



Robert Lehniger und CyberRäuber

Lost in a virtual forest

Meet the CyberRäuber, a Berlin-based duo hacking conventional theatre with VR technology. *By Katie Hawthorne*

Just as television was supposedly the death of film, technophobes would have you believe that virtual reality will be the death of... well, everything? VR is making waves in industries from gaming to space exploration, and theatre lovers might fear that a hi-tech headset is incompatible with the rush of feeling as the lights dim and the curtains rise. The CyberRäuber will persuade you otherwise.

Go down to the woods at the Deutsches Theater this month and you're sure of a big surprise: these trees are virtual. Reworking the Brüder Grimm classic *Hänsel und Gretel* under the care of director Robert Lehniger, are Berlin's most future-facing theatre makers. After meeting at a talk on art and VR, data analysis entrepreneur Björn Lengers and programmer Marcel Karnapke discovered a shared excitement for its theatrical potential – despite a room full of gloom for the medium's future. After winning support from the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung they debuted their vision with an adaptation of the Schiller classic *Die Räuber* (from which they draw their name) at the Theater und Netz conference in 2016, and the CyberRäuber project was born. Since then, they've embarked on some wild projects to prove their point – including laser scanning and virtually re-creating

every inch of Kay Voges' intensely complex production of *Die Borderline Prozession*. Above all, the duo argues that cutting-edge tech and the ancient art of theatre are rooted in the same desire to communicate. After spending 10 years as a programmer in the Digital Bauhaus Lab in Weimar, Karnapke finds the rehearsal room an inspiring laboratory: "We're perceived as technology-centric, but actually we're human-centric. I couldn't imagine a better software development platform than theatre; you can talk to people, look at people responding."

In their collaboration with Junges DT, the theatre's youth branch, CyberRäuber used a week-long workshop to explore the potential in the classic fairy tale: an all-ages team of volunteers decorated sugary VR headset-shaped biscuits – what would this story be without sweets? – and planted a virtual forest. Using Tiltbrush, software that resembles a three-dimensional Microsoft Paint screen, children and seniors alike helped (and heckled) each other to construct a world of gothic pines and elaborate cobwebs. Karnapke explains, "Instead of just consuming virtual reality they could build some-

thing – that makes virtual reality an extremely social reality."

This process helped them break ground on their Grimm re-telling, titled *Verirrten sich im Wald*. Karnapke continues: "So these children are lost in the woods. But how would that feel? Even experiencing just 20 seconds of being in a dark forest with only a flashlight is enough. A glimpse is all you need. Your imagination will take care of the rest."

Without dropping too many breadcrumbs, Lengers sets the scene: "On stage we have this little house where 'something' is living. Maybe we're living there too. And then... it opens up!"

Verirrten sich im Wald requires 14 real-life actors, and the tech functions like a hyperlink, revealing extra layers of meaning embedded within the performance. Although they're listed in the DT's programme as "VR Artists", they work from a vast toolkit: expect Oculus Go headsets, video projections and augmented reality – a way of viewing virtual images in 'real' space, using a handheld screen – but anything's possible in the CyberRäuber's forest. After all, as Lengers says, "that's theatre, right?" ■

Verirrten sich im Wald Mar 30, 19:00, *in German only* Deutsches Theater, Mitte

DON'T MISS

Queer Darlings

The Sophiensæle invites favourites old and new to perform in a mini-festival focusing on feminist and queer perspectives on the body and desire.

Mar 6-9

Persona

Catch Anna Bergmann's take on Ingmar Bergman's psychological drama, a co-production with the Malmö Stadsteater, at the Deutsches Theater before it heads to the Berliner Festspiele's Theater-treffen this May.

Mar 6, 20:00, with English surtitles

Comrades, I am Not Ashamed...

... of my communist past: HAU looks at the politics of memory following the fall of the Iron Curtain with a festival dedicated to perspectives on the past from Berlin to Belgrade.

Mar 11-17