Putting VR Technology into Documentary:

Reflections and Speculations on a New Immersive Theatre Genre in Britain

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Abstract: As VR technologies develop and start to infiltrate British theatre venues and companies, and even spectators' homes with LIVR—the world's first virtual reality theatre content platform—, they also seem to have simultaneously injected a new "immersive" vigour and vitality into the flourishing field of contemporary documentary theatre. Whilst documentary methodologies are commonly used by site-specific and immersive theatre makers, their recent association with VR has to this date been relatively ignored. Through a close study of the National Theatre's *Home: Aamir* (2016), an immersive 360 verbatim documentary about a Sudanese refugee who lived in the Calais "Jungle" camp, and Jayisha Patel's *Notes to my Father* (2017), narrating the true story of a survivor of child trafficking and her father, this article will attempt to address this gap and evaluate the capacity of spectators to be "affected" by this new breed of immersive and politically-engaged documentary theatre.

Résumé : Dans un contexte actuel marqué par le développement croissant des technologies de réalité virtuelle sur la scène britannique, allant parfois jusqu'aux domiciles des spectateurs avec la plateforme LIVR (la première entreprise de théâtre de réalité virtuelle à la demande), on voit poindre un nouveau genre de théâtre documentaire plus immersif et technologique que ses prédécesseurs qui fera ici l'objet de cet article. En effet, si les méthodologies documentaires sont désormais l'apanage des praticiens du théâtre immersif et *in situ*, l'utilisation récente de la réalité virtuelle par ces derniers est quant à elle relativement ignorée par la critique. À travers l'étude des spectacles *Home*: *Aamir* (National Theatre, 2016) et *Notes to my Father* (2017) de Jayisha Patel, cet article permettra ainsi de poser les premiers jalons théoriques de ce nouveau théâtre immersif qui se veut à la fois politique et documentaire.

Keywords: VR, immersive theatre, documentary, politics, technology

Mots-clés : réalité virtuelle, théâtre immersif, documentaire, politique, technologie

> [T]he true transformative nature of VR is based on just how immersive an experience it can provide. (Mealy 254)

In the twenty-first century, immersive experiences represent one of the fastest-growing cultural practices in the UK. Whilst it is true that today's immersive performances within the UK's cultural industries largely derive from the early experiments with space in the 1960s, the current boom differs greatly in both nature and form from these past practices. For one thing, immersive theatre is now increasingly moving into the tech field, as it undergoes a digital transformation that is changing both the way it is created and distributed. Augmented Reality, Mixed Reality, and Virtual Reality have clearly expanded the range of immersive theatre experiences on offer.[1] VR in particular, which will be the object of this study, was identified by the Arts Council in 2018 as being especially rich for development.

VR is an emerging technology. It is arguably comparable to the personal computing in the early 1990s or smartphones in the early 2000s. As a tech, it will likely become omnipresent (Ainley 2020; Dunn 2017), but at present there are early adopter costs, and both head-mounted display (HMD) or headsets and controllers are still rather cumbersome. Currently, one of the main obstacles with VR as a technology is the data requirements. File sizes can be huge and have equally huge bandwidth requirements. For example, to stream a 2k file in VR will require a network connection of 5-7Mbps per device. If one has 10 units in any given space, then the requirement is 70mbps broadband. It has meant that while immersive technology could be a superb tool for the field of theatre and performance, it

has not been a feasible multiple user option to this point. In VR, the aforementioned bandwidth issues also restrict how many people can have this experience at any one time while streaming the content. To return to the comparison with personal computers in the early 1990s, content and experiences have been made for immersive media with an individual in mind rather than a collective. This is analogous to PCs' pre-internet. Once it was possible to connect computers, the experiences and tools that were developed exploded in both range and use. In other words, the point that immersive media is currently missing is the ability to reliably deliver group experiences. Once this is in place, people may start to see the technology in different ways and look at new and innovative uses for it.

However, these caveats aside, numerous practitioners all over the UK have already explored this new "wearable theatre" medium. Curious directive incorporated VR sequences into their 2018 play *Frogman*, whilst the influential Punchdrunk company also experimented with tracking and haptic technology, as well as VR, most notably in their 2016 Research and Development piece *Believe your Eyes,* in partnership with Samsung Electronics America. The VR experience can be gigantic with the creation of total environments as in *enter wonder.land* (a part-VR experiment drawing from Damon Albarn, Moira Buffini and Rufus Norris' 2015 musical *wonder.land*), or very small and intimate one-to-ones such as *Draw Me Close*, Jordan Tannahill's new memoir-play (a co-production of the National Theatre and the National Film Board of Canada) with an emphasis on visual, sound and the sensory. In some VR theatre pieces, the audience is invited to change camera angles, sit in the middle of the stage, and even influence the story's outcome. More importantly perhaps, VR has slowly but surely found its way into the most celebrated British theatre institutions including, among others, the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal Court Theatre, the Royal Opera House, the Barbican, the Young Vic, National Theatre Wales and National Theatre Scotland. Famously, one of the first things Rufus Norris did when he took over at the National Theatre in London was

to create the Immersive Storytelling Studio—a studio pioneering the use of VR technology and 360-degree filming in a theatrical context.

Unsurprisingly, documentary and verbatim theatres, which have a propensity for innovation and experimentation with remarkable incursions into the field of immersive and site-specific theatre in the UK and further afield (Look Left Look Right, Jericho House, The Paper Birds, Rimini Protokoll, etc.), are now starting to engage with VR in various shapes and forms. Another related point that may have become a determining factor in the current intersection of VR and documentary theatre lies in their shared interest in what Janelle Reinelt calls "[its] promise" (6), as regards to the latter. Indeed both VR and documentary theatre sometimes strive to reach a level of unmediated authenticity that is so compelling that audiences are often reported to experience a stronger emotional response. In that infinite search to fulfil the promise of the "real," VR technology can be perceived as a strong candidate to bridge the gap between the "real" (outside the performance) and the "real" within the frames of the performance. The first case study, *Home: Aamir* (2016) directed by Rufus Norris at the National Theatre, is "an immersive verbatim documentary" in which actor Sule Rimi plays the voice of Aamir, speaking his exact words taken directly from an interview subsequently shaped by verbatim writer Suhayla El-Bushra. As in most verbatim works, we are told at the end of the piece that "all words, sentences and context are Aamir's own." In 360-degree imagery, we experience Aamir's journey by foot: through the desert, via Libya, over the Mediterranean and to the inhumane conditions of the Calais "jungle." It is more or less a hybrid piece at a crossroads between VR films and theatre, described by Mark Atkin, curator at Sheffield Doc Fest, as "an entirely new type of documentary." More exactly, the piece combines the production processes and storytelling techniques of theatre with 360 film to create a deeply affecting and immersive virtual reality experience that takes us to the heart of the ongoing humanitarian tragedy that is the refugee crisis. The second piece in this study, Jayisha Patel's *Notes to my Father* (2017), is a different case in point: it is not made in partnership with a theatre, but by Oculus VR For Good and My Choices Foundation.

However, this VR experience also uses a mix of verbatim theatre and documentary storytelling techniques and is the world's first live-capture VR experience about sex trafficking. More specifically, the entire script—the voice-over in the VR piece—is verbatim, based on the transcripts of hours of conversations between director Jayisha Patel and the real Indian people whose arresting story she is conveying here through the medium of VR. The piece tells the true story of Ramadevi, a mother in India, as she navigates her painful memories of being sold to a brothel as a young girl, through the prism of a letter to her father who inadvertently played a role in her trafficking. The main characters—Ramadevi and her father—are portrayed by the real Ramadevi and her father who now work in solidarity with their local community to help prevent sex trafficking.

The Immersive Affordances of VR

For practical reasons, this article cannot claim the kind of extended space within this special issue on immersive theatre that a full-fledged panorama of the state of research in VR (within theatre and performance) would require. Nonetheless, a few reflections shall offer insight into current discussions regarding its engagement with immersive theatre practices, as well as a comprehensive view of its remit. When we say "virtual reality," what often comes to mind is some sort of goggles, or helmet that immerses the wearer in three-dimensional computer-generated graphics that respond to the wearer's movement. In other words, this is an immersive show that is all in the audience's head. However, this is in effect an atomistic picture of virtual reality, one in which an individual person is put in a digitally-generated false world, a picture that does not take into account our case studies, or VR journalism, to name only two examples from a very rich and expanding field of practice.

VR—the technology—is actually three things: it tracks your physical movements, redraws them depending on what you do (it redraws a world based on that movement) and it is display: showing the wearer's eyes, their ears and sometimes their skin, what the world is like based on

that movement. VR—the immersive theatre experience—is also three things: live, pre-recorded (first-person video) or computer-generated (computer game avatars). More precisely, VR theatre pieces tend to fall within the last two categories. There are either 3D VR experiences that take place in a completely computer-generated world, which allows the user to interact with the virtual environment, or 360-degree video experiences which have captured something in the real world. In the latter case that will constitute my focus throughout this article, the user or spectator can only consume the content. In other words, in this scenario, the content is fixed and cannot be altered by the spectator, adapted to reflect the spectator's engagement with the VR experience. To help think through the limitations of that analysis, I want to consider that there are currently four main ways in which theatre practitioners are using immersive video and audio technology.

First, there are 360° videos. These are 100% VR pieces that are not live theatre pieces in the conventional understanding of the term, even though in some cases the experience of shows like the VR musical journey *All Kinds of Limbo* (2019) at the National Theatre could arguably be considered as 'live' in the sense that the audience had to buy a ticket, had to be there at a specific time in a specific location and were never left alone to their own device with the VR headsets. The performance could welcome a certain number of audience members and the experience started at the same time for all participants or "immersants." In fact, to be more precise, there are now at least two ways of making these 360 videos in the realm of immersive theatre. Either, similar to LIVR—the world's first virtual reality theatre content platform—, a live theatre piece is recorded and the experience of being there with the audience is therefore recreated, or practitioners create an actual piece of VR, that is to say, in the context of this article, immersive pre-recorded VR experiences based on the words of real people as are both *Home: Aamir* and *Notes to my Father*. Second, VR can mean interplay between visceral and virtual worlds as in the aforementioned Young Vic's 2019 *Draw me Close* and Punchdrunk's *Believe your Eyes* (2016), which both integrate live actors into the VR performance. Third, there is a practice of intermittent use of VR

during a live theatre performance, as is the case in curious directive's 2017 piece *Frogman*. Fourth, VR immersive pieces can be more social in nature when one becomes an avatar and does things in a virtual world (the audience does not even need to be in the same room, or even country to engage in the experience), but it is not at present the main activity of VR theatre-makers.

Hardware aside, I want to argue that VR performances can be said to correspond to textbook immersive performances in that they put the spectator in the middle of the story always using sight and sound, and sometimes even touch and smell. In other words, they create a sense of intimacy. As in all immersive performances, there is no fourth wall to be broken and the audience is mobile. As Saikrishna Srinivasan and Gareth Schott have explained, VR helps to "bring audience 'onto the stage' and transform their status and role from non-participatory witnesses outside the play to co-presence" (478). However, VR also has some notable limitations to be reckoned with. These works never exceed 20 minutes for various reasons including the fact that they are very intense, and not recommended for use for a prolonged period of time. VR also blocks light and sound from the physical world, which contributes to the immersion, and, in that sense, it differs from conventional and analogue immersive theatre. Indeed, the spectators are not sitting, they are typically standing (or more accurately, they are walking, grabbing, and pivoting their head to see behind them, etc.), they are not able to see the other audience members and engage with them during the performance, and their experience is solely predicated upon their movement and is therefore very likely to differ from what other audience members have experienced.

Looking at the broad spectrum of VR performances, one must also recognise the specific immersive affordances of the medium, which rethinks the informal contract with audiences. Arguably, VR goes a step further than conventional immersive theatre when it aims to reinforce the qualia—the phenomena of feeling present. Typically with these shows, including both *Home: Aamir* and *Notes to my Father*, the nature of the invitation is predicated upon reaching the "affirmation point",

which is the point where a given audience member accepts the virtual environment as "real." In *Home: Aamir*, this moment may happen when we are first hearing the agrammatical and poignant sentences of *Aamir* and are transported into a replica of one of the Calais Jungle shelters, replete with detritus, dirt and chaos. In *Notes to my Father*, this moment is likely to happen after the delicate sounds coming from a cello start to fade, and the 360-degree camera takes us to what resembles a filthy brothel in India. From a technical standpoint, the quickest way to get a spectator to that point is by making the VR experience as seamless as possible. Under these circumstances, the brain cannot necessarily always tell the difference between compelling VR and reality. While it is possible to add extra detail or dressing to VR performances (for example allowing audience members to jump from one location to another), this is very rarely done as it increases the probability of a mind rejecting the experience as "artificial." Instead, the lion's share of time is spent in post-production making sure the playback experience has no noise and is properly graded.

However, as Johan F. Hoorn, Elly A. Konijn, and Gerrit C. Van Der Veer have jointly claimed, in VR, "there is always a contextual cue (e.g., the head-mounted display unit) that makes the user aware things are not real" (21). That being said, as in headphone-verbatim theatre—"a paperless form of performance featuring the faithful reproduction of speech patterns whereby actors are required to wear headphones and speak along to a sequence of carefully edited audio interviews" (Garson 51)—which saw the cumbersome headphones stop functioning as alienating device to eventually become a convention accepted by spectators (Cantrell 168), we can anticipate that audiences in VR may experience a similar process. Interestingly and in a similar fashion, Janet H. Murray, in her pioneering essay "Immersion" on the future of narrative in the 1990s, equates the immersivity in VR to the "sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (98). This idea of otherness is precisely one of the subjects of contention in VR, as it pertains to political significance and efficacy.

The Politics of Virtual Reality

> Must we, in fact, be overwhelmed to some degree in order to have motive for action? We only act when we are moved to act, and we are moved by something that affects us from the outside, from elsewhere, from the lives of others, imposing a surfeit that we act from and upon. (Butler 136)

What can VR do that cannot be achieved within a live, immersive documentary performance? Besides some undesirable side-effects such as simulator or motion sickness, eye strain and even reality blurring, the major difference is that these immersive VR pieces create like never before that sensation of being there, they make us briefly feel as if we were there with Aamir in *Home: Aamir* and Ramadevi in *Notes to my Father*, as if we were walking in their shoes. Indeed, with virtual reality, the gap between the real experience and mediated experience in the context of immersive documentary pieces is getting a lot narrower. In *Home: Aamir,* for instance, we are at some point immersed in a lorry representing Aamir's horrifying journey into England with twelve other migrants, which, in his own words, "felt like the last forty minutes" of his life. This might seem in line with Kate Nash's claim stating that VR "invites a distinct mode of engagement" (97). As such, we might simply conclude that VR's specific mode of immersivity heightens the way the performance is received, even though the presence of the voice-over in both pieces—the actors standing in for Aamir and Ramadevi—inevitably draws our attention to the constructed nature of the VR experience.

But what is exactly happening, affectively, in the experience of such immersive VR verbatim and documentary pieces and what is the spectator's body invited to do in that context? Do the exact words of real people—here those of Aamir and Ramade—resound more deeply in a VR context, thereby coinciding with more powerful identification and empathy processes in the audience? How exactly might these works be said to activate the audience's affective system at a time when, arguably,

for Julie Salverson "the ability to feel— ourselves, others, the world we live in—is disappearing" (143)? Conversely, is there not an irony of sorts in knowing that technology, which typically creates distraction and depletes our attention by constant solicitation and demand, is here portrayed as doing the exact opposite, that is to say making us pay more attention and care more about precarious lives?

More surprisingly perhaps, claims regarding its potential and transformative properties have grown exponentially. For virtual reality scholar Jeremy Bailenson, for instance, VR creates an environment that sets us for empathy with "the potential similar to experiences in the real world to enact profound and lasting changes" (2018). In effect, VR is raising our heart rates when we are in it, engaging us in ways we have not been engaged before in immersive and documentary theatre. It follows, therefore, that when the stakes extend to "real people" some different experiential correlates enter into friction that may be argued to yield a heightened affective impact. Put another way, they erode the sense of non-consequential safety typically associated with the conventional (fictional) immersive theatre-going experience. In addition to these, particular aesthetic choices shape the potential of documentary material to rouse audiences. In *Notes to my Father,* for instance, some of the harrowing words from Ramadevi's story appear in the VR piece, at the same time as we are hearing them, making them ever more potent.

But does representation in VR documentary theatre pieces ever acquire the affective power of the represented as Jeremy Bailenson seems to suggest? It may also be argued that, contrary to the alleged shorter-lived and more transient Aristotelian emotion, the strategic harnessing of such affects by theatre-makers may assist in the activist transference of experience to real life. Indeed, at the very end of *Notes to my Father*, Ramadevi addresses both her father and the spectators when she utters the following words: "We can learn from this," suggesting that the phenomenon in India, which tragically led her to a brothel can be halted with a better awareness of its societal ramifications and blind spots. Similarly, in *Home: Aamir,* the protagonist,

halfway through his story, as if conscious of who may listen to this, utters the following words: "You couldn't imagine." Arguably, such a moment of direct address can be said to encourage a deeper engagement with the predicaments of Aamir, and by extension, of asylum seekers more broadly.

However, scholars such as Paul Bloom have expressed more nuanced views, arguing that VR "isn't the moral game-changer that some make it out to be" (2017). Indeed, a self-administered VR experience, however real and immersive it may feel, is not necessarily transformative in itself. In the same vein, but without specific reference to VR, Patrice Pavis argues that immersive theatre "is not really comparable with the immersion of the ethnologist, which is necessarily a more long-term and cautious affair […] [i]n the theatre, it is rapid and limited, fictitious and superficial, remote-controlled by the team of the 'host' actors" (100). But is VR a mere trick for our brains, a mask of seductiveness to inspire pathos, as when Aamir in *Home: Aamir* shares the harrowing story of the death of his younger sister or is it an earnest means (against the reported current waning of affect) to move an audience to affectively and critically engage with perceived injustices such as those that happen in the Calais "jungle" (*Home: Aamir*) and in India (*Notes to my Father*) and to also interrogate how that reality/status quo has come to be experienced as true by audience members in the first place?

In VR, to affect members of the audience profoundly at a sensory level, this type of theatre strives (with varying degrees of success) to break up the conventional cognitive boundaries of realist theatricality and phenomenologically emphasise (or "manufacture") a correspondence between theatre and the real world: the felt intensity that what we are witnessing has an existence beyond the theatrical and VR frames. That being said, exposure to a VR documentary piece, however 'real' it may feel, does not guarantee that it will affect an audience, even on "a small scale" to reprise British playwright Dennis Kelly's 2012 words on the ability of theatre to change the world, nor that, even if it does, it will automatically translate into political activism or trigger

a transformative experience for everyone. In other words, the desired emotional response might never be achieved. Similarly, no firm conclusion can ever be reached about how and who a VR documentary performance or any kind of immersive theatre affects, due to the impossibility of archiving the transient experience of "being there." Arguably, such VR works might paradoxically reinforce dominant epistemological and affective frames by reproducing in virtual reality what Judith Butler calls the "tactical distribution of precarity" (148) currently casting certain groups as culturally, politically and socially "other." But these works may also be enabling in the way they challenge the affective frames underpinning mainstream narratives, what Bryoni Trezise calls "the 'feel-ability' of certain bodies over others" (3). Indeed, what these works can do effectively is allow audiences to spend time with unfamiliar thoughts, feelings and perspectives, thus enabling affective encounters between seemingly separate segments of the population that may not be possible otherwise.

Immersive Theatre of Crisis: A Preliminary View of VR's Potential for the Art Sector during the Covid-19 Pandemic

On 16 March 2020, the British Government responded to the pandemic by issuing guidance that "everyone should avoid gatherings and crowded places, such as pubs, clubs and theatres," prompting UK Theatre and the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) to advise their members venues to close, as well as face-to-face performances to stop across the whole of the UK. Clearly, Covid-19 has been a whirlwind that has severely curtailed many theatre practitioners' ability to create and showcase performances, including those immersive productions at the cutting edge of the sector. For an industry still reeling from the "first wave" and the consequences it has had on theatre attendance and ticket sales, the ability to offer a VR immersive theatre experience in perceived safer environments could be vital. Indeed, now nine months into a global pandemic with theatres closing again in the midst of a "second wave" and the backdrop of an economic crisis, it may be time to investigate anew the potential of VR and how issues relating to the

crisis may have moved on or changed for the field of immersive theatre—and whether any new problems or concerns might have arisen.

Undoubtedly, the recent crisis has significantly highlighted the lack of digital contingency plans, as well as the growing need for immersive audio and visual technology like VR, which has the capacity to give the spectator the experience of being in that front row seat with the complete agency to watch the performance where, when, and how they wish. For theatre companies that are attempting to produce live and recorded digital theatre whilst working remotely, VR constitutes not just a means to share creative content across borders, but a technology that can be deployed to safeguard access to theatre in the future, including both national and international reach and various levels of audience engagement. This would therefore seem to support a certain line of analysis surrounding VR: the seductive idea that this "new tool" will solve problems that we did not have in the "old normal," neglecting the fact that VR audiences are still a relative minority and that the makers of these VR technologies did not have theatre in mind. These considerations aside, there are some fascinating ongoing projects using VR, not least among them the "Livr cross border Rosebox project," which is seeking to create an immersive experience network. More specifically, this innovative European project between the London-based company Livr and several venues across the UK and Europe, aims to build a VR enabled network that has the capacity to share theatre and performing arts across borders virtually. Put another way, the system would allow audiences in one area to put on VR headsets and experience performances from other regions as if they were there. This supplements the idea that the immersive theatre experience through a VR unit is only in its infancy.

Once one drills down into VR's technical execution, as I have done in this article, it becomes clear that immersive technologies, and in par-

ticular 360 video content, bring with them a whole palette of new and innovative possibilities for the performing arts. More immediately for our purposes, VR performances are making important interventions in the field of immersive theatre and it can be argued with some force that the days of the Punchdrunk shows with mask-wearing audiences have almost certainly passed. My point here, however, was not that VR technology will start to replace theatre and immersive performances as we have come to know them, but that it is a worthwhile opportunity that has the capacity to augment these performances in fascinating ways. And we can only imagine what the immersive theatre scene will be like when VR eventually becomes mainstream, when the hardware increasingly melts away and becomes more affordable, and when new theatre-makers will have graduated from their "Virtual Theatre" training programmes. As the use of VR in immersive theatre performances grows, and theatre-makers understand better how to tap into its unique affordances, we can expect to see more affecting performances and stories that open our minds and hearts. In the hopeful words of scholar Shane Pike:

> [T]ools of AR and VR will soon be used to enhance live, embodied narrative through dramatic storytelling and together these forms will generate a new style and technique of immersive theatre that takes artists and makers to the next stage of human creativity. (120)

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[1] Augmented Reality is referred to as AR, throughout this article; Mixed Reality as MR; and Virtual Reality as VR.