

Red Ball: iPads in Performance

Marla Schweppe
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY, USA
marla.schweppe@rit.edu

1. Introduction

Now you see it. Now you don't. This red ball is real, mimed, and rendered. In this performance these versatile performers use magic, mime, movement and iPads to play with a simple, red ball and a few heads. The performers from PUSH Physical Theatre and the graphics created by Marla Schweppe combined to create Red Ball.

2. The Creators

PUSH Physical Theatre has been called "a cross between fine art sculpture and the hit movie, *The Matrix*," but its co-founders currently (and with tongue firmly in cheek) characterize it as: "like regular theatre...but more painful." Founded in Rochester, NY in 2000 by husband-and-wife team, Darren and Heather Stevenson, PUSH represents the couple's desire to "push" the boundaries of conventional theatre. Its physical feats can be awe-inspiring (hence the "painful" attribute), but the cherry on top of this acrobatic sundae is PUSH's ability to grab hold of audiences' emotions through exceptional storytelling.

Marla Schweppe is a professor in the School of Design at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Early in her career she designed for theatre, television and movies in New York City and other theatres around the country. She traveled through four continents and over 30 countries designing for Jennifer Muller and the Works, a contemporary dance company. She did her graduate work in computer graphics and animation and has been teaching computer graphics and animation for 30 years at Ohio State University, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Northwestern University and RIT. Her creative work includes the incorporation digital graphics in both live and virtual performances. She was the 1999 SIGGRAPH Gallery Chair.

3. The Process

Red Ball was created at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. In the original performance three students performed with PUSH members. The piece was developed from an original concept using a red ball as the consistent element and then imagining all that could be done with a red ball and iPads in combination with movement, magic, and mime. Many ideas evolved like placing an imaginary, mimed ball in mid-air and then having it appear on the iPad as though the iPad were a moving window into the imaginary world that would be viewed when someone walked past the position of the imaginary ball.

Some of the ideas involved a single iPad and others involved multiple iPads, like the cascade (Fig. 1) in which the ball 'falls' through five iPads from top to bottom and ends up rolling

across the floor as a physical ball. Still other ideas involved additional visual elements on the iPads. A blunderbuss fires a burning red ball into the air, which hits an imaginary bird and then the feathers fall and are only visible in the iPad 'windows'. Additional elements involve the appearance and disappearance of a few heads.



Figure 1. *Ball at the top of the cascade.*

4. Conclusion

Using iPads and commercial software we created an entertaining performance, which is now being performed in the repertory of the company from New York to California. The success of the performance depends on the expertise of the performers in timing their movements with the visuals on the iPads. In total, more than 100 short videos were used on the five iPads. Over 600 were created in the process of developing the piece. We are working on a second performance and a specialized application for the iPad that does specifically what is needed in the performance environment.

Links

PUSH PHYSICAL THEATRE, www.pushtheatre.org

MARLA SCHWEPPE, cias.rit.edu/~mkspph