

# Ben Kidd & Stefanie Schmitt

## episode 9

**The Culture & Technology Podcast**

<https://culture-technology.podigee.io>

Episode 9: A Laboratory For Imagined Futures

Ben Kidd (Dead Centre) & Stefanie Schmitt

INTRODUCTION

How can theatre use technology to enhance its experience?

Ben Kidd, one half of theatre production company Dead Centre, believes theatre must have relevance to modern-day society. Together with Stefanie Schmitt, a dramaturg and stage manager at Vienna's Burgtheater, we sat down with him to find out exactly what that means.

## GUESTS

**Ben Kidd** is a freelance director and co-artistic director of Dead Centre, a production company based in Dublin. Founded by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd in Dublin in 2012, Dead Centre have gained a reputation as one of Ireland's most innovative and exciting companies over that time.

## HOSTS

**Severin Matusek** is an editor, producer and strategist who has spent the last decade researching how technology transforms culture, communities and society.

**Stefanie Schmitt** is a dramaturg, editor, lecturer and stage manager at Vienna's Burgtheater. Her research includes dramaturgies of the digital, immersive storytelling and the interconnections of acting theory and neuroscience.

## IDEAS AND PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

- **Dead Centre** was founded by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd in Dublin in 2012. They have gained a reputation as one of Ireland's most innovative and exciting companies over that time. <https://www.deadcentre.org/>
- **The Second Coming** is a poem by W.B Yeats that was written in the wake of the First World War. <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/28/939561949/opinion-reading-william-butler-yeats-100-years-later>
- **Pepper's Ghost** is an illusion technique used in theatre, cinema and concerts. It involves using a mirror to highlight a hidden room that's kept dark and holds a 'ghostly' scene. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepper%27s\\_ghost](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepper%27s_ghost)
- **Beckett's Room** is a play produced by Dead Centre. It is a play without performers, telling the story of the apartment in Paris where Samuel Beckett lived with his partner Suzanne during the Second World War. <https://www.deadcentre.org/becketts-room>
- **Chekhov's First Play** is a work from Anton Chekhov that was initially dismissed as unstageable. It was brought to life in 2015 by Dead Centre. <https://www.deadcentre.org/chekhovs-first-play-1>
- **Die Maschine In Mir** is a play which requires the viewer to upload a short recording of themselves, which is then used in the performance. <https://www.burgtheater.at/en/production/die-maschine-mir-version-10>
- **Surveillance Capitalism** is a book by Shoshana Zuboff that examines how private companies use our data as a means of predicting and controlling our behaviour. [Surveillance Capitalism](https://www.surveillancematters.org/2019/03/20/surveillance-capitalism/)

## CREDITS

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Theme Music by Zanshin.

## TRANSCRIPT

### **Ben Kidd**

The first thing, I suppose the short answer to that question is a bit of a disappointing one because it came from my colleague, who is not here, he's absent, Bush, who, I think he would claim it just came to him in a dream, you know, it just sort of had a feeling. In English, of course, one of the connotations is Dead Center, right in the middle and you would often... it has a bit of a theater connotation, center stage, you know, and yet this feeling that what's in the center is not there, what's in the center is dead.

There's a kind of a literary reference in it. I think, for Irish, for the Irish certainly, which is the W.B. Yeats line "things fall apart, the center cannot hold" I've forgotten the name of the poem that's from, this idea that the center is no longer providing the fulcrum or no longer holding everything together.

### **Severin Matusek**

And how did you and Bush meet and what led to the founding of the company in 2012?

### **Ben Kidd**

It was an accident, we actually met years and years ago at university in the UK, we were both studying philosophy. I think I studied philosophy with English Literature, and we were just friends, we went our separate ways. He ended up in Dublin and I was living in London and he wanted to make a show, he was working as a performer, and he wanted to make a show and he needed a director, which I think really just meant he needed someone to make sure the lights were pointed in the right direction, because he performed the show, he wrote a piece and performed it, I went across to help him make that work.

It was a very small work but Dublin is a city that has a theatre community, which is incredibly vibrant, and very small and so what it means is when you start making work, lots of people see it, and lots of people talk about it, and you see everyone else's work, and you talk with them about the work they're making. It's a really brilliant, sort of vibrant place to nurture and cultivate artists at the beginning of their creative journey. Lots and lots of really interesting young companies emerge because there is this kind of very strong theatrical tradition, especially a literary tradition, we have lots of great playwrights in the 20th century in particular but also this kind of really interesting what happens when you make theater in a small city, basically, that everyone is communicative, everyone is kind of cross-pollinating their work. So we made a first show, and then it seemed to make sense to sort of make another one and we just, in the first few years, we just followed ideas.

If one of us had an interesting idea for a show, then we thought, what else is there to do except try and make it you know, we were a bit younger, and we weren't as worried about long term

plans. So we just kind of followed. So we never had a plan. We never had a manifesto, we never had an idea about what kind of work we wanted to make. Some people really do and I respect that immensely but for us, it was accidental, and following instinct, really an opportunity and then after a while, you look back and go, oh, we've been doing this for eight, nine years and you also go yeah, I guess we have found particular themes, particular ideas, that we keep coming back to.

### **Severin Matusek**

I find it actually quite interesting, which is also something I only realized now, that also with Steffi here, and you mentioned it before, you have this background in research and researching the history and the future of theater, as well as being in a super hands on job, I guess, as a stage manager, manager at Burgtheater and you, Ben and Bush both also have this theoretical background, you know, in philosophy and then this very hands on approach to theatre. So Steffi, how can we imagine your day to day life, as you know, stage managing one of the most important stages in the world at Burgtheater and then accompanying that with theoretical research into the history and future of theater?

### **Stefanie Schmitt**

Oh, well, thanks for the questions. It's a bit overwhelming, to be the academic. Yeah. What made me go to the theater was the interest in us as human beings, how we experience the world and how can we make like, in the Age of Enlightenment, we had all these new discoveries. The natural sciences, the new optical devices, the knowledge about electricity, and Pepper's Ghost and the telescope and the microscope and so we could experience the world in a new way and human beings became the center of the universe and where the authors like Friedrich Schiller, who was also trained a trained Doctor, where they tried to find out more about human psyche, and the soul. It's called *Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, the experience of the human soul. The observation of the human soul was very interesting for them on theater as a model of the world and I think, in your work, you use theater as a laboratory, and as a model of the world when I think of the Wittgenstein play you're doing at the Akademietheater right now. Use a diorama to explore, to tell the story. So just to play the ball back to you, can you explain what the audience is going to see at the Wittgenstein?

### **Ben Kidd**

Yeah, that's a really interesting description, I suppose, of theatre as part of this laboratory and emerging as this, this way of trying to put things because, yeah, I guess the stage, a stage has been different things at different points in history. It's had different metaphorical uses but always, I suppose what you're doing with the stage is putting the world on it, and we all watch it and see if we can learn anything, and there is something about the contained nature of a stage, I suppose, whatever the stage is, it's, it delimits the boundaries just sort of says, look at this, what do we think about this? What does this teach us or tell us about what it feels like to be a human? So we're making this piece, 'Alles Was Der Fall Ist', which we did the rehearsals for and

then put it in the fridge, as we're able to do in the Vienna system, which was started by Wittgenstein, thinking about Wittgenstein's book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. We were particularly interested in one bit of that book, and one bit of his thinking, where he talks about models and pictures. He thinks that language is like a picture, language functions like a picture. Language functions like a model and models are something that theater uses a lot as well to design stages, you make a model, and it's often a very, very beautiful process when you make these little models but no one in the audience ever gets to see them because you make full size stages, because models are just for play, right? Models are just for the preparation. So we wanted to try and make a piece that was based around models. So we tried to tell a story, using model boxes and found using technology, using video technology, and found ways to put actors in model boxes. In that show, without giving too much of that show away, for a large part of that show, the audience is watching, what we hope will seem like a strange, new, hybrid way of telling a story with these miniature models and then actors being inserted into the models. What Wittgenstein was kind of consumed by in his life was limits of what you can talk about, the limits of what you can think about and as a man, he was very perplexed and troubled about how to live, and he lived a very unhappy life probably in some ways and so the show also tries to test the limits of what theater can really say about human beings and human life, the limits of what this little stage, this little laboratory stage can do.

### **Stefanie Schmitt**

Looking at your work, I detect a certain interest in the fragment, the first draft, the unfinished play, because as far as I know, you've never staged the traditional drama, the written down text. So you just did the, you called it *Beckett's Room*, but there's another version of it called *Beckett's First Play*, as far as I know, and there's Chekhov's first play. So you're interested in the unfinished work?

### **Ben Kidd**

Absolutely. We made a piece called *Beckett's Room*, which should have been called *Beckett's First Play* but it was forbidden by the estate, for very good reasons, I think actually, because there is a real first play of Beckett, there is a first play from Samuel Beckett, which has never been performed, and which is, you're not allowed to perform. So we were interested in this as a starting point for a project. I think, really, we don't want to make a production of *Three Sisters* or *Hedda Gabler* or something because these plays are already finished, and they don't need us. We will only make them worse. You know, there's just no way we could stage *Three Sisters* and make it better than it already is. We will ruin it. We're not good enough and I say that as a slight joke but also it's kind of true. That's not really where our skillset lies. But we are interested in theater, which is this kind of crazy form, right? Where we do the same plays again and again and again. What other art form is there where that kind of repeating would be acceptable? I mean, maybe, you know, Hollywood remakes is the nearest analogy, but it's really fascinating that theater is stuck in this time loop. So we do the same play. We do *Hamlet*, we do *Maria Stewart*, we do these plays again and again and again and that's okay, you know, and it's fascinating that we do that. So we're interested in that but we're also not. We feel like we're not

the best people to be part of, you know, those things. What is fascinating though, is the idea of a theater text that shouldn't work, you know that the Chekhov First Play project was really exciting for us and really revelatory for us, because we, prior to making that project, we probably had been people who'd considered or maybe we'll do a play by Arthur Miller, or Schiller, or Eugene O'Neill or Beckett or something but then we came across this weird, unfinished first play of Chekhov's that he wrote when he was 18 and it's an absolute disaster. It's a complete mess and of course it's fabulous for that reason. A person you can see in it a person failing, and attempting to try and create something and not quite getting there and this just seemed to me to be, or seem to us to be the perfect thing, because the form and the content then are the same. That's ultimately the only thing we're really chasing, how do you find a form that such that your form and your content are not separate? That's, that's, that's what, that's what the task is, right? It's so hard to do but with the Chekhov piece, you're like, okay, this is an unfinished play, this is a disaster of a play. We don't try and tidy it up, we don't try and make it better. We lean in, we embrace that disaster and that mess. That was a good learning for us and something that we tried to take on always. You're just looking to see what form does this thing wants to be in?

### **Severin Matusek**

We're talking about the history of theater and traditional plays versus unfinished plays and what I found very interesting in in your work is how you explore the role of the audience and how you let the audience participate and think about new ways to make the audience participate and, you know, in this podcast, in our previous episodes, we've been talking a lot about technology as the great enabler and liberator and a democratic tool that allows more and more people to participate in some way of culture, whether that's creating music or being part of democracy and democratic processes, and so on.

So when I think about my very limited knowledge of theater. Theater does have this image of, there's a stage and there's the audience, and the audience sits there and listens, and then they leave again, whereas in your place, you try to involve them and let them participate. So we know historically, with theatre, have there been other periods or authors that also really thought about letting their audience participate in new ways? Or is this something that really you're trying to inject into theater that hasn't been done in that way before?

### **Ben Kidd**

Well, I definitely know this is not something that we are pioneering. Certainly not. No, this is kind of, certainly as long as I've ever been going to the theater, one has been aware of certain types of work that attempt to fold in the audience. Now, maybe this is just our particular experience but what is often noted, I mean I often think about, I'm British, so Shakespeare, and that great Jacobean Elizabethan age of theatre is our kind of, that's the thing that is always referred back to as being the kind of birthplace of theatre and the role of the audience in that period was so strange for us to really consider now, if you think about Shakespeare's Globe, the experience of going there would be just bizarre. It was always basically night. The audience was vast, sort of 1500 people or something, which is much bigger than any theater in the UK, really, now, very,

very few theaters of that size.-Most of them were standing up and talking to each other, and not really watching the play, and certainly shouting back at the play and, you know, interrupting the play, and the actors probably would have been speaking to the people individually. You know, the dramaturgy of the plays would have been completely informed by this, you know, that... And then the people seated up top would have been one row reserved for people who are wealthier and then the row above that would have been sometimes actually the Queen. So you've got this extraordinary social stratification of people in the theater and you've also got people who were all following different rules about being at the theatre. The people downstairs would be drinking and having sex and talking to people and carrying on complete parties while a play was going on.-In Shakespeare's text you can read it, you can tell his work has a breadth of tone, the tone is from high comedy, up to kind of high poetry discussing the nature of the human soul and I think that comes from the fact that he was well aware that he was dealing with, he was trying to speak to the whole world, same time, you know, and I think something happened to an audience where an audience became, you know, the theater became overall a bit more bourgeois and the theater became a little bit more of a rule bound place we lost a little bit that sort of whole world in the audience. We are interested in how to make sense how theatre makes sense of itself as a live art form on the night, as to acknowledge the audience and we're interested in the way in which theatre is also ignoring the audience.

### **Stefanie Schmitt**

Do you think there's a kind of evolution of the audience as we have all the digital technology with us, our mobiles, that became body extensions, practices of second screen, and you've spoken about the shortened attention span that we have, and I think theatre is changing in a way that it becomes an experience rather than something that you just go to attend from 8 to 10 at this specific location. You somewhere said, you need to start the show before the actual beginning of the show in the audience's mind. I guess this is the question that when we made this Die Maschine In Mir show and when we read around it, that is a very profound and interesting question for us all. We, basically what's happened, I guess, in the last 30 years, or 20 years is that the internet and technology has made us realize that large parts of our life is really about exchanging information. You know, you, you guys and me, we don't need to be in the same room right now. Because it doesn't really matter. All that matters is the information. These iPhones are just extensions of us, of course, very soon, the iPhone won't even be an extension of us, it will be implanted in our heads, you know, there won't be witnesses, we will seem very quaint to carry these little boxes around everywhere, you know, to find out when the next tram is arriving, we'll just access that information, and so you realize that you can, reading Marx books screaming, thinking, but human beings aren't just exchanges of information, are they? When I meet someone on a street? Is it really the case that I've just exchanged information and that's all the encounter,-amounted to? I think theatre has to step in, I think, for us, the idea of involving the audience in the shows, when I think about it, it's about charging the room and making experience for anybody who gets up on stage and everybody else who then knows that they could have got on stage, turning it into something kinetic and physical, and turning it into something material, as opposed to just being an information exchange especially so with the film theater, The experience is reduced to information, and the question for us as theatre

makers is, how do we get the emotion back into the show that is experienced at home, in our screens, and on our little devices? How can we facilitate trust in the, in the images that we see because we all know images can be manipulated, so we don't necessarily expect everything to be true that is going to be shown in theater and we need to get back the magic of theatre into the little device that is showing us the news and the yeah, all the information that we need to adjust?

## **Ben Kidd**

That's a really interesting point about truth. When you go to the theater, fundamentally, there is a truth going on there. It is just true that that person is standing in front of you and this person, their age, their physicality, these things are undeniable and so it's true. We really struggled when making *To Be A Machine* to come up with ways that we might be able to convince the audience it was live and it was really hard to do. The closest we came was to use the chat function on the video where we streamed it so that people could actually see their comments come up and know, yes, this is happening live but if I'm honest, it didn't really work because we were looking for something different from that. We were looking for something better, we were looking for something that felt live, something where the truth would be undeniable and that's very, very hard to find. Our video designer made the observation, when we were talking about how we might prove it was live. We were talking about, could you hold up that days newspaper? This is like a sort of cliché from the movies, you know, like, or it would be the real thing from hostage situations where people we, and is that really the only way we've got of proving that it's live, and we sort of realized, maybe it is, maybe it's the best way and of course, aha, ironically, printed newspapers, certainly where I live, will be extinct within 10 years, like they don't exist anymore, that the business model has died, you know, so you realize that these proofs, that something is real and is happening live, are fewer and fewer and that's fascinating and terrifying, because we might be sliding into a world where we would no longer really think that whether something is true or not, is our concern as citizens. We just consume the information and doesn't really matter. Theater being that and sharing the space does then becomes something that theater needs to fight to still be and I think theatre finds itself in a problematic position, because however much we can deny it, the buildings and the meeting spaces are incredibly exclusive and they exclude a huge section of society for lots and lots of really different intersecting reasons. Because the other thing, though, that I'm thinking as you say this, is that what theater has always done and must always do is to think about the world we're living in. That means formally, it has to understand that the worst thing could possibly happen would be that the theater becomes a silo or it becomes a cathedral, you know, becomes a place where certain members of society go to but realistically, it's not got its eyes open. And I've been encouraged by lots of theater work I've seen in the pandemic, which you watch on your laptop, but also on your phone using Instagram, you know, you attempt to try and whatever it was Beckett said, find a form for the chaos or find a form for all this mess. You know, that's what we have to do. That's what theatre can do. You know, it has such formal experimentation built into it. So yeah, how do we find a way that we still keep these buildings as being central, and your point about truth is such a good one. But doesn't become reactionary and doesn't become conservative, and, you

know, in and of itself, is scared of new forms of communication technology, because they are not going away.

### **Severin Matusek**

I love that that one thing you just said, you know, find a form for all this mess, which brings us back to, you know, theater as a model for imaginary futures and the role of theater. The other things that you pointed on, I think, what I find so interesting, and that's my question. Over the last 10 or 15 years with, you know, technology becoming such a big part of our lives, and social media becoming a big part of our lives, we are now accustomed to having all these feeds and information that is tailored to us personally. So none of our screens really look the same. So we have all of these experiences and the way we perceive the world, very individualistically, and now you talked about, Die Maschine In Mir, that this is like a common experience where a group of people, again perceive space and time together. Did you get the feeling from the feedback that you got from the audience that this is also a need that we have because we've lost it? Not already before the pandemic somehow, but somehow there is a craving of people that want to share the time and space together again?

### **Ben Kidd**

There definitely is an appetite for it. There definitely is a desire to do it. There's a sort of chemical desire in the body, I guess, to be with other people as the clock ticks by and, you know, experiencing something together. Your question is very provocative, though, because you're right. You know, we no longer all read the same news, we just don't, you know, we no longer all look at the same world really, in a lot of ways, in terms of the information. I suppose we're kind of really interested in the possibility of theater to be a visceral, bodily experience, and an experience that moves away from thinking about human transactions as being about information. We play a lot of games in our theater and tricks but we hope that these games and tricks are really only ever about unleashing and returning to an emotional moment. You know, it's the emotion that we're hoping to unleash and reveal, we're never trying to make a clever point because emotion is something and yet human. The space as Wittgenstein would say that, you know, the thing you can't talk about, the thing beyond words. That is a religious sensibility, you know, I referred to saying theaters can't become cathedrals at the same time there is something that we need to fight for, which is kind of yeah, to move away from just thinking about theater as information, and to move away from theater being yet just about communicating a message or an idea. I think the key is theater as a place where you just open up a space for a bunch of different individual people to be individuals and share a communal moment. They are all individuals. We are all individuals. The idea that an audience is one thing is not true. We are profoundly individual. So how do we find a space where we all share the same moment, and we all recognize there's individuality in a community?

### **Stefanie Schmitt**

What I wanted to ask is, when I look at the cast list of *To Be A Machine*, you see a lot of job descriptions that aren't regular in a theater. So the theater system doesn't provide these kinds of jobs. How do you convince the theater to employ people from different industries and what do you get back from them because they behave differently in a rehearsal space, we have our code of when to stay silent, what to what to expect of every different department and so on. So what can people from different industries bring to the theater?

### **Ben Kidd**

We don't do it on purpose but we find ourselves kind of doing that, with every project. With the Wittgenstein project, we needed model makers and the Burgtheater has some of the most brilliant craftspeople in the world, but they don't have a modelmaking department. We are consistently finding ourselves in a place where the expertise are not there, we have to go outside to find other people. It's not deliberate but we do like it because I love what happens when you bring disparate practitioners together. The vibe is a little bit different. It's more like the vibe, you know, like those Ocean's 11 movies, where like you assemble a group of weirdos together to make a project We've always liked the idea that there is no hierarchy. We come from a theatre tradition with a very clear hierarchy with the playwright very much at the top. And everybody else is just doing what the playwright writes and says, and we were radicalized out of that tradition.

### **Severin Matusek**

This reminds me of this interesting metaphor that you mentioned before of the theater as a tech startup, which you mentioned while talking about *Die Maschine* in *Mir* where, on one hand, you got data and information from your audience, each individual member of your audience that you would have never had access to in a traditional setting. So this allows you to build a different relationship but with what you said now of bringing all these different people together, it also brings up, you know, the old gospel of the tech startup as someone who disrupts, you know, existing structures in order to create something new. So, do you think that the theaters institutions or theatre companies should act more like tech startups?

### **Ben Kidd**

I hate anyone listen to this and thinking that I'm proclaiming a model of theater that is really along the lines of the tech industry. I don't know anything about a tech startup, really. So I'm sure there are lots of practices that go on within these hyper tech bubble companies that we wouldn't want to. We wouldn't want to emulate that yet. It was really interesting with *To Be A Machine* because we did then start thinking of our audience, like information. Well, two things happened. We started thinking of them like information, because we literally had spreadsheets with codes on to tell us how many audience members had uploaded for any particular night. And so we started to see oh VX. 2312 hasn't uploaded yet, you know, so we started to think about everything as data because if you think about things that way, becomes very addictive, you know. At the same time, though, the opposite happened because the audience, it's very

easy, especially for directors to ignore the individual quality of their audience members. Whereas we were making *To Be A Machine*, we got these videos, and they were beautiful. People sent in videos of themselves, trying to work their webcams and laugh when we told them to laugh. Videos themselves, where their cat walked across in the background, It was so moving, and so intimate, you know, we saw into people's lives. So for us, I still have memories of particular audience members of particular nights, both in Vienna and in Dublin. And I've never had that before, that strange thing, the tech industry has brought to us whereby we are all data, but at the same time, our experiences are completely individualized and we are treated as individuals. There's a great book, the Shoshana Zuboff book, *Surveillance Capitalism* makes the point that the move into so-called surveillance capitalism and individual targeting can be seen as the endpoint of the way in which consumer capitalism has given people what they want, which is a sense of individual autonomy. I would like a different car because I feel like I want that car, you know, now I'm not I'm not here to talk about political capitalism or socialism or political structures but there is something that this hyper-individualized tech world is giving us which is a which has a human need as well. The desire to feel individual.