

“VR for the Stage sector”

Description of the event

“VR for the Stage sector” was a short, self-contained, workshop designed to introduce participants to the skills and techniques required to create VR immersive productions. During two stimulating and inspiring days, the participants explored the challenges of immersive media, the technologies available to facilitate the experience and how to adapt a classical stage performance for VR. The workshop was both practical and participatory, meaning that the participants were expected to actively experiment with the equipment provided.

The workshop was led by Jonas Myrstrand, an experienced filmmaker working with immersive media productions, and hosted by Gothenburg Film Studios.

Main Topic

360 degree film-making and immersive VR:

First person perspective-taking, embodied distance perception (proximity), 360 degree camera position and directing viewer’s attention

Programme

The workshop had the following content: Introduction, Theory, Examples, Planning, Camera technique, Rehearsal, Reflection, Filmmaking on location, Editing, reflection & future steps.

Goals of the event

- To give an overview of how to use VR in the stages of planning, filming and editing
- To increase the understanding of how VR is and can be used as an artistic tool to create immersive environments and narratives
- To demonstrate that VR is a viable and accessible tool for those on a low budget and with limited technical background knowledge

Objectives of the event

- Participants develop basic skills in the use of VR technologies in the performing arts.
- Participants re-interpret and perform a piece of stage-based theatre through immersive VR technologies
- Participants will demonstrate a knowledge of key concepts within VR that influence artistic production, for example perspective and 360 degree immersive world building

Competence development:

The main skill which the participants learned in this workshop was how to use a 360 camera. A 360 camera is used in making a VR film to capture a complete view of a place. In order to learn this skill, it was firstly a requirement to understand the several concepts around immersive productions and 360 filming. As the camera in itself was quite simple, the learning focused on gaining the background knowledge which would enable the participants to use the camera correctly in practice.

Methodology and method: An example-led, experiential and embodied practice

In order to teach the participants how to produce VR content, the WL believed it was first necessary for them to experience the VR-environment through examples. While examples were shown on the screen, embodied learning played a strong role here as participants were able to use headsets to experience examples of VR content. In evaluating the workshop, the WL said without experiencing the feeling of being 'There & Now' in, the participants wouldn't have been able to fully grasp the fundamentals of VR and use them to guide their own productions. The participants agreed. One participant reported that "it was important to see the conditions that they had to work with in order to feel inspired."

The workshop was fundamentally driven by the principles of practical, experiential learning. The camera as an object was the basis for learning how to use it and the participants were straight away asked to interact with it. With the camera in the centre of the room, the WL had the participants move around it in different ways and, via. an app, could show them how it looked on the screen to give an idea of how the camera works when filming. This was essential scaffolding for rehearsals with the camera which, in turn, was necessary for a smooth filming experience the following day.

The rehearsals with the camera were just that, camera-use focused as opposed to acting focused. The goal was to see the visual difference between holding the camera in 3 different positions, which gave 3 different viewpoints. The first position was with the camera on a tripod, the second in an actor's hand and the third was when the camera replaced one of the actors. There was no right or wrong here, just different artistic choices to make. Discussions and brainstorming sprang up around how the actors could position themselves on stage, and whether it would even be possible to replicate the original physical interaction between the characters. It was also a way to get used to the camera being on stage. The most interesting experiment was when the actors tested speaking to the camera as though the camera was another character. In the end product, this would give the audience the feeling of being directly spoken to.

This experimenting with the camera's perspective is the most significant thing to give time to in such a workshop. It is important that the participants have time to assess which camera perspective works for their material before filming. Don't underestimate how long it takes to download material from the camera to the phone and then export from the phone to YouTube and arrange the



programme. This doubles the amount of time needed. The workshop participants reported that they remembered and enjoyed the rehearsals with the camera most. Quite simply, they said it was fun and they gained energy testing the possibilities of the equipment.

Target group/participants:

The target group of the workshop was a specific subsection of professionals within the performing arts. 'Free theatre', the direct translation from the Swedish term, refers to those active within the performing arts outside of the institutional format. Born during Swedish cultural reforms in the 1970s, free groups and productions have become a stable force within Swedish cultural life and contribute to approximately 1/5 of theatre productions within Sweden. The term also includes newly started or loose constellations of performers, as well as more established groups.

This target group was chosen firstly as they experience harsh economic conditions. There is primarily a reliance on short-term state funding, which means an incapacity to plan in the long-term. They receive less than 10% of state financing within the performing arts and therefore also experience financial challenges during production and can lack resources needed to innovate. The content of the workshop and the equipment used was planned to address the needs of this target group and raise awareness of the relative affordability of VR equipment - lower-budget technologies offer a broad range of possibilities for beginners

Another motivating factor for the target group was the challenge of dual roles. In institutional theatre, job roles are siloed and specific. However, in free theatre groups one person will often take on several roles, for example, taking responsibility for the art department overall or directing and producing simultaneously. The content of the workshop was created to be relevant for these artists. As such, the workshop gave a general overview, following the process of creating a scene in VR from concept development, via. direction and acting, to editing.

The workshop participants were 2 actors in their late teens/early 20s and an experienced director involved in a Swedish 'free theatre' group. They had worked together on a production previously and knew each other within this constellation. The group meeting beforehand was vital to them getting the most from this pedagogical experience. They were all open, eager to try something new, took initiative and were self-motivated. 3 people was optimal but the numbers could be increased to 5, potentially 6, before the workshop methods would become unviable.

Tools

The tools used in the workshop where:

Insta360 ONE X2 (camera)

Insta360 app (used in phone)

Oculus quest 2 VR headsets

Editing program: Final Cut Pro X (computer)



In the choice of tools the instruction was to choose digital tools that are inexpensive or free of charge to use, to ensure the possibility for freelancers with small budgets to use.

For communication, a VR headset is essential to this workshop in order to convincingly communicate the embodied and perceptual differences involved in working with 360 cameras and VR.

A YouTube channel to upload and view the 360-footage created during the workshop

Evaluation

The workshop was evaluated through a combination of observation and reflection.

The workshop evaluator observed the participants as they participated in the workshop to assess the pedagogical approach. While the evaluator didn't formally take part in the workshop, they also had the chance to test the VR equipment, facilitated reflection with the participants/workshop leader (WL), and interacted socially with them. This gave an insider perspective and a chance to also gain feedback on the workshop from the participant/WL perspective.

The participant group was asked to reflect both during and after the workshop. Facilitated by the evaluator, they took part in group reflection related to the quality of their learning experience during the workshop itself, both with and without the WL present. A week after the workshop, all were invited to a reflective interview with the evaluator to explore memorability and to measure the perceived results of the workshop after the immediate experience.

Key takeaways

Learner engagement and active participation was key to reaching outcomes

As an educator, reflect on theoretical content you include. Is it essential to the learner experience and for them to reach the desired outcomes? If yes, consider how much time you dedicate to this as well as alternatives to a lecture format. Greater interactivity can keep your learners engaged and increase the chance of your material being comprehended.

At the beginning of the workshop, the WL held a 30 mins. presentation on the current start-of-the-art within VR production. At this stage, the younger actors looked both bored and restless. They intermittently 'zoned out', shifted around in their seats or yawned. After the presentation, one participant even jumped around as a way, presumably, to expel some energy.

After asking the participants about this content, all said that they felt it was important to have a background understanding of VR and that such a theoretical knowledge is essential scaffolding to be able to actually use the equipment to create. However, no participant could remember the content of this presentation when asked about it a week later.



Afterwards, the WL began to show VR film material on YouTube <https://youtu.be/dGWvErLdzH8> and explained the qualitative differences between a conventional film and a VR film. It was then that he suggested participants try the VR headsets as a better way to understand the differences he was speaking about.

“Finally,” said one participant as they eagerly tried a VR headset. This was clearly the moment they had been waiting for. Trying the headset inspired a free flowing dialogue between the participants and the WL about form and film in which each person contributed with their own ideas and experiences.

When participants were asked questions on the content of the workshop, it was as though this was the point in which the workshop began. Once they began to actively engage with the material in a discursive and bodily way, it was though the workshop gained colour and the content became intensely memorable for all.

Independent participant preparation is key to meeting learning objectives in a compressed workshop format

For a smooth experience of the compressed workshop format, work with pre-existing constellations who can supply creative material and have the capacity to meet independently beforehand to select and rehearse it.

The group collectively agreed that the preparation they did before coming was a major factor in getting the most out of the workshop content. In advance of the workshop, the WL sent out a request that the group should prepare 3 scenes that they wanted to transform into a VR experience. As the participants had worked together before, they simply brought material from their previous production with them. This was material that they had performed on stage about 20 times. They were intimately familiar with the characters and the plot. Even with these conditions, the group still met in advance to collectively choose 3 scenes and to modify the acting slightly to better suit the camera rather than the stage.

From the perspective of the WL, the preparation meant that they could structure the workshop with the ambition to give an overview of VR and a feeling of the process in its entirety, even though time was tight. For the actors, they reported that bringing their own material with them meant that they could focus on the camera instead of the acting. It made the whole process more constructive and helped give it a clear goal. If this hadn't been done in advance, the workshop would have needed to be longer in order to build the team dynamics and create/select material.

This means that who you invite to the workshops shouldn't just be a matter of just getting numbers up. Some alternatives exist of course but, in order to replicate the 2-day structure of our workshop, there needs to be a pre-existing dynamic and for the participants to commit to meeting independently beforehand. It helped in our case that we had a director-participant, who was naturally able to be the WL's main point of contact and the person who instigated meetings with the



other participants. One alternative, for groups without material, would be that the WL sends out scenes in advance for them to prepare.

Strive for a low barrier to entry to motivate participants

The democratisation of what is perceived as more 'advanced' digital tools comes around by thinking about your learners, what they want to do and what their resources are. If you focus on the fundamentals only, the technology becomes accessible.

360 camera technique was presented very simply at the workshop. This was purposely done in order to challenge preconceptions about the level of technical know-how required to make a VR production. Pre-conceptions that can hold people back from experimenting or even having the motivation to learn. While some cameras can be quite complicated to use, the camera in the workshop was very simple, similar to a point and shoot, so the learning focused on how to understand the implications that a 360 filming has for the production (see main topics above).

A guiding principle useful to remember when hosting a similar workshop is that participants don't need to learn everything about the piece of equipment in order to use it. The most necessary learning here was understanding that a 360 camera shoots in all directions from the centre point where it stands. This centre point then becomes the audience's P.O.V in the final VR product. This change of perspective is radically different from how a performance is perceived in a traditional audience seating layout. In order to transform a stage work to a VR piece, understanding how the work will be seen was fundamental.

As mentioned earlier, the participants were most engaged when being active. Keeping the introduction to the equipment on a very simple level gave more space to this active, experimental state-of-mind in which people became motivated by possibilities and eager to learn more through further training. When the participants were given access to/control over the camera they became more creative with the alternate possibilities that the VR could offer, rather than being confined by a 'right' or 'wrong' way to use the equipment.

Transferability

It would be possible to transfer this workshop as-is to certain contexts in which the participants know each other and can bring rehearsed material with them. As the workshop time was extremely compressed, these two factors meant it was possible to go through an entire overview of the process and actual film within such a short space of time and are needed to apply it with different groups or in different situations.

