

Everything live-stream, or what?

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<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/ebersberg/meta-theater-moosach-up-stage-digitaloffensive-1.5633788>

The "Impro Open UpStage" series at Meta Theater Moosach is a large-scale experiment: the participants want to understand how multiple theater and audience spaces, as well as analog and digital sources, can be connected - on an equal footing.

The pandemic has digitized us all. Suddenly, events are being live-streamed everywhere. Full stage in front of an empty house. But is that all there is to it? Is it really that simple? What challenges do artists face when they interact at a distance? Which concepts work well, which ones tend not to? What does "artistic quality" even mean in the digital? And what is the best way to implement a multi-hybrid model?

Meta Theater is currently looking for answers to these questions. Thanks to various grants, the small, fine stage in Moosach is now very well equipped technically, but a corresponding high-speed connection is still a long time coming. Part of the larger "Meta Theater #digital" project is a series of events in which new hybrid formats are being researched and developed. No wonder, since Axel Tangerding's house has always seen itself as a free laboratory that develops new ideas and then feeds them into the theater scene. And once again, Joseph Beuys is right: "The task comes from the future." In other words, the digital offensive is not only to be understood as a reaction to the pandemic, but also and above all as an investment in a new infrastructure that is intended to have a lasting effect.

A digital stage is intended to make it possible to explore new avenues of interaction

The basis for this pilot project is a platform currently under development called "UpStage." This digital stage is intended to enable new ways of interaction - between artists themselves, but also with the audience. In this case, that means that some of the creative actors are in Meta Theater and some are connected live from other places. And the same applies to the audience: some sit at home on the sofa, some in the theater. The result is multi-dimensional evenings, where various levels cross, overlap and - ideally - vibrate with each other. The artistic direction has been taken over by Florian Reinhold, alias Gaston, who as an actor, improviser, magician and coach is a convinced border crosser already.

The research team has already presented five "hybrid improvisation evenings full of surprises" - and has not promised too much. For what is really happening here is work in progress; the project has plenty of surprises in store not only for the audience, but also for the artistic and technical actors. To put it bluntly: The "Impro Open UpStage" series is still far from perfection. Nevertheless, it is worth attending, because the audience gains a deep insight into a highly exciting process. After the performance, the audience in the theater is asked to describe their impressions, and a stimulating discourse ensues between stage, technology and audience.

On this last evening before the summer break, it's poetry meets painting meets music meets magic. A kind of hybrid revue of numbers is performed - in the role of the red thread: Gaston. As the artistic figure Jacqueline, he leads us through the program, but also contributes one or two small art tidbits. Otherwise, the painter Max Ott, the spontaneous poet Daniel Graziadei and Lionel Dzaack, head of the digital section at the Pathos Theater in Munich, perform and improvise. The former is at work in Moosach, first at an easel and later at a tablet; the latter two deliver their contributions to the theater via the internet.

On the back wall of the stage you can see letters, paintings, films, even an avatar of Tangerding

The analog stage is supplemented by a digitalised back wall. The wall functions as a screen on which, on the one hand, the chat with the online viewers can be seen, and on the other hand, a part of the letters, paintings, films, and even an avatar of Tangerding wandering across the large surface. Applause comes both from the can and from the seats, and the viewers at home send plenty of hearts and smileys.

Initially, Graziadei supplements Ott's painting in real time with verses and word creations, and the audience is also called upon to "join in the poetry". Inspired by the brushstrokes on the analog canvas, there is talk of

the heart of darkness, of different colors, of the valley of sunshine. "It shines the world from the picture into the net - and now?" writes the invisible Graziadei. Later, Dzaack provides experimental, mostly spherical-breathy sounds; one sees his hands operating various devices, and at some point Ott begins to paint into the video. Abstract structures emerge, cables become independent, reality and fiction become blurred. Finally, the third act is performed by the two artists on site. Jacqueline invents one of her sensational spontaneous stories about an angry bird and the creation of the sun. Ott attempts to underline her words with digital art - attempts, because the painting program unfortunately doesn't really want to play along most of the time.

The main task of the technicians is to pray that everything will remain stable.

In general, the entire theater space is full of technology, with computers, cameras and screens everywhere. Four people are busy operating all the channels going in and out, creating a total work of art from the various sources. Their main task, however, seems to be to pray - that please, please everything will remain stable. Several times during the evening, things go wrong, but at which interface exactly is usually not clear. Then it becomes clear. The model "pause clown", which Gaston masters wonderfully, only works analogously. Meanwhile, the disconnected viewers at home are probably clicking helplessly around each other. "Why can't I see anything???" Jacqueline can not only chat and present, but also perform magic. This means that - at least for the analog audience - any technical glitch can be charmingly bridged.

"When the digital meets the analog" - it still stutters tremendously. Not only do the streams in various directions keep breaking down, but the analog version of the spectacle also has its pitfalls, especially when it comes to proportions and lines of sight. The easel Ott is working on, for example, would have to be larger in order to watch him paint without straining. On the other hand, Jacqueline obscures much of the poetry that magically appears on the back wall of the theater. So the evening is a challenge - for everyone involved. Keeping calm is the order of the day - and being attentive to those moments when the multi-layered new format works. Because there are certainly those. When artists inspire each other across genres. When sound and image develop a common pull. When supposed failure gives birth to unexpectedly humorous scenes. When boundless imagination makes one forget all limited technology. When touches happen, across space and time. Then a magic takes place that needs to be preserved and transformed so that it can work again on other evenings.

The developers of the platform are looking forward to suggestions from the practical test

"Impro Open UpStage" is a large-scale learning process. The participants want to understand how multiple theater and audience spaces, as well as analog and digital sources, can be connected - and on an equal footing. They want to synchronize word, image, movement and sound, to make the various elements dance with each other. And many will benefit from their experience: The team is in close contact with the UpStage developers around Helen Varley Jamieson, who are happy to receive any suggestions from the practical test. Together, they are treading the path to a multi-hybrid future of art, and there is still a lot to discover. The next step will therefore be in the fall.