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ZU-UK previewed two new shows in July as part of their Decalogy of Loneliness project. *Binaural Dinner Date* and *Good Night, Sleep Tight* are fully immersive pieces that blend real-time experiences with performance, technology and prepared scripts. ZU-UK research associate **Joseph Dunne** explains how it works and details their vision for VR and theatre

REALITY THEATRE

ZU-UK (formerly named Zecora Ura and Para Active), is an East London and Rio de Janeiro-based theatre and digital arts company that has been producing live art pieces since 2001. Our executive director Jorge Lopes Ramos and artistic director Persis-Jadé Maravala specialise in creating interactive performances using innovative models of audience participation and interaction. For Jorge Lopes Ramos, the ambition is to create unique experiences for each participant that "constantly confound expectations of what a live performance can be".

The two new shows we previewed in Stratford in July, *Binaural Dinner Date* and *Good Night, Sleep Tight*, display our skills in using an assortment of binaural sound, 360º video and virtual reality technologies to immerse audiences in theatrically playful worlds. The premieres were performed ahead of a full London run at Theatre Royal Stratford East from 16 November to 3 December this year.

Binaural Dinner Date and *Good Night, Sleep Tight* are part of Decalogy of Loneliness, our 10-part project experimenting with interactive technologies and public space, developing performance models that include found audiences who can enter into the piece by chance or accident. For this reason, we staged the two shows inside and around Gerry's Kitchen, a real café which continues its normal operation during the shows. During previews, capacity at each was around 96 people over four days, while for the main run it will increase to 72 per day.

For *Binaural Dinner Date*, we used the format of a blind date to explore the limits and possibilities of human interaction between six pairs of strangers. Participants state what they are looking for when they book a ticket (friendship, fun, love) and are coupled up with someone with compatible preferences.

The entire performance plays out as a mediated encounter, as participants are fed instructions over binaural headphones they wear throughout the 45-minute performance. During the inevitable cliché of a blind date, voices alternate between telling them what to say during an icebreaker and the daters' own naturalistic conversation. This is followed by an awkward silence that invites participants to gaze at the busy public throughway in front of the Theatre Royal bar opposite Gerry's café, and urges them to contemplate the complex interactions they observe among the revellers in attendance. We structured *Binaural Dinner Date* as a circuit of games and storytelling. The participants are hosted by the waiter, W (played by Will Dickie), who congratulates them for displaying enormous faith in humanity for attending. W acts as a conventional waiter by serving drinks, but also plays the role of games master and romantic anti-hero. W leads one circuit of games that range from staring contests to speed drawing. The winner of each game is rewarded with an intimate question that they then put to their partner.

We prepared the questions, but participants can choose to share as much or as little personal information about themselves as they wish. The other circuits include prerecorded dialogue between a couple that is relayed through the audio feed. The action is punctuated with the story of W, who has been working at the restaurant since he first visited the venue on a date. At that encounter, W was asked "What's the worst that could happen?" Unable to respond, his date left him alone at a table. He's been looking for love ever since.

> "One participant I spoke to expressed this sensation as 'being a performer in a play without having to worry about being a performer'."

For artistic director Persis-Jadé Maravala, the binaural audio element engages the participants in an intimate encounter by placing them in a micro-event inside of the larger performance. The instructions are carefully calibrated to ensure participants have a degree of agency in deciding the boundaries of the date.

Although the interactions are mediated, and so are in many ways tightly controlled, the burden of having to decide what to say and do is ameliorated by being guided with a relayed script towards a meaningful relationship. Sharing personal information becomes uncoupled from a sense of responsibility because the performance – and the words people use – give the conversations a fictive edge. The line between playing a character and being yourself is intentionally blurred so as to deepen the experience of immersion until the audience becomes part of the fabric of the show. One participant I spoke to expressed this sensation as "being a performer in a play without having to worry about being a performer".

In *Good Night, Sleep Tight*, we push the boundaries of immersive encounters in performance even further by inviting individual participants into a virtual reality world. Each person is greeted by an anonymous handmaiden figure who dresses them in pyjamas and hands them a cuddly toy before tucking them into bed. They are then equipped with a VR headset and headphones. At first, all they can see is the interior of Gerry's Kitchen, but when they look down they realise their body is now that of an eight-year-old.

They then hear a children's lullaby being sung to them whilst their face is stroked and their fingers are softly kissed. Turning around, they see a woman who wasn't there before (played by Maravala). She is soothing them to sleep. Suddenly, the participant is floating through the window and only a white space is visible until a wide vista of a village – a drone view of Bogotá – reveals itself beneath them. All the while, a child's voice plays over the headset asking them questions about the finite nature of their lives.

We created the out of body experience using games engine Unity, a software that is installed into Android-powered smartphones. The software is intended to be used for game design but this production shows how it can be applied in performance by using 360º video footage synchronised to live actions. The footage projects onto two screens simultaneously, which the audience experiences as one whole image. As it plays on a responsive camera, they unknowingly move when they look around them. The synchronisation of the live and the virtual creates a fluidity between the visual nature of the piece and the physical reality of the public space the audience find themselves in. A participant told me that the journey of the piece had the effect of watching a simulated dream inside a simulation.

"The thematic content shifts the adventure from a purely experiential VR simulation into the realm of storytelling," explains Jorge Lopes Ramos. "We are excited by the potential this technology has for allowing audiences to enter into an immersive dramaturgy where they are at the centre of the artwork."

BINAURAL DINNER DATE AND GOOD NIGHT, SLEEP TIGHT WILL RETURN FOR A FULL LONDON RUN AT GERRY'S KITCHEN, THEATRE ROYAL STRATFORD EAST, FROM 16 NOVEMBER TO 3 DECEMBER. FOLLOW THE PROGRESS OF ZU-UK'S DECALOGY OF LONELINESS PROJECT ON THE COMPANY WEBSITE.

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PHOTOS ALL COURTESY OF ZU-UK

Opposite page: *Binaural Dinner Date,* participants are fed instructions via headphones

Inset: Jorge Lopes Ramos and artistic director Persis-Jadé Maravala

Above and opposite page: *Good Night, Sleep Tight,* a VR headset transports participants into the bodily experience of an eight-year-old