent they can meaningfully expand our aesthetic space of possibilities. In this respect, it is the order of the day to stringently develop those parts of reality that (will) belong to our world in the theatre and for the stage. It is no longer a contradiction to make analogue theatre that deals with digital technologies and that also deals thematically with what one might call the digital revolution and invents sensually concrete translations for playing with our perception. Among other things, to gain insight into what the digital is doing to us humans as a whole.

For a while there was the fear that the real theatre, the building, with its rows of seats, its plush and its history, could be replaced by a good internet connection.

Or that the audience wouldn't come back because they had made themselves comfortable on the sofa with Netflix and co.

In the meantime, we believe that a (small) part of the future of theatre may be extended reality, where other, digital elements are added to the physical presence of a concrete space. The co-presence of audience and actors in a space is the unique selling point of theatre that we should not do without. And the creation of opportunities for people to meet in the flesh has become perhaps the most important function of theatre within society. In this respect, theatre should not become a denier of digitalisation, but should make its millennia-old means available to create encounters and also reduce threshold fears of the digital and make it tangible, comprehensible and also criticisable in a sensual, concrete way.