

Summary of Project Experience

Lovushke – A Study of Virtual Reality in Live Theatrical Performance

Creators: Almeda Beynon and Kevan Loney

What is the difference between a communal and solitary experience? Both exist in every artistic space, but can the solitary experience effectively become the message of the communal? These are the questions that prompted us to begin research on virtual reality and how its presence in live performance could enhance the experience of the audience. For our graduate thesis, Kevan Loney and I developed a dual – audience experience that relied upon audience participation to piece together a narrative that explored the relationship of the mind and body at the end of one's life.

The creators of the piece are – Kevan Loney, third-year Video and Media Design graduate student, and myself - Almeda Beynon, third-year Sound Design graduate student in the School of Drama. The driving force of the project was - how virtual reality could alter the presentation and reception of live performance, and how could we create a narrative when some of the story was only accessible to one audience member at a time.

There were two audience experiences that people could choose from. The first was the interactive track, where the audience joined the performers onstage and completed tasks we had set up for them. Four audience members got to experience the Oculus Rift environments, and four audience members performed memories in front of a green screen, that created a live element inside of the virtual reality headset. The other audience experience was more traditional in presentation, as

most of the people were sitting and watching, but they got to watch the entire machine of the production working together.

The technical elements of the process remained a constant from conception, but throughout our time with *Lovushke*, we learned that with this particular type of work, the story must come out of the process. We tried to write a play that would be the foundation for the storytelling element of the production, but soon found that this was not the most effective way to create interesting and immersive art. We then devised the story in rehearsal, and it became immensely easier to derive meaning from the technical set-up and situations put in place by the Oculus Rift. We soon came up with a framing device that established the Oculus Rift as the “brainstem of the main character,” and the story was easily developed from there.

The project also provided a space for research on more immersive sonic capture techniques for sound propagation in the virtual environment. With the FRFAF grant, we purchased a Freespace Omni-Binaural Microphone that allowed us to capture 4 binaural stereo feeds at once. Using a script for Unity, we parsed the sonic information to make a truer image in the virtual space. As the project neared performance, we decided to incorporate the microphone into the aesthetic of the live performance – with our actress whispering all of the lines into the ears.

Logistically, the project needed a space for performance. We applied for the PearlArts Diving Movement Residency (PDMR) in East Liberty for space, and they actually provided us with the last bit of funding we needed to mount the production. We had three funders in total – Studio for Creative Inquiry, PDMR, and GUSH. We

still ended up with out of pocket expenses, but the production would not have been possible without these generous funding sources.

With all of these factors in place, we mounted the project on Saturday April 2, 2016 at 201 N. Braddock Ave. Overall, the project was successful. We billed it as a workshop, so that we could do multiple rounds of audience members and really get a sense of how everything worked. We got necessary feedback from members of the audience, and real time conclusions about what worked and what needed further development. The information that we gathered from this production is invaluable to our future careers, as we have a better sense of how different people react to performance, and how best to cater to all members of an audience. Art is something personal to the creator, but in the world of commercial theatre, having the knowledge to attract more audience is a marketable quality in a design applicant.

This performance also opened up opportunities to bring the production elsewhere for development. We have gotten invitations to apply for other residencies, and since the implementation of the Oculus Rift has never been done before in a theatrical setting, we are also working on a publication for a technical theatre magazine. Ultimately, this project will be the first in a series of virtual and augmented reality productions that we produce. The goal is to start a production company by the end of the year 2016, and secure further engagements for our work as soon as possible.