

Building a Text for Actors and AR: Researching and Developing a Horror play with new technologies in mind.

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Abstract: While there are many examples of successful horror theatre, the stage technology they use is often little different from that of the nineteenth century. In this paper, the playwright, dramaturg, and creative technician of a new horror play discuss the process of researching and developing a script that uses Augmented Reality, and the implications of this for the genre and medium.

The Writer

I belatedly visited *The Woman in Black*¹ in August 2018 and, although I admired the production and the play, I was never remotely scared. I posted about this on Facebook² and found that several friends and contacts had similar stories to tell – the play had simply not frightened them. One of the people on the thread was Peter Stone, a founder member of the Just Some Theatre Co. He expressed an interest in “the power of horror in theatre” and, significantly, in seeing “something that isn't straight away Victorian because ‘old is scary’”.³

I had collaborated with Just Some previously when they produced my play *Coward*.⁴ Peter and I spoke further. We explored our interest in visceral horror films – we both enjoyed classics of atmosphere, intensity and effects such as *The Exorcist* and *The Shining*; I expressed my affection for 70s and 80s Italian films such as *Suspiria* and *The Beyond*, works long on strangeness and baroque violence, and Peter expressed his liking for recent queasy

¹ *The Woman in Black*, by Stephen Mallatratt, based on the book by Susan Hill, directed by Robin Herford. Fortune Theatre, London, August 29, 2018.

² James Martin Charlton and Peter Stone, ‘The Woman In Black, Which Only Took Me 29 Years To See...’, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/fuzon/posts/10156390791566047> (accessed 19 July 2021).

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Coward*, by James Martin Charlton, directed by Terence Mann. Touring and White Bear Theatre, London, September to November 2013.

Spanish horror such as [*•REC*].⁵ These films have in common a combination of stories about people in extreme situations with bloodthirsty set-pieces. Our conversations ended with me agreeing to come up with an idea for a contemporary horror play along that would scare. In late 2020, the Arts Council gave Just Some funding to work our conversations and aspirations into a Research and Development project.⁶

Much of the mainstream horror theatre of the past few decades has relied on what are essentially Victorian special effects: lighting, sound and physical stage machinery are the backbone of not only *The Woman in Black* but other recent West End horror productions I've seen: *Ghost Stories* and a stage version of *The Exorcist*⁷. Just Some Theatre and I agreed that our play should be something which could be produced incorporating contemporary AR technologies. I had previously experimented with VR technology alongside my colleague Magnus Moar, filming one of my short plays for 360° video, which resulted in a video artefact and article; the 360° filming demonstrated how the technology could be used to enhance the voyeuristic aspect of the audience experience.⁸ Magnus had subsequently drawn my attention to various new AR technologies. A horror project offered the perfect opportunity to write a text which demands an integration of live actors with AR effects in order to create a theatrical equivalent of the startling and visually realistic experiences offered by the films that Peter and I admire. I predict that theatre will travel a similar journey to cinema, in terms of increasingly supplementing practical, traditional Special Effects (SFX) with digitally created Visual Effects (VFX).⁹

⁵ *The Exorcist*. Directed by William Friedkin. US: Warner Bros., 1973; *The Shining*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. US / UK: Warner Bros, 1980;1977. *Suspiria*. Directed by Dario Argento. Italy / US: Produzioni Atlas Consorziate / International Classics, 1977; *The Beyond*. Directed by Lucio Fulci. Italy: Fulvia Film, 1980; [*•REC*]. Directed by Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza. Spain: Casteleo, 2021.

⁶ Just Some Theatre, 'R&D PROJECT', Just Some Theatre. <https://www.justsometheatre.net/r-d-project> (accessed 19 July 2021).

⁷ *Ghost Stories*. Script by Jeremy Dyson and Andy Nyman, directed by Sean Holmes, Jeremy Dyson and Andy Nyman. Ambassadors Theatre, London, November 11, 2019; *The Exorcist*, script by John Pielmeier, based on the novel by William Peter Blatty, directed by Sean Matthias. Phoenix Theatre, December 8, 2017.

⁸ James Martin Charlton and Magnus Moar, 'VR And The Dramatic Theatre: Are They Fellow Creatures?', *International Journal Of Performance Arts And Digital Media* 14:2 (2018): 187-198.

⁹ Kenan Proffitt, 'Special Effects VS. Visual Effects: Which Is Better?', Actionvfx, <https://www.actionvfx.com/blog/special-effects-vs-visual-effects> (accessed July 19, 2021).

As a part of this development phase, I have written a play which requires horrors both corporeal, imagined, and supernatural. As usual in play development, I have been passionate about my characters and their story. Equally, I have seen the script as a way of countering the challenges of working *with* AR with a series of challenges *to* AR. I ask, can the technology achieve this? If not, can we develop the technologies to achieve it? This integration of dramatic storytelling with technology to create horror theatre is nothing new: it was a backbone of the Parisian Grand-Guignol¹⁰. What is new here is a play with a twenty-first century setting designed to incorporate the latest technologies available in AR VFX.

Throughout, I have kept in mind the need to put the story foremost in terms of development, with a concentration on those story elements which will affect the audience, specifically scare them. My suspicion was that the horror plays that I have seen have not scared me because they largely rely on shock effects, with a casual and sometimes even campy attention paid to the source of the horror in the tale. Surprises and loud jolts are the ornaments of horror, they are not the horror itself. The horror itself is in the encounter with evil – the nameless malice at the centre of *The Shining's* Overlook hotel, the coven at the centre of *Suspiria's* ballet school atrocities – which the audience are led in labyrinthine ways towards via a strong story.

The Dramaturg

Horror, more than any other genre, depends on subtext – metaphorical monsters serve as symbols for real-life fears. Stephen King (who, let's face it, should know) develops this argument in some detail in *Danse Macabre*,¹¹ starting with the example of *The Amityville Horror*¹², where the house-wrecking poltergeist plays particularly well to a middle-aged audience dealing with the horrors of home ownership. As a screenwriting lecturer, the question I ask most often of horror scripts is "Yes, but what's it *really* about?"

¹⁰ Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson. *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre Of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 52-66.

¹¹ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London/Sydney: Macdonald and Co., 1981). This argument is found particularly in Chapter VI, pp. 154-229

¹² *The Amityville Horror*, Directed by Stuart Rosenberg, US, American International Pictures, 1979.

In the cinema and theatre, the use of special effects is itself a symbol, an objective correlative for the supernatural or scientific element at the centre of the story. We may not literally believe that Colin Clive can reanimate a corpse¹³, or that Richard Attenborough can create dinosaurs¹⁴, but the make-up skills of Jack Pierce, or the CGI of Industrial Light and Magic (a significant choice of name, by the way) acts as a substitute. In the horror theatre of the Grand Guignol, the plays are often structured towards a reveal, a final gore effect which acts, as I've argued elsewhere, as an equivalent of the 'money shot' in pornography¹⁵.

Working with James Martin Charlton on this play, we had to consider both of these questions, and the relationship between them. The subtext – which, without wanting to give anything away, seems to me to be about false systems of values – and the technology, the moments when the virtual reality interacts with the live action, needed to be considered in tandem. Too little substance, and the spectacle becomes meaningless; too little spectacle, and the audience feels cheated, denied the visceral kick that the Nollywood scholar Tori Arthur has referred to as 'affective spectacle'.¹⁶ Horror, in this respect, is the genre in which technology works in the service of subtext.

The Creative Technician

The use of digital Augmented Reality (AR) in theatrical productions can be seen as an aspect of the enduring relationship between technological innovation and Theatre. Long anticipated¹⁷ and with early experiments¹⁸ AR is emerging as means of enhancing

¹³ *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale, US, Universal Pictures, 1931

¹⁴ *SteveJurassic Park*, Film.directed by Steven Spielberg,*SteveJurassic Park*, Film. US: 1993, Universal Pictures

¹⁵ David Cottis in Hand and Wilson, *Grand Guignol*, 74-75.

¹⁶ Tori Arthur, 2014, 'Reimagining the "blockbuster" for Nigerian cinema; the Nollywood narrative aesthetic of affective spectacle' in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol 6, Issue 9, May 2014
<https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA373891252&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=08886601&p=LitRC&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7Ea2d69a3f> (accessed 22/7/21)

¹⁷ Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck : the Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. (New York :Free Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Daniel Jernigan, Stephen Fernandez, Russell Pensyl, and Lee Shangping . *Digitally augmented reality characters in live theatre performances*. International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media. 5. (2009) 35-49.

dramas.¹⁹ As a teacher and researcher in the area of new digital technologies, I have been following these developments and undertaking a variety of related projects most recently with my colleague James Martin Charlton, exploring the possibilities of 360° Video to enabling the audience to be at the centre of the onstage activity

Following these, James suggested that I have a discussion with Peter Stone and designer Bek Palmer, with whom he was working to develop a new drama that would explore new ways of staging 'Horror'. They felt that AR might be able to contribute to this, in enhancing scenes, staging appearances and disappearances, directing the audience's focus, enabling transformations, animating objects and so on. Over a Zoom call, I was able to discuss their initial ideas and put before them some exemplars of three types of augmentation: handheld, headset²⁰ and projected, including projection mapping.²¹ With affordability and portability of a shared AR experience being priorities, it was clear that projection emerged as initially the most suitable option. We discussed staging issues, such as placement of projectors, viability (financial and physical) of large 'invisible' projections gauzes (e.g Hologauze®²²), projector luminosity, noise, airflow and so on. I was intrigued to see how Peter and Beka were able to adapt their plans and finesse practical problems to accommodate and conceal technologies. Not surprisingly, whilst they were keen to explore AR's potential, the audience's experience was paramount: the technology, in this case, should be unobtrusive and dramatically effective. One possibility seemed of particular interest: the use of a single, projector that uses a controlled angled mirror to deliver dynamic projection mapping.²³ Although this approach may limit the projection size and limit simultaneous projections, it essentially broadens the projection field, reducing the need for multiple projectors if multiple isolated effects are required.

Outcomes

¹⁹ Sarah Dawood, *How the RSC brought theatre to life through its digital production of The Tempest*. Design Week, December 22nd 2016. <https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/19-25-december-2016/how-rsc-brought-theatre-life-through-digital-production-the-tempest/> (accessed 22/7/21).

²⁰ Charles Fink, *AR Is The Star Of A New Theater Company*. Forbes <https://www.forbes.com/sites/charliefink/2018/11/05/ar-is-the-star-of-new-theater-company/?sh=7b48ea901d8e> (accessed 22/7/21).

²¹ Bravo Media Inc. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryq-hTx6DaM> (accessed 22/7/21).

²² Holotronica. <https://www.holotronica.com/technology/> (accessed 22/7/21).

²³ Gallery Invasion. Skullmapping, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APpw6ZKIQ3I> (accessed 22/7/21).

The Research and Development project has resulted in a workable draft of the script, of which Just Some Theatre filmed a staged reading On 12 June 2021. This will be edited and some primitive VFX (or narration-based indication of VFX) and used for demonstration and feedback purposes. For Charlton, the theatre company's decision that a simple table-reading (even on Zoom) would not be appropriate for this text was enough to indicate that the text was successfully demanding something more which could only be solved by technological means. Beyond that, Charlton has discovered that, although on many levels he is writing a traditional theatre text, the AR element makes it a hybrid theatre/screenplay. New technology calls for multimedia forms. As he and Cottis have discovered through the dramatological process, which involved lot of discussions about what the VFX will be. Whilst writing for theatre performance habitually involves thinking about what the performers, director and designers will bring, in this case it has also been about what the creative technician is going to do. For Moar, the discoveries have (predictably) been more specific – aside from looking at technologies with which he was already familiar, he has investigated uses of a projector that uses a controlled, angled mirror and explored the theatrical possibilities of this dynamic projection mapping. All in all, the R&D has been a successful alignment with the theatre company's aspirations,

For Just Some Theatre the desire to delve into the world of using technology in our theatre productions came through a drive to create work in the horror theatre genre that provides audiences with a unique new experience, rather than the more traditional theatrical horror experience. We've always been conscious of how theatre has to contend with not only cinema/film, but also a new generation that digest art, film, TV and even some theatre shows on demand. The use of this technology is an opportunity to re-energise, re-engage and discover a whole new way of experiencing theatre in a truly unforgettable contemporary manner.²⁴

²⁴ Just Some Theatre, email message to the authors, July 22, 2021.