

THIS IS A THEATRE NOW

Recipes for recreating performance conditions in an era of social distancing

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31st May 2020

This spring, Irish theatre-maker John Doran presented an online play. He called *We're In Here (Parts 1, 2, & 3)* a #videoastheatre experience. Doran asked his audience to spare a thought for their viewing circumstances:

Some light criterion to embolden the experience of theatrical-audience-concession (how to mentally approach this since I can't physically put you in an arranged (?) space)

- For better or for worse, give it the attention that you would a live play which you are physically at
- Watch it in the dark
- Listen with headphones or like, a good speaker (it's bassy)
- If you can, watch it on something larger than a phone
- Like when you actually attend a theatre; take a moment to think about where you are and when ... (still working on how to simulate foyer-anxiety)
- For the love of God, do not feel pressured by any of this. **THIS IS YOUR EXPERIENCE FOR YOU** (like real plays) if you're arsed. We're havin'a'laugh.

A Twitter review of *We're In Here*: "This is pretty sly, and reminds you how plays mess with your brain."

Going to to the theatre is letting your brain be messed with: it's entering a space you don't own or administer, accepting entertainment as presented, promising not to interrupt it, agreeing to suspend your disbelief, and defending other people's right to share that experience. It's generosity and abandon. It's simultaneity and unpredictability. It's messy, and it messes with.

If big-style shared experiences have to stay off the menu for much longer than expected, the questions about theatre go beyond how we continue to co-create and share content:

How can we recreate, both for and as audiences, the conditions of watching performances?

Start from the concept of theatre as place, and travel towards theatre as a set of circumstances: What does it mean to walk into a theatre? What are you taking on and giving up when you cross that threshold? What are the rituals and circumstances that set up and hold the act of performance and witness?

We're seeking a new suspension of disbelief: We have too much control over our viewing and listening situations and we have to pretend to give it up.

One-to-one performance and non-traditional theatre spaces both hold helpful clues about how to do this — to allow someone else to temporarily design our space, to follow instructions, to step into a fresh situation and cede control.

Most of my practice as dramaturg and producer with Accidental Theatre has involved performance in non-traditional or reclaimed spaces: We break the 'rules' of how these spaces are supposed to function (office, warehouse, bank) and devise the architectural and interpersonal aspects that welcome and guide people through theatrical performances: **THIS IS A THEATRE NOW**.

Playwrights' Bootcamps are an Accidental project that give playwrights the space to experiment with theatricality. At our first Bootcamp (2014), one of the day-long workshops focused on one-to-one theatre. Each writer was given the simplest ingredients to construct a solo performance to be experienced by one audience member at a time.

1. A space (room, stairway, hallway, walk-in closet)
2. One light source (overhead light, cigarette lighter, lamp, candle)
3. Themselves (voice, body, ideas...)
4. One audience member

A simple recipe yielded a motley spread of tiny plays: a singing lesson on a stairwell, a candlelit tour of an imaginary apartment in a toilet, a bedtime story illustrated with shadow puppetry, etc. They paid close attention to every corner of the performance, inviting the audience member in, creating a sense of occasion.

These intimate performances in non-traditional spaces were tiny experiments in trust and proximity. Theatre can teach us new ways to be close and help us devise new rules for navigating space together.

Even after we have emerged from our cocoons, collective safety will still be paramount, maybe including social-distancing measures that render theatre buildings impossible. (Dublin's Abbey Theatre, for example, normally has a capacity of 492; to safely maintain social distancing in the auditorium, that would be slashed to 48.) Even after social distancing measures are relaxed, the instinct to isolate may be tough to suppress. Older and immune-compromised folks may need to wait much longer before they can visit established and readymade performance spaces. Differently abled people and those experiencing chronic illness or mental-health challenges all may have accessibility needs that count out traditional theatre venues too.

What tools can theatre-makers and audience members use to create radical accessibility, summoning and welcoming unpredictability? One-to-one performances, designed consciously to turn people's everyday spaces into theatres-for-the-moment, could tap into that sense of generosity and abandon.

Here's a brief ingredients list (not exhaustive) — your own performance recipes to follow:

- **Entrance or threshold** — invite them into the play
- **Senses** — incorporate tactile and experiential elements and use all five senses (smell and taste are woefully underused in traditional spaces)

- **Agency** — does the audience interact with or affect the story/experience?
- **Programme** — it's the story about what you're about to see, the thing you will carry away after: e-mail or post it
- **Shopping list or scavenger hunt** — things to find around the house or have on hand
- **Watching environment** — how should they watch? (under the duvet with headphones, standing at the kitchen sink)
- **Kits** — introduce physical objects that transform a person's everyday environment
- **Scores and soundwalks** — borrow from sonic art: record instructions for a guided walk around the neighbourhood or write a score for a solo performance, e.g. Yoko Ono's '13 Days Do-It-Yourself Dance Festival' (1967)
- **Exquisite Corpse** — borrow from the 1920s surrealists: begin stories that travel from home to home with a new element added each time
- **Technology** — it's all fair game: phones, Skype, Zoom, Otter transcriptions ... use apps to make, share and discuss plays
- **Afterlife** — what's retained, destroyed, shared or remembered?

Approach it with curiosity and mischief.

Play and improvise.

Mess around.

Let yourself be messed with.

Notes

Doran, John. *We're In Here (Parts 1, 2 & 3)*. Digital play (2020)

Nestleroth, Callie. "Making Theatre in Non-Traditional Venues". HowlRound (2018)

Ono, Yoko. *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions & Drawings*. Simon & Schuster (1970)