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## Carmen

A dazzling new production on Sydney Harbour

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# Ghosts in the Machine:

## Media Design for *You Are Dead. You Are Here*

In Christine Evans' new play, *You Are Dead. You Are Here*, seen recently at HERE in downtown Manhattan, Michael, a veteran of the US occupation of Iraq now living in a shelter and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, takes part in a therapy program centered around the use of Virtual Iraq (VI), an actual virtual reality tool used to treat soldiers who have been traumatized by war. Michael takes part in a VI exercise that replicates the events in Fallujah in which his Humvee was attacked, resulting in the death of a fellow soldier. Hannah, Michael's therapist, walks him back into those terrible moments, but there's a ghost in this particular machine: The program is repeatedly taken over by Zaynab, a young Iraqi woman who describes in grim detail her daily life in Fallujah and who interferes in Michael's healing process.

*You Are Dead. You Are Here* is an example of something new in theatre, a play that cannot exist without video media. Jared Mezzocchi, the media designer for the production of the play at HERE in downtown Manhattan, notes that he has been working with Evans and the director, Joseph Megel, on the project for three-and-a-half years. During a two-week residency at Georgetown University, he says, "We went to Walter Reed Hospital and were introduced to [VI]. We reached out to the USC Institute for Creative Technologies and Skip Rizzo, who created the software. They gave us the original program, and I figured out how to incorporate it into the show."

Virtual Iraq, seen on a television screen at stage center, appears several times in the play; Kittson O'Neill, who plays Hannah, manipulates the program from her laptop, while changes of angle and perspective are made by Anthony Gaskins, who plays Michael. "Michael has a joystick that moves the action back and forth and the head tracker to look from left and right."

As the action turns more complex and nightmarish, the whole of Melpomene Katakalos' office set becomes a canvas for video imagery. These are complex, layered looks created by overlaying VI sequences with live video of Kathleen Khavari, who plays Zaynab, and additional visual information that looks like video lines and/or static interference. (Khavari stands behind the upstage wall, which, when backlit, is a scrim; her face is captured by three security cameras.) These looks are largely created using an Isadora media server linked to an Edirol V8 switcher and to six ViewSonic projectors—three for front scrim projection and three for rear projection.

What with imagery emanating from the onstage laptop and from the media server in the control booth, Mezzocchi says his task was complex: "It was a really complicated schematic, and it took months to make it happen so the director and playwright could get what they needed right there and then. The challenge was to build a system that met any demands." He adds that behind Hannah's desk is "a cobweb" of wires going from the computer to the control booth to the on-stage

monitor. "This is the first time I've gotten close to the notion of the technician as performer," he says adding that O'Neill, not a member of the tech crew, sets up the computer onstage, in order to give the actress ownership of the technology.

Mezzocchi says he was concerned that the video would overwhelm the humans on stage; therefore are times when the presence of imagery is faintly projected on the wall with the stage lights on full, creating almost subliminal effects. "The biggest challenge was trying to figure out how the video fit into the story," he says. "I trained as an actor, and I always try to do a character breakdown for the media. What is its objective? What does it want? I'm always trying to figure that out."

*You Are Dead. You Are Here* is a production of Transit Lounge, a group formed by Mezzocchi, Evans, and Megel, and there are plans to remount the production, possibly on a tour of military bases. "We did a preview with an audience of veterans and therapists who use VI, and the talkback after the show was wonderful," he says. The play ran at HERE through June. — David Barbour

