

9 June 2016

National Theatre launches a new ‘Immersive Storytelling Studio’, which will commission new work specifically to be experienced through Virtual Reality or 360 technologies.

- **HOME | AAMIR, an immersive 360 verbatim documentary about a refugee who lived in the Calais ‘Jungle’ camp, will receive its world premiere at Sheffield Doc/Fest 2016**
- **a two-week residency with Oscar Raby, an award-winning multimedia artist**

The first major partnership for the Studio will be a collaboration with National Film Board Canada on a Research and Development Lab to advance the language of creative non-fiction VR.

The National Theatre today announces the establishment of an **‘Immersive Storytelling Studio’**, which will form part of the National Theatre’s New Work Department, in collaboration with the NT’s Digital Development Team. The studio will examine how Virtual Reality and 360 films can widen and enhance the National’s remit to be a pioneer of dramatic storytelling, to ‘place their audiences in the shoes of another’.

Theatre regularly uses technology to enhance theatrical experience, or to allow creative teams to do things that might otherwise be difficult or impossible. The Immersive Storytelling Studio will experiment, and commission new work specifically to be experienced through VR or 360 technologies.

Toby Coffey, Head of Digital Development at the National Theatre said: *“By working with the creative talents of writers, directors and actors within the NT’s network, we can*

identify exactly how Virtual Reality and 360 film could be part of the way we tell stories for the stage and beyond. The immersive nature of this technology is incredibly powerful and the NT is acutely aware of the importance of this as an advanced form of storytelling, and excited to see where our experimentation might take us."

The first project to be produced by the Immersive Storytelling Studio is **HOME | AAMIR**, an immersive 360 verbatim documentary. The film follows Aamir, a 24 year-old man escaping the threat of murder in Sudan. Aamir's father sold the last valuable item the family had to pay traffickers to take his son away from certain death. This begins a journey across Sudan, Libya, the Mediterranean, Italy and France. The film is the first in a series of 360 films exploring the meaning of home through the stories of refugees who have been living in the Calais Jungle, and is a collaboration between the NT, Surround Vision and Room One.

Actor **Sule Rimi** (*The Suicide*) takes the voice of Aamir, speaking his words from an interview shaped by verbatim writer **Suhayla El Bushra** (National Theatre Writer in Residence). The film is directed by **Toby Coffey**, Head of Digital Development at the National Theatre, **Erfan Saadati**, Head of VR Production at Surround Vision, and **Rufus Norris**, Director of the National Theatre.

Erfan Saadati said: *"Tasked with creating a compelling story in 'The Jungle', we made repeat visits to film and meet those living in Calais. We were overwhelmed by the conditions and daily struggle endured by the people living there. We hoped we'd eventually feel more positive about the camp surroundings, but each time we returned, and as the faces in the camp kept changing, we couldn't shake that feeling of helplessness. Aamir was brave to come forward to tell his story. It's horrifying to know that the 'jungle' was nowhere near the worst part of his journey."*

Rufus Norris said: *"HOME | AAMIR is part of our ambition to tell the most compelling contemporary stories and give a voice to the issues of today. Displacement and migration are defining themes of our time, which we as a society have to understand and come to terms with. To engage with that through this 360 project is hugely important."*

Mahdi Yahya, Managing Director of Room One said: *“Some stories are so extraordinary that even the most imaginative of us struggle to believe them. This immersive new technology puts an end to that struggle and lets us share in the grief, strength and hope of those at the sharper end of human existence.”*

HOME | AAMIR will receive its world premiere at Sheffield Doc/Fest, in an immersive installation, as part of **Alternate Realities: Virtual Reality Arcade**, a programme curated by Mark Atkin, at Site Gallery and The Space, from Friday 10 – Wednesday 15 June.

Mark Atkin said: *“It’s exciting to see the NT working on documentary through the VR medium. Theatre creatives work with spatial media, placing protagonists on a stage, which means they really understand VR production. They are able to combine the storytelling techniques of theatre with the presence and intimacy that VR affords, to create a new kind of documentary experience that allows them to present a fresh perspective on important issues- such as immigration- with a depth of compassion rarely reached in traditional media. I’m delighted to be showcasing HOME | AAMIR in the ‘Alternate Realities Virtual Reality Arcade’ at Sheffield Doc/Fest and look forward to the new VR work they are starting to create.”*

The idea for an Immersive Storytelling Studio was born out of the success of the 2015 VR music video *fabulous wonder.land*. The experience was the first VR project for the NT, and was seen by over 90,000 people at an immersive front-of-house installation alongside the musical *wonder.land*, on which it was based. The experience has been subsequently presented at festivals worldwide, including Cannes Film Festival’s first VR programme and Sundance Film Festival.

The Immersive Storytelling Studio will engage with pioneers in the VR and 360 technological fields, through collaborations and residencies. The first of these will be a two week residency by **Oscar Raby**, director of VR works *Assent*, *The Turning Forest* and *Easter Rising: Voice of a Rebel*, all featured in festivals around the world. Along with producer **Katy Morrison**, Oscar established **VRTOV**, an Australian digital production studio that develops immersive experiences and experiential storytelling.

Oscar will undertake a two-week residency at the NT in June 2016 to research and investigate the dialogue between the languages of VR and theatre, in order to develop VR work with the NT. The conceptual focus of the residency examines the idea of the VR user as a performer in their own narrative.

Oscar Raby said, *“In films, every time a character looks straight down the barrel of the camera we, on the other side, become aware of our place in the world. The frame works as a threshold between the story, happening in a world where characters live, and the experience of it, happening in a world that the audience lives in. Virtual Reality is shifting that frame of reference to a point where it is harder to identify where the fourth wall is and it does this by turning the user into an active agent from the moment they put the headset on - an actor in this world. I look forward to working on this idea with the NT, and establishing exactly how VR and live theatre might interact.”*

In Autumn 2016, the NT’s Immersive Storytelling Studio will collaborate with **National Film Board Canada**, one of the world’s leading documentary, animation and interactive producers, to explore and advance the language of creative non-fiction VR storytelling. The three-week project will engage acclaimed theatre artists and creatives from the UK and from Canada to develop work which will combine the strengths of the institutions in creative documentary, theatre and VR production. Further details to be announced.

David Oppenheim, Producer at National Film Board Canada (NFB), said: *“The NFB has a rich history of documentary storytelling and creative experimentation. We’re excited to bring that experience to bear to help define the language of documentary VR. This partnership with the NT is an important part of our upcoming explorations in this space and we are delighted by the unique possibilities opened up by combining the traditions of our respective organisations.”*

Toby Coffey said: *“I have long admired the work of the NFB- they are one of the most critically acclaimed storytellers in the industry. It is very exciting that we are partnering on this project and that we will get to explore together documentary theatre and verbatim theatre using these new forms of immersive storytelling.”*

ENDS

Press Contacts

National Theatre:

Emma Hardy, Press Officer Tel: 0207 452 3231 / ehardy@nationaltheatre.org.uk

National Film Board of Canada:

Lily Robert, NFB Communication Director Tel: 1 514 296 8261 / l.robert@nfb.ca

Notes to Editors

About Sheffield Doc/Fest

Sheffield Doc/Fest is a world leading, and the UK's premier documentary festival, celebrating the art and business of documentary. They are a hub for all documentary and factual content across all platforms, from feature length to shorts, and including virtual reality and interactive projects.

The festival comprises:

- Film programme for the very best UK and international documentaries;
- Alternate Realities for digital and interactive innovation;
- Talks & Sessions to inspire, inform and debate;
- Marketplace for UK & international business.

Every year, Sheffield Doc/Fest is proud to connect thousands of creatives in a nurturing environment, resulting in the discovery of new talent, new collaborations and new commissions for cinema, television and online. They aim to create a festival experience that is creatively inspiring and the place for pioneering and innovative ideas, projects and thinking. Sheffield Doc/Fest welcomes over 30,000 documentary-makers and lovers each year, including 3,500 industry delegates from over 60 countries. This year, the festival takes place 10 - 15 June 2016.

About Room One

Room One is a group of companies spanning art, theatre, film, music, media, and TV. It partners with artistic organisations to encourage the adoption of ground breaking new technologies, such as virtual reality.

About Surround Vision

Surround Vision is a full service 360° production company specialising in VR film, documentary, interactive content, and apps for the new generation of digital audiences. Constantly pushing the boundaries of VR production, they deliver beautiful films, stunning mobile VR applications, and engaging and immersive 360° content. Based in London, Los Angeles and the Netherlands, and with over six years at the forefront of commercial 360° production, their award winning teams produce content for broadcast, advertising and commercial clients, and they work with some of the most progressive agencies and brands around the world including: Budweiser, Tate Modern, EA Games, Land Rover, Sky, Chivas Regal, BBC, Nike, Disney, Virgin, Intel, RayBan, The Guardian, Channel 4 and the United Nations.

About Oscar Raby and VRTOV

Oscar Raby is an award-winning multimedia artist and Creative Director of independent digital production studio VRTOV. His Virtual Reality documentary *Assent* (2013), about the Chilean dictatorship, has been exhibited world-wide including screening at Sundance New Frontier, IDFA DocLab and Sheffield Doc/Fest where it received the Audience Choice Award for Cross-platform.

VRTOV is a Virtual Reality production studio pioneering powerful immersive experiences and experiential storytelling. VRTOV's most recent productions are *The Turning Forest*, which had its world premiere at Tribeca Film Festival 2016 and was named one of Wired Magazine's '8 Best VR Experiences at Tribeca'; and *Easter Rising: Voice of a Rebel*, which premiered at Sheffield Doc/Fest 2016 www.vrto.com

About National Film Board Canada

The National Film Board of Canada (NFB) is one of the world's leading digital content hubs, creating groundbreaking [interactive](#) documentaries and animation, mobile content, installations and participatory experiences. NFB interactive productions and digital platforms have won 100 awards, including 17 Webbys. To access acclaimed NFB content, visit NFB.ca or download its [apps](#) for smartphones, tablets and connected TV.

About The National Theatre

The National Theatre is dedicated to making the very best theatre and sharing it with as many people as possible. We produce productions on the South Bank in London each year, ranging from re-imagined classics to modern masterpieces and new work by contemporary writers and theatre-makers. The National's work is seen on tour throughout the UK, in London's West End, internationally (including on Broadway) and in collaborations and co-productions with regional theatres.

National Theatre Live, which broadcasts live performances to cinema screens internationally, is now celebrating its 7th year and has been experienced by over 5.5 million people worldwide in 200 countries. For more information, visit www.NTLive.com. The Clore Learning Centre at the NT is committed to providing programmes for schools, young people, families, community groups and adult learners. The nationwide youth theatre festival [Connections](#) and playwriting competition [New Views](#) engage thousands of young people around the country. Further, over 2,200 secondary schools have signed up to the free streaming service, [On Demand in Schools](#) since its launch in September 2015.

In 2015-2016 the NT:

- Staged 34 productions and gave 3,057 performances in the UK and internationally.
- Reached audiences of over 787,000 on the South Bank, and over 3.7 million worldwide (South Bank, West End, touring and NT Live).
- Broadcast, via the [NT Live](#) programme, to nearly 1.5 million people around the world.
- Engaged with over 189,000 participants through the NT Learning events programme.

nationaltheatre.org.uk

@nationaltheatre