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Who Laughs Last On The Hybrid Stage?

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Newton is a theatre designer and the professor of Stage Design at Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. For many years she has made video and other forms of tech central to her practice. Since 2007, she has designed stage sets and videos for theatre performances by Susanne Kennedy, Sebastian Baumgarten, Lola Arias, andcompany&Co, Eric de Vroedt, Davy Pieters, Boogaerdt/VanderSchoot, and Nicole Beutler, among others.

Abstract

The paper explores questions that open up our understanding of the use of tech in theatre and live performances. It investigates the challenges and possibilities of tech in the theatrical space. Our relationship with technology is now deeply embedded in the everyday practice of theatre-making. As a set designer and as a professor in the Stage Design class at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, I constantly come across the question: *How can we productively collaborate with each other in using tech in the making of plays and performances?* This question is central to my work, whether in the studio, the classroom, or on the stage. Technology shapes the spaces I design, and, in turn, it influences how I approach the collaboration between the performers, the audience, and the tools at our disposal. This paper investigates these shifting dynamics through a concrete example: my collaboration with Susanne Kennedy on *Three Sisters*, after Anton Chekhov, which premiered at the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2019 and later entered the repertoire at Vienna's Volkstheater in 2021.

Keywords: tech, theatrical space, set design, Susanne Kennedy, *Three Sisters*

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The hybrid stage: a cross-disciplinary experiment

The rise of digital media has changed the way we engage with both theatre and visual art. As spectators, we are accustomed to faster edits, layered visuals, and interactive experiences. This shift has significantly altered our perception of space and time in the theatre. I have always been fascinated by how this new media environment influences our dramaturgical choices. How do we engage with digital tools without letting them overwhelm the human experience on stage?

I will take a closer look at the meaning of the term *hybrid*, and then use my collaboration with Susanne Kennedy on *Three Sisters* as an example for extensive interaction between the performers and various media. In this project, neither the live material nor the recorded material would make much sense without the other. This crossover between stage and digital media raises important questions about collaboration, authorship, and the role of technology in contemporary theatre.

The term *hybrid* has become a catchword in contemporary discourse, from hybrid cars to hybrid events. But what does it mean when we apply it to the stage? A hybrid stage, for me, refers to the fusion of physical and virtual worlds — where the boundaries between stage design, video, sound, and lighting blur and overlap. It is an environment where the material world of the stage interacts with digital, virtual elements to create a new kind of theatrical experience. The term suggests a merging of different elements and, in this case, it refers to the intersection of physical spaces and digital media in live performance. A hybrid stage is not simply a mixture of live and digital elements but a space where both live action and recorded media exist in a continuous, reciprocal relationship. The two are inseparable — each influencing and amplifying the other.

The idea of hybridity goes beyond just mixing digital projections with traditional sets. It is about *interactions* — how performers, technology and space communicate with one another. In productions like *Three Sisters* and

others with Susanne Kennedy, the integration of digital media is not just a backdrop but a partner in storytelling. This interplay is crucial, as the digital and physical realms are inseparable in the storytelling process. We see a stage that both *is* and *is not* a traditional stage. This hybridisation becomes a critical space for exploring what it means to be human, to be present, and to exist in multiple realities simultaneously.

This phenomenon of mixing and cross-pollination in art — what the Dutch call *kruisbestuiving* (cross-pollination) — has been a guiding principle in my work. Digital media in theatre can bring forth new modes of engagement, but it can also distract from the core of the performance if not carefully handled. The challenge is always to find a balance where technology *enhances* the narrative rather than displaces it.

Three Sisters: the merging of physical and virtual worlds

In our production of *Three Sisters*, the stage design became an exercise in merging physical and virtual spaces. Developed in close collaboration with director Susanne Kennedy, video artist Rodrik Biersteker, sound designer Richard Janssen, costume designer Teresa Vergho, and light designer Rainer Casper, the production treated technology not as an add-on, but as a co-author. The collaborative process began nearly a year before the premiere, allowing conceptual and technical conversations to unfold simultaneously.

The starting point was Chekhov's classic: a play that has been performed countless times across theatre history. We asked: *How can we create a cosmos in which the Three Sisters appear in different realities simultaneously?* The answer was not to restage the play, but to reinvent the space in which it existed. The digital elements, from video projections to sound design, were integral to how the sisters were represented — sometimes in historical costumes, sometimes as soap opera characters, as digital avatars and, at other times, as older versions of themselves in the present. The blending of these elements created an overlapping, fragmented sense of time and identity, mirroring the play's themes of unfulfilled desires and stagnation.

Visually, this layered cosmos was achieved through an interplay of live and projected elements. A custom-built stage box, framed by projection surfaces and mirrored walls, became a screen onto which digital images were superimposed. A semi-transparent projection foil, a LED-lit ceiling, a front-projection shutter, and mirrors created fluid transitions between realities, challenging spectators to distinguish between the physical and the virtual. Is that a real wall, or a projection? Is the actor present, or an illusion? The confusion was deliberate.

The technology behind *Three Sisters*: blurring realities

Theatre has traditionally relied on the immediacy of the moment in which a space is shared between performer and audience. But in our increasingly digitised world, the incorporation of screens, voice manipulation, AI, VR, and real-time video feedback has redefined what constitutes "presence"

on stage. In *Three Sisters*, the creative team around Susanne Kennedy and I worked with a combination of pre-recorded voices, looped actions, and projected visuals that created a sense of estrangement — a deliberate alienation that disrupted the audience's expectations of emotional immediacy and theatrical realism.

In this context, technology was not merely a tool or an enhancement but it became instead a co-creator. It altered the very ontology of performance, where actors no longer performed in linear time, but instead existed in recursive loops and fragmented gestures. Our collaboration required a new language, one in which the director, the set designer, the video designer, the technicians, and the performers engaged in a constant negotiation between control and surrender, structure and accident.

Technologically, this production of *Three Sisters* would not have been possible without cutting-edge tools. A 20,000 ANSI lumen projector turned the room into a giant projection screen, with a variety of mechanical elements such as shutters and mirrors that contributed to the illusion of a constantly shifting world. The transitions between physical set elements and virtual projections were seamless, creating a dynamic and disorienting space where the audience could not always tell where the stage ended and the virtual world began. High-speed LED lighting, synchronised audio-video cues (via MIDI), and 3D rendering allowed us to move between hard cinematic cuts and traditional theatrical gestures. The mechanics of the theatre, like shutters closing and screens descending, worked in tandem with the digital architecture to create a hybrid form of storytelling. Playback voices replaced live speech.

The use of mirrors played a crucial role in this illusion, reflecting projections and distorting perceptions of the physical space. This interplay of projection and real objects resulted in a hybrid environment that was constantly shifting between different dimensions. The projections were not just passive backdrops; they interacted with the live performance, becoming part of the narrative itself. Characters appeared in one version on stage and in another on screen, making it impossible to separate the two.

At times, the projections included effects like avatars or pixelated characters walking through walls — references to video games and virtual spaces. Characters morphed identities, walked through virtual walls, and glitched across dimensions, like avatars in *Second Life* or *Oblivion*. These elements were carefully designed to evoke a sense of movement between realities, a technique that challenged the audience's perception of the boundaries of space and identity. This was not theatre *about* technology, but theatre *with* it — where the machine was no longer a background tool but a dramaturgical force.

Yet, working with technology on stage is not without its frictions. A hybrid stage can be disorienting, not only for audiences but also for creators. Timing becomes complex when live and mediated elements must align with precision. There is also the ever-present danger of novelty overtaking substance and of technology being used for its own sake rather than in service of meaning.

During the creation of *Three Sisters*, one key challenge lay in preserving the emotional resonance of Chekhov's text while operating within a highly mediated aesthetic. The result was intentionally uncanny. The performers' voices, detached from their bodies, created an eerie feeling of alienation that reflected the existential paralysis central to the play. But achieving that effect required experimentation and collaboration across disciplines.

In the traditional theatre model, roles like set designer, costume designer, and lighting designer are often separate, with each artist working in their own silo. In *Three Sisters*, however, these boundaries were less distinct. The collaboration between set designer, video artist, sound designer, but also with video and sound engineers, was essential to the success of the production. The video projections were not simply a technical add-on; they were integral to the storytelling itself. This kind of collaboration requires constant dialogue and flexibility from everyone involved, as the integration of technology into the stage design often evolves throughout the rehearsal process.

Collaborative possibilities: rethinking authorship

This transformation of theatre into a hybrid form also affects how we collaborate. During the pandemic, when *Three Sisters* was streamed online, it reached audiences in a radically different format. Though not designed for screen, its hybrid nature worked astonishingly well. Spectators described it as something between cinema and 3D installation. The shift in medium changed not just how audiences experienced the work, but how we as artists understood our own process.

Yet digital collaboration is not without tension. Recently, in another project, a dramaturg shared an AI-generated image in our group chat, intended to "inspire" scenography. The dramaturg had typed a few words into a text-to-image generator, and the resulting image — vague, romantic, and unmakeable — was praised by the team. I was confused, then angry. This image, far away from any material reality, bypassed the nuanced dialogue that is typical for scenographic development. How do we, as human creators, remain agents in such processes? What does authorship mean when a machine becomes the inventor?

These questions are not abstract. They touch the heart of what it means to create and collaborate today. To what extent can we still control our tools and use them to our advantage?

What I learned from the experiences made during this project is the necessity to rethink authorship and collaboration in theatre-making. Creating a set becomes a process of input and response across human and non-human agents. In this light, the role of the stage designer evolves into that of a system thinker or dramaturg of experience — one who must choreograph space, time, sound, and interface with the same attentiveness once reserved solely for sets and props.

The future of the hybrid stage: challenges and opportunities

As we look to the future of the hybrid stage design, we must confront several important questions. What does it mean for the physical stage when technology plays such a dominant role in the storytelling process? Can we maintain the ritualistic, human element of theatre while embracing digital tools? And how do we ensure that technology remains a tool for expression rather than an overwhelming force?

For me, the answer lies in collaboration and flexibility. As artists, we must be open to new ways of working and thinking, and embrace the fluidity of technology. However, we must also remain vigilant in ensuring that the essence of theatre — the human connection, the shared experience — is never lost in the process. In my most recent work for *NOW WE ARE EARTH / An Orchestra* with the choreographer Nicole Beutler, we worked with a choir of non-professionals, who were placed in the auditorium and on stage. The audience were very moved when choir members sitting next to them suddenly started singing. This showed me again that sharing an experience with live actors and live audience members is not only valuable, it is necessary for human connection.

Technology and environmental sustainability

Technological evolution does not exist in a vacuum. The sophisticated systems that allowed for productions like *Three Sisters* — projectors, lighting grids, 3D software — rely on highly funded institutions and heavily resourced environments. This model is under pressure in Germany and the Netherlands, where the political climate threatens the subsidy systems that support experimentation.

At the same time, there is a growing awareness among younger theatre-makers about sustainability. When I told students that most of our set pieces eventually end up in the rubbish, they were shocked. For them, recyclability is not a niche concern but common sense. This opens up exciting possibilities: using the material knowledge of theatre workshops in new, sustainable ways; integrating newly developed, ecologically responsible materials into production; rethinking scenography as a process grounded in environmental awareness.

The very technologies that enable us to create hybrid spaces also contribute to the over-exploitation of resources. The pressure on theatres to produce more shows with greater technological sophistication has led to an increase in waste and unsustainable practices. As artists and educators, we must find ways to adapt to these challenges, balancing technological innovation with a commitment to sustainability. For example, we can bring research on new materials into theatre production, ensuring that we are using resources responsibly while still pushing the boundaries of what is possible on stage.

The laugh that echoes

In *Three Sisters*, the physical set nearly disappeared. The stage became a white box — a blank canvas animated by light, sound and code. Eventually, even the sisters themselves left Earth, heading into space. For me, this dissolution of the physical world mirrors the dissolution of boundaries in our field: between real and virtual, artist and machine, stage and screen.

So, who laughs last on the hybrid stage? Perhaps it is not a person at all, but the process itself — the flicker of something unforeseen emerging out of collaboration between flesh and code, gesture and glitch. In this laughter, we find not triumph, but transformation. A new dramaturgy is taking shape — one that questions the binaries of live vs. mediated, human vs. machine, and control vs. chaos.

As theatre continues to evolve in tandem with technology, we are called not only to adapt but to imagine differently. In doing so, we may discover that the hybrid stage is not a compromise, but a generative space — one in which the unexpected becomes possible, and where laughter lingers long after the lights have gone down.