

# She Wants You To Kiss Her: Negotiating Risk in the Immersive Theatre Contract

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## Introduction

The four performances discussed in this article were presented together as part of the *InOnTheAct* Festival produced by The Lowry Theatre, Salford Quays, in Autumn 2012. Advertised in the Festival flyer as 'intimate' and 'risk-taking', they can broadly be identified as immersive theatre productions. The Festival took place in and around Salford Quays, amidst the public 'piazzas' and neon-lit, glass-fronted buildings of Media City leased to national broadcasters and the University of Salford. The performances were located in local shops, in an abandoned factory unit, and in a listed 14<sup>th</sup>-century building abutting a residential area of Salford, all within a mile of the Lowry Theatre. In *Borderline Vultures*, Happystorm Theatre an abandoned factory environment is not only 'set' in advance by professional theatre designers but is also re-generated, re-conceived or reset, as a result of participants' spontaneous and haptic encounter with objects, installations, machinery, sounds and light. For *The Situation Room*, Oscar Mike installed an elaborate world amongst the extractor fans and breeze-block walls of an unfinished space designed for another purpose as a retail outlet. Triangle Theatre (*Between You & Me*) re-purposed a treasured heritage space in order to trouble a dominant historical interpretation of the site. In Look Left Look Right's *You Once Said Yes*, participants explore the familiar environment of a vast shopping centre, while receiving subtle messages that intrude on the navigation of spaces, warping signs and gestures that are usually relied upon as co-ordinates.

Defining her criteria for immersive events, Josephine Machon states that: '[t]o be immersive the event must establish a unique 'in-its-own-world'-ness, which is created through a dexterous use of space, scenography, sound, duration within interdisciplinary (or hybridised) practice' (Machon, 2013, 238). If there is an inherent tension here, it is that immersive events can be understood to encompass the separate, self-contained, qualities of a theatrical event on stage and yet 'rub up' against other realities, such as everyday life in public spaces. Different communities can encounter a theatre festival as an equal and open event-space whether or not they are aware of any publicity, and regardless of their awareness of the work of the companies involved. Immersive events and practices occur at the limits of both the theatrical and the everyday, and call into question the boundary between them. The participant maintains an on-going encounter with others in these locations, such as insouciant shop attendants and everyday shoppers, at the same time as looking for meaning in almost every available sign. The participant in all these examples needs to negotiate slippage between the 'fictional' and the 'real' as they alternate between the two, and sometimes the real and fictional collide.

The term 'immersive theatres' is understood in this discussion as a range of modes of interaction that trouble the rituals of everyday life and the conventions of established audience behaviour. The practitioners and producers whose work is examined here promote a fluid movement not only between performers and self-selected participants but also between participants and those who are using the spaces of performance for entirely different purposes. These companies seem to foster and embrace porous theatrical environments which draw on the imaginative

powers of all participants, witting and unwitting, voluntary and involuntary. Machon's use of the term 'dexterous' (2013, 238) to characterise eclectic and hybridised immersive theatre practices suggests a nimble manipulation by theatre-makers of space and scenography to generate sensory environments and experiences. Their dexterity disorients participants, challenging their expectations and investments, as we shall see in the examples addressed below.

Immersive theatre practices have the potential, temporarily, to reconfigure the regulation of public and private space by powerful developers, zealous security staff, and those with cultural capital. For in the immersive environment, 'reality' and make-believe can co-exist in subtle, disorientating or playful ways that restore power to leisure users and everyday consumers. Immersive theatre can offer temporary, alternative worlds; this is one of its charms, for artists and 'lay participants' alike. According to Quays Arts and Cultural Development Manager at the time of the Festival, Kathy McArdle, bringing immersive theatre to these sites was an opportunity to 'inject life' into the new Quays environment, if not to challenge the corporate interests so visibly represented by the new, dominant architecture and attendant security presence.

Programmers at the Lowry Theatre who commissioned the four productions were closely involved in the process of re-configuring work seen at other festivals with other themes in order to situate it properly within the *InOnTheAct* Festival. They seem particularly conscious of the element of risk involved in immersive play and of the possibility that once artists and programmers 'disappear' behind the 'scenes' in

these environments, or slip into the crowd in urban spaces in order to facilitate participant agency, participants, in fact, can feel exposed, stranded and script-less. In precedents such as *Lecture Notes on a Death Scene* (Analogue, 2011), for instance, the audience member is left almost entirely alone. For the duration of the studio-based production they are seated in front of a mirror reflection of themselves, and subject to the gentle brushing of light objects and tricks of the mind. In more extreme examples, audiences may experience loss of face, embarrassment, or humiliation, as in Ontroerend Goed's *Audience* (Edinburgh Festival, 2011), a piece which plays on the audience's acute fear of being singled out and their reaction to an apparently singled-out member of the audience being humiliated.<sup>i</sup>

The Lowry supported the festival in Salford partly because the producers wanted to introduce such cutting-edge experiences to the Lowry programme. They saw in immersive theatre the potential to develop new audiences, but recognised that this meant inculcating familiarity with the specific demands and contingencies of this kind of event. David Fry, Producer of the Lowry's three theatre spaces is keenly aware of the price, both personal and financial, of producing immersive theatre experiences:

[M]ore and more people want to be involved in something that's exciting [...] They don't know what's going to happen to them, and that's part of the attraction [...] We want to give them those risks [but] the economics of that are that it costs a lot of money. (Fry, interview).

Financially, the balance of intimacy and audience development can present a dilemma for producers. So often the audience is not new, but, rather, friends and professional associates of the company devising the work. When the experience is intimate, or, as in the case of *Look Left Look Right*, for one person at a time, the number of people experiencing such work for the first time is necessarily limited. But

an ambivalent and tendentious audience-performer exchange such as that presented in *Audience* was not the kind of interaction that the Programmer for the Lowry Studio, Porl Cooper, wanted for audiences in Salford. According to Cooper, the characteristic that would connect the four companies during a Festival of immersive theatre would be 'the experience'. Referring to the demands of self-direction in the immersive theatre experience, he explained:

[I]t takes you out of that safety of your auditorium seat [and] people associate the work I'll be doing in the studio with being taken completely out of your comfort zone [but] I didn't want the situation where audience members are left to carry it themselves because that's their nightmare idea of what this kind of thing is. You want to bring people into it not scare them off.

Echoing Cooper's concern, regular Lowry audience member Ian Cummins said he would avoid any kind of work that put him on the spot, associating immersive theatre with the participatory heavy handed-ness of the modern British pantomime.

Cooper observes that some recent work has developed subtle devices to instruct audiences in the conventions of immersive interaction at threshold moments. An initiation or induction may help to mitigate against feelings of exposure, from intrusions into personal physical space to feelings of infantilisation (those associated by Cummins with established forms of staged interaction such as pantomime). In the introductory phase of Chris Thorpe and Hannah Jane Walker's touring work *The Oh Fuck Moment* (2012), participants are invited to take a cup of tea. Much as in Look Left Look Right's induction (discussed below), this offer establishes a principle of acceptance and 'going with', without needing to know what purpose the offer may serve later on. Audience members take a cup of tea, even if they don't like tea, not

only in the conventional sense of the 'relaxing' social ritual, but in order to become participants. The cup becomes a tool and the tea a conduit for immersive participation, simply because it 'might be useful later' (Cooper, interview).

The pitfalls (or attractions) of potential embarrassment are offset by the appeal (or labour) of creative practices that afford a more democratic involvement in the experiences on offer. Producers of immersive events are aware that confident participants may take liberties with performers, objects and other participants, while other participants will conform rather than risk 'breaking' the work. As the contract of engagement and the degree of risk in the immersive environment are both necessarily in the process of being enacted in this sense, boundaries between make-believe and real tend to be contingent on the previous knowledge a participant has about theatre processes. This presents practical and ethical questions for artists devising such work, who must draw in 'naïve' participants alongside seasoned ones, all within a real-seeming immersive environment.

Despite, or perhaps because, immersive theatre practices espouse immediacy of experience, spontaneity and innovation, they seem inclined to draw on traditional, realist characterisation paradigms, as a common performance language. The terms of the contract are most visibly initiated in the appearance and manner of the performer. If it is recognisable, the performers' style and language can be easily adopted by participants; hence, the parameters of performance remain relatively narrow. This is further informed by existing and 'accepted' determinants of everyday 'natural' behaviour in public spaces. Under such conditions, a contractual framework is erected hastily and with limited tools. In the next section, I will argue that

immersive performance may derive much of its dramatic tension from awareness of the insecurity and potential collapse of narrative and illusion, an awareness shared by professional performers and participants within the event contract.

Happystorm, *Borderline Vultures*: uneasy celebration

*Borderline Vultures* (2011) is a production by Happystorm Theatre that examines some of the difficulties with social integration experienced by migrant workers including obstacles to communication and understanding. Drawing on interviews with migrant workers in Salford and performed by an international cast, the production requires participants to enter a factory and work out the codes and procedures of a strange organisation. Participants appear to embrace the challenge of this puzzle, as in so many immersive events, but are less prepared for the sense of frustration and inertia that arises from not understanding their function within the process of fabrication. Nor is it possible to say what is being manufactured by the factory. In short, the artwork generates a bewildering sense of alienation from productivity.

As if to concur with Machon's notion, of 'in-its-own-worldness' cited above, Susi Wrenshaw, co-artistic director of Happystorm, and director and performer in *Borderline Vultures*, told me that their objective was to 'set up a[n] alternative world governed by its own time and its own rules.' In their production, set in an abandoned pharmaceutical factory in Salford, Happystorm require their audience to take responsibility for making this world through a process of interpretation. The contract between performers and participants is foregrounded in the show itself, so that the participant gradually becomes aware that they will get what they ask for: the participant creates a highly personalised experience that to a large extent is 'self-

directed'. The outcome is largely based on the depth one is prepared to search through spaces, and the vigour with which one engages with or even confronts experienced performers.<sup>ii</sup> Happystorm had been offered an abandoned warehouse by festival producers and, during the devising period, discovered a plethora of discarded factory and office equipment. The company incorporated these found objects and their own experience of making sense of the warehouse in order to provide the audience with the job of 'completing' a design, or making sense of an inchoate space.

On arrival, the audience-participants find the detritus of a scientific enterprise scattered around the unit: filing cabinets, desks, lamps, vacuum bottles, tripods, chemical chambers, and so on. This becomes a mysterious and awe-inspiring playground for anyone not *au fait* with industrial chemical processes. The makers of *Borderline Vultures* gesture to this trove with the enthusiasm of a child who has trespassed into adult territory but has no understanding of the purpose of the objects it takes as playthings.<sup>iii</sup> They invite the participants to re-invent the significance of these objects in response to the maze of offices, corridors and doorways in the warehouse. The work is necessarily a conjecture, an invitation to test the meaning of objects, space and thresholds guided by the playfully manipulative processes noted in my introductory discussion. For their part, Happystorm do provide an induction or threshold ritual—in this case, a straightforward job interview for participants conducted outside the factory. Following a successful interview, each 'candidate' is directed to the venue and then towards a whiteboard marked with an obscure chart indicating various staff duties and a number of stars, suggesting a (competitive) employee award system. This is the impetus for the participant to begin to juggle



contesting objectives and to explore interaction with other participants; firstly, to fulfil a task and to be recognised in some way, and secondly to explore the tools available for the task in collaboration with other performers. 'Experienced' performers (professional actors) in white lab coats appear to have been in the factory for some time, but for the most part they are silent and preoccupied. If they do speak it is only in a language foreign to many participants: such as Turkish, Polish, or Vietnamese. In an environment so deeply subject to translation and exposed to misunderstanding, the 'inexperienced' participant may find relief from the pressure to understand through the pleasures of transgression attendant on immersive theatre experiences. Participants conscientiously explore the available spaces, hunting eagerly through cupboards for significance or, baffled by the elusive routines of experienced staff, wait listlessly for something to occur. There is an additional tension between the movement of participants that are 'free' to roam through laboratories and the demands of predetermined choreographed sequences as aspects of the dramatic narrative that the professional company need to activate in specific rooms. The 'inexperienced' participant may find refuge in a 'staff room', lounge on cushions in front of a TV, or intrude into installations with a mixture of curiosity and, perhaps as a result of frustration, a destructive drive. There is a strong sense of being subject to an unseen authority. This is embodied in the urgency and passive dance routines performed by characters in white lab-coats; but there appears an equal desire amongst the new arrivals to subvert scheduled events. This dynamic signals a wider socio-economic context, outside of the world of the immersive play.

In preparing this article, I interviewed producers and participants and also used feedback from audience surveys. One participant's account reads:

*The factory manageress is speaking rapidly and is completely incomprehensible. She gives you a key. She grabs you by the arms. She pushes you into the assembly hall where people have been drawn towards a vast transparent plastic sheet. The key opens a locker you think, but it doesn't seem to fit. She is getting impatient and shoves you again towards an alarm system. You look frantically for a lock. The music is getting louder. You find a padlock, and unlock it. It reveals a red button. She shoves you again. You push the button. A loud alarm sounds. A large plastic sheet is pulled away by the employees and a machine begins to glow and emit smoke. You have been silent for an hour. You are swept up in the crowd of people breaking through a thick plastic industrial curtain into a new open space where there is a spontaneous but awkward celebration.*

The escape is framed as an 'accident', due to faulty equipment perhaps, and is accompanied by a confusion of alarms and smoke. There is a surprisingly rapid and uncanny gathering of other participants who are drawn by the ambiguity of the alarm. Until this moment they have been scattered throughout the building, now there is a collective impulse to push through the curtain towards an imagined exit. Although this event is fictional, the alarm suggests that the end of incarceration as participant-performers is nigh and for this reason there is a sense of relief augmented by the enthusiasm of those who have been there the longest (both the actors and the experienced factory workers). This becomes a general desire for some gesture of 'celebration' and this results in a stilted conga. On the night I was there it was not clear who started it, but for a participant the awkwardness of the celebration may

simply derive from an experience of having been shoved. It may also derive from a blurring of coercion and conspiracy. Nobody seems willing to expose the theatrical illusions of the smoke and noise. There is complicity, but one in which awkwardness and uncertainty seem fitting, quietly pointing to the fabrication of this moment. The pretence of triumph may also be undercut by the recent experience of exiled labour, as we had wandered without purpose or language around the factory. There seems to be a recognition that while the catastrophe and the conga are merely playful and 'dextrous' coercions, they share a characteristic with urgencies made up by children in order to commission conspirators, or to create a community for their subversive adventures. We are close to the exit door and, beyond it, to actual migrant workers in spaces not far from this particular, immersive experience: The Home Office Reporting Centre for Salford City Council is located close by. The complicity in this example of immersive play can thus be understood as an attempt to explore the liminal space between the internal zone of play and the external zone of migrant work and to translate the desires and frustrations of migrant communities.



According to survey responses for Happystorm's previous work, *The Crypt Project* (St Philips Church, Salford, 2011), participants left 'buzzing', one reporting that it was thrilling 'because it's so personal and it's really an intimate experience'. In *Borderline Vultures*, the authentic voices of collaborators from a network for refugees and asylum seekers and Salford City Council Equality and Cohesion department have informed the piece. These collaborators were invited to work in progress and thus were 'in on the act' long before the paying participants. For Wrenshaw, such personal accounts are 'at the heart of it', bringing authentic purpose to devices such as the use of foreign signs and language on the walls of the factory, and strengthening the affective force of exile and lost agency. Nevertheless, she asserts

that the dreamlike immersive world is not documentary theatre and the words of collaborators outside the here and now of the immersive experience are not re-enacted. The refusal of clear communication seems determined to frustrate any easy assumption of correspondence between documented experience and re-enactment. As it renders its participants mute, so this performance about migrant labour opens space for a visceral experience of the frustrating and seductive conditions of global capital.

*You Once Said Yes*: digression and interruption.

Ellie Browning, Assistant Director for *You Once Said Yes*, agrees that Look Left Look Right are more interested in complicity than confrontation: '[I]t's not putting you in a dark room and expecting you to cope with a shift of power' she says, unwittingly evoking Ontroerend Goed's notorious *Smile Off Your Face*, presented at The Lowry in 2009.

*You Once Said Yes* takes the form of a solo odyssey through Salford Quays and is an invitation to participants to open their eyes and their hearts to the reality around them as they journey through public spaces, all the while remaining alert to directions fed through headphones. Look Left Look Right translated this psycho-geographic journey—first staged in Edinburgh's graveyards, courtyards and cobbled streets at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 2011—to the postmodern, urban environment of Salford Quays: a shopping mall; a sunken Italian garden (built for the BBC's flagship children's TV programme, *Blue Peter*), the Lowry Theatre cloakroom. In the latter location, the participant is inducted into the ethos of the show, this time

through an encounter with an actor dressed in the uniform of a travel agent or air hostess, who doubles as some form of Health and Safety Officer. The participant receives a survival kit including a mobile phone and writes down a desire, which is placed in a sealed envelope. Before departing, the participant receives a parental but quite forceful kiss on the cheek, before being launched back out into the world. On the journey, they come across a series of characters who invite the participant to assist with a dilemma: replace a lost purse; agree a business idea; accept a marriage proposal; join in a criminal act. Exhorted by the travel agent to say 'Yes' whatever happens, the participant finds that each affirmative encounter draws them deeper into moral, legal and emotional dilemmas, entirely of their own making. This is one (anonymous) participant account. The pronoun 'you' is used because the work interpolates you. It asks, in its process of negotiating with you whether you can ever really know what you think or feel, and in doing so it foregrounds you as constructed, socially, through interaction:

*She wants you to kiss her. She's looking at the lipstick on your cheek, the imprint of the kiss you got in the cloakroom. You feel you ought to tell her quickly, delicately, that you are married. But they asked you to say yes – say yes to everything. Just as you are thinking that your wife might understand, the mood changes. She's not angry any more. She has prepared a track on the MP3 player for you to listen to now. 'Play it', she says – 'walk away and don't turn back.' So now you are walking away and listening to a warm and reassuring voice. It's a different voice; it knows what you have been through. As it guides you out of the shopping centre, the voice invites you to turn around and look up because Clarissa will be waving. It's sunny and the water on Salford Quays is glinting. You miss Clarissa already and feel that perhaps*

*there was something there after all. Something real. You turn around and look up. There is no one there.*

In order to preserve the force of the unexpected, so valued by some participants as mentioned above, the producers kept performance locations of the Festival secret and requested the participants who had attended productions not to share their experience. For those that were new to the work, the producers set in place tactics that would gradually immerse participants in the world of the productions. The company chose to place the more obviously theatrical characterisations at the beginning of the route, to reassure the participant that, for example, a woman asking you to speak on her mobile with her aggressive husband was in fact a 'performance' and not a real-life fraud.

Conversely, participants can provoke the actors, challenging the security of a scripted identity that seems at odds with the participant's more uncertain sense of role, as performer Laura Lindsay attests. In *You Once Said Yes* she played Felicity, a canal boat resident who has turned her back on The City, and so organised her script into a series of bullet points so that she could keep track of interrogations and cross-examination from participants. The actors do not see the whole journey in Look Left Look Right's show, while the audience does. By repeating fragments often in isolation from other scenes or actors, the performer is involved in a kind of confusing, solitary memory game that can create uncertainty for the actor about the 'world' they are immersed in and the degree to which it is open to re-inscription (Lindsay interview).

Paradoxically, digressions can lead the participants *out* of the act and into a state in which the notion of performance is almost entirely forgotten. Very soon after leaving the cloakroom, the participant can feel alone, quite vulnerable, and at the whim of an encounter, a phone text or recorded message. Delays have potential to derail the piece as the audience departs on an individual journey within a tightly timed sequence of departures. One participant of *You Once Said Yes* earnestly refused to enter a Volvo which is used to conduct a 'heist' as it was being driven by what appeared to be a 'thief', hence the production team often has to adjust to shifts in the tolerance of risk by individual participants. Even after their induction, participants can disrupt the 'script' while still saying 'yes' to everything, in their own fashion. These worlds cannot be utterly immersive: they have a very fragile membrane, of which the participant is intermittently aware, particularly when there is an interruption:

*The Volvo driver is shouting Get Out! He means it. MediaCity security have spotted you. He leans across you to open the passenger door, but you are going already. You are running aimlessly, you can't hear the instructions. You look around you. Anyone of these people could be security. You try not to run, you don't want to attract attention. You will meet another actor soon, you think. You stop. The giant screen is playing re-runs of the Olympics. You are looking at two members of the public on a bench in the open square outside the BBC building. They are looking at you, and laughing a little. Have they been put there? The game has ground to a halt. You are lost. A mobile phone call. It's one of the producers. She seems still to be playing. But she's using your name. You got it wrong and you got lost, but it's all right: it's working perfectly now. Turn around.*



While interventions can enhance the unpredictable moments in this work, producers try to limit unhelpful 'mis-keying' by figures out-of-the-frame: security guards; local police; actors from other shows recognised by audience members; and interruptions from members of the general public. In Edinburgh, the show was halted by police as the heist scene involved a driver in a balaclava, just as the 2011 summer riots had taken place in London; on another occasion, in Camden, a participant went off on a long walk with a non-player convinced they were an actor.

The immediate prize for completing a solitary journey in *You Once Said Yes* is a personalised, musical epilogue. For many people this unexpected shift from abandonment to embrace and reward is uplifting. It raises, almost without fail, a giggle of self-recognition as the song presents a pastiche epic narrative of the participant's surprising journey. For the production in Salford, this took place in the Lowry Gallery, and was 'witnessed' by the cast looking out from photographs that capture them 'still' (that is, continuing to be, but statically) in-role, mounted and fixed on the wall. In this ending, the audience member is cast as the celebrity while the performers renounce their professional identity as actors in favour of this more open and direct encounter with the audience. This is your reward for taking a risk and for sticking to the agreement. It is a reflective moment in which you may feel that you could continue to say yes in your everyday life without being part of a performance, and that this readiness is an achievement, the result of what you have learned, earned, created. All very much in keeping with the celebration and regulation of the everyday self in shopping precincts like the ones nearby.

### *Between You & Me: dialogism and immersion*

Triangle Theatre, of which I am co-Artistic Director, is a performance company that has investigated the relationship between performance, biography, and place since 1988. Beginning with Artistic Director Carran Waterfield's solo performances about the mythologies, histories and identities in and around her home city, Coventry, the company's work continues to explore autobiography and archives, and museum interpretation, through both ensemble and solo work.

For Triangle's *Between You & Me* at the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Ordsall Hall, commissioned by the University of Salford for the festival, a group of performance students experienced the process of immersion as a mode of practice-as-research during one of their course modules. Triangle's contribution to the festival differs from the other productions discussed here in that the process of immersion began for students in rehearsal and before any encounter with the public. Here, two Triangle performers in-role applied constraints on communication with the students such as assigning simple chores and tasks without explanation and in coded, archaic language in order to establish a playful induction to a world modelled on a Victorian servants' hierarchical household structure. Students did not 'merely' devise and assemble the piece from fragments of research, but, rather, expanded their comprehension and interpretation in the rehearsal space. From an initially naïve perspective befitting a newcomer to a social hierarchy, each student was able to enrich their understanding as they built a relational network with professional performers and other students performers.

The production adapted texts and characters from the so-called 'Newgate Novels', a category of 19<sup>th</sup> Century 'sensationalist' novel, which takes criminality and 'low-life' as a theme. Publications in this genre include *Oliver Twist* (1838), and Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839). As the students became more adept at deploying a persona or role on site at Ordsall Hall and improvised with language or texts associated with the Newgate Novels, they learned how to shift between realities, apparently slipping in and out of the constructed world with ease. They developed coded ways of interacting with local authority staff working at the museum. By adding a further construct at the level of the contemporary world and imagining themselves as contemporary museum curators, they were able to keep in play the question of whether they were 'performing' or not, were 'in character' or not.

By the time of the public performances, the hall ceased to be a 'fixed asset', a 14<sup>th</sup> century hall, or a Tudor hall, and had become for the group a site within which multiple histories had been lived and performed. This immersion for participants generated a dense and dizzying promenade experience for external audiences invited in to engage with the students' work. The Victorian servants' hierarchy had been mapped onto a second network of contemporary relations between heritage staff, curators, guides and visitors; and public audiences were themselves separated into Victorian classes of 'rich', 'deserving-' and 'undeserving-poor'. These hierarchical relations were further inflected in the conceit for the occasion of the performances: the event was understood as a rare 'holiday'. In their leisure time, the Ordsall Hall servants were performing an amateur-theatre venture (and on this occasion they were further blessed with a visit from that famous amateur thespian and social commentator, Charles Dickens). Throughout the event, performers

slipped between three realms or levels of persona: contemporary heritage guides speculating about history and society, household servants on a day-off, and well-known characters from the Newgate Novels testing social boundaries. As audiences travelled from one space to another, in and around the building, all these figures shared with the audience a constantly shifting framing and re-framing of contemporary reality, narrative fiction, constructed performance.

This shifting was entangled by the practical difficulties of guiding audiences around Ordsall Hall, and organising them into different parties visiting different spaces simultaneously. The ambition was for audiences to gather at the end of the performance and to share their experience, piecing together aspects of the narrative. Audiences in this production tended to compare notes on the extent to which they embraced or played along with the situation they found themselves in, rather than debating how to make sense of the literary narrative, as they might in a conventional drama. Triangle artists, endeavouring to limit the risk for student performers working with immersive theatre-making methods, devised a complex graphic of the sequence of scenes in order to manage the flow of their production and to anticipate the potential behaviour of the audience. These complex and carefully orchestrated promenade strategies are like those of *You Once Said Yes*. Here, however the audience were inclined to be more passive and willing to follow the directions given by the students.

The audience had been 'cast' in terms of assuming a social status, but their investment in this notion was inevitably superficial as they did not appear to want to disturb any prepared scenarios. As in *Borderline Vultures*, in which disorientation

and abandonment present a challenge to sense-making, audience members in *Between You & Me* had limited perspectives on the whole event and so had to construct meaning from fragments, much like historians might do. During the production the 'rich' group of audience members were to be confronted by 'poor' or criminal characters and 'poor' audience members would spend time with the 'rich' characters. Such inter-textual devices were intended to complicate the sentimental narratives of the Newgate Novel and of many heritage exhibits. Arguably, though, the complexity of interwoven narratives worked against spontaneous interaction by audience members. The students, more deeply immersed in character, filled with a mixture of bravado, fear and ensemble, enacted with zeal. The audience did respond as seemingly immersed participants in a culminating event in which different audience sections emerged from separate spaces in the interior of the building to join in a 'fight at the barricades' and a 'march to the scaffold'. At these moments, the 'poor', both public and students, participated in throwing missiles at the 'rich' and everyone jeered at 'Fagin' (a performer 'doubling up' as the pompous Head Butler of the servant household). A parody of deeply entrenched social tropes seemed to be played out by knowing participants in this moment. It seemed at this point that there was a free and collectively improvised performance around a recognised, carnivalesque ritual.

*Participation in a mob and enthusiasm for the carnival of execution has whipped up the visitors, witnesses to the household's day off. 'Fagin'/the actor/the butler playing him just about maintains his dignity. The Housekeeper, Miss Foster, who has been engrossed up to this point in her role as hangman, would be expected to call the household to order, but her*

*role has been superseded by a competitor within the household hierarchy, Miss Crossland, who has worked out Oliver Twist's family tree by the way, and calls all the servants to order, and in a fit of fury blames Dickens for the whole messy construct. Picking up a broom handle, she chases Dickens to his car and out of the gates of the heritage house. The actor playing Dickens, a female in a ridiculously large grey beard, hoots the car horn as s/he drives off into Manchester. Miss Foster, finally recovering her composure whips off the black shawl that has been draped over her head, puts down the drum that has been beaten all the way to the site of the execution, and dismisses the household saying "this is the last time I give you Saturday afternoon off work". You join the other participants in a semi-circle around the trainee actors and applaud, before meandering back through the Tudor gardens and into the coffee shop. (Participant account, 31 October 2012)*

Audience feedback celebrated the use of space and the entertaining comedy of misidentification, but expressed an alienation from the complex alternative rules within the given 'scripted' scenarios, an aspect of the contract that, on this occasion, appeared not to be open to co-authoring. *Between You & Me* revels in histories told through gossip and eavesdropping. This form of communication created many tantalising and ambivalent moments of intimacy and co-presence early in the piece. However, the teleological narrative structure of the Newgate Novels that were the starting point for devising seemed also to call for a sense of direction. As an experience for the public there was also a dramaturgical inclination for the piece to achieve 'resolution'. The collective *parade* to the gallows can be understood as a carnivalesque moment in which multiple social structures were playfully up-ended

and parodied, but here the audience ultimately abandoned the roles assigned in the induction and performed the collective persona of a mob.

Oscar Mike, *The Situation Room*: coercion by the group

Oscar Mike is an associate company of Shoreditch Town Hall, led by directors Tom Mansfield and James Blakey. The company states that they 'want to make work for audiences who want to play' (Theatre Bristol website, 2015). In particular, they are interested in the structures of games and the ways in which games inform performance-making. Oscar Mike's contribution to the festival was inspired in part by the phrase 'Fog Of War', a phrase describing the anticipation, uncertainty and confusion that arises in the context of a battle, and that seems to contradict images and accounts of violence in military conflict. The production is also inspired in part by the documentary film *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Dir. Errol Morris, Sony Picture Classics, 2003).

In *The Situation Room*, the audience is seated on the edges of a space in which contesting perspectives on a military and political situation are presented by two figures, one a member of the Politburo, the other a member of the CIA. Through numerous game-derived devices, such as a blindfolded version of 'rock-paper-scissors', or coded messages in envelopes, simple voting devices, and rewards (including a shot of whisky), the audience are drawn into the game-playing and ambiguity of the military-political situation. Here, performance does not involve a representational narrative so much as an active unfolding by the audience of an increasingly complex context. Audience members face one another in two groups, in a traverse setting, divided by the playing space, designed in fascinating detail by

Hannah Sibai, as a war-bunker style room from the Cold War period. In Salford, the space was a gloomy and cold vacant shop unit, richly furnished with ministry paraphernalia: filing cabinets and wooden desks; heavy telephones and green-shaded lamps. The audience are invited to play through individual and group participation: individuals take decisive roles in the central performance space; small groups confer on tactics; and two opposing groups of audience grow increasingly competitive, with one side of the audience vying for advantage and supremacy over the other. The transition from audience member to participant is facilitated by the fact that some of the devices for participation are well known from games. Individuals are also elected by fellow audience members to represent each group, or they find themselves participating as a consequence of some privileged information, perhaps supplied in a sealed envelope, or in code. In this way, the audience is enlisted and the responsibility for driving strategic play forward is handed to them. The performers introduce information by taking (emergency) phone calls, or presenting new information via a slide projector, and towards the end, by breaking the rules of the game entirely and performing a child-like representational dance in the mode of young boys 'playing at war'.

In the beginning, participants take sides having indicated who they think they are by saying which newspapers they read and which products they regularly buy. Within moments they are playing a game to help them abandon these external identities. They decide who will 'be the Russians' and who will 'be the Americans' in a simulation of Cold War political committees. As members of the CIA or the Politburo, participants are involved in a contest over territory and oil. They are presented with large quantities of political, military and industrial information, by feverish advisors.



Slide after black and white slide is cast onto a wonky projector screen and the participants become immersed in a fog of information about important figures with obscure names: Russian politicians, Arab militants, and American spies. As they stare at grainy aerial photographs and maps of villages and oil fields, the audience are aware that they will have a responsibility to interpret; they have already been put in teams. The faintest grasp of the significance of a rebel uprising, an assassination, or a deployment of weapons seems to be crucial to the team's success and grasping this information is key to the individual's survival within the group. There is a feeling as an audience member that an interpretation of this information will be called for by the group and so each person strains like a new government minister to retain facts and maintain 'face'. Fuelled by the notion of the game, participants gleefully raise their hands and vote with enthusiasm, or cheerfully select one of their number to make an 'important' decision. A playfully competitive mode emerges, as does a fundamental problem of democracy: the tension between the group and the individual. Participants become aware of the challenge of taking a stand that will contradict others or 'spoil the game'. An example of immersive theatre facilitating participants in exploring contingent or ideal selves, *The Situation Room* dares the audience to explore a radically alternative self.

*It is your turn. As the Head of the Politburo you are charged with making a final decision for your team. It feels very lonely out in the centre in front of everyone. You are not sure if your posture suits the occasion. You want to laugh, but the mum and her boy (your team) are looking at you. They expect you to perform. So do your opponents. You are asked whether or not to bomb the oil fields. The result will be widespread collateral damage, the death of*

*hundreds of people, if not thousands, and the destruction of entire villages, but the influence of CIA-backed rebels will be set back by years. You will retain power in the region. Your man needs an answer. You laugh. The approbation of your team-mates seems less important now than taking a stand for liberal anti-war politics. And you are beginning to feel responsible for the boy's education. With a secret signal you decline to authorize the bombing. Your man looks disappointed as the smaller actor, the one playing the American, enthusiastically fills in the map with blue chalk. You have lost and you regret the decision immediately. The little boy looks at you in disgust. You have not only lost the war, you have taken all the fun out of the game. As you drive home the boy's expression of disappointment appears in front of you again and again. (Participant account, October 2012)*

The company have observed that gender, age and group size influence role-play. For instance, a group of teenagers responded to the idea of the game, and to the possibility that play *for its own sake* could be as provocative as the political questions brought into play. A group of elderly participants recognised the symbolic act of performance as exemplary of democratic process. The degree of risk-taking involved in performing in front of others is mitigated here as the devices involved in making a choice are more like toys than triggers. The theatrical objects remind one that one's finger is not actually on the nuclear button.<sup>iv</sup> The choices are closely directed by characters from within each scenario, the options are narrow, the narrative consequences are broadly declared and the choices available are simple laminations over recognizable events in broadcast news.

In this way, the production reveals its purpose: the eponymous ‘situation’ involves the participant getting in on the act with major political figures in a grand narrative; but the situation also involves, at a more intimate level, confronting the personal implications and risk of divulging one’s position to one’s neighbours. For some participants, putting oneself on the line in a game resonated with a stance it might be necessary to take in the real world; for others, it was an opportunity to play with choices and positions more reckless than the attitudes and identities they would hold in life. Like the other productions in the Festival, *The Situation Room* emerges as a durational negotiation that tries to balance the pleasure of intimate co-presence with the challenge and disorientation of a boundary-breaking performance game.

## Conclusion

Category errors can occur in immersive theatre that takes place in public sites. Just as when one sees a celebrity in person and confuses their role with their private persona, so audiences will ‘go as far as [they] might feel it possible into the meaningful universe sustained by the activity – into what one might call a *realm*’, as sociologist Erving Goffman observed. ‘[However] only some *realms* [italics in original] ought to be thought of as *worlds*, since only some can be thought of as ‘real’ or ‘actual’ (46). Therefore while we may proceed with the useful defining image of an experience that is ‘in-its-own-world’, it may also help to remember that the allure of this work is often its profound epistemological challenge to the boundaries of the world and to one’s cultural education.

The four productions in the Festival were designed variously as one-to-one, site-specific, and promenade experiences, but the companies involved unwittingly shared

narrative devices linked to a (heroic) journey structure. For Happystorm, the heroic journey is an explicit aspect of their structuring process, for others the qualities of the participant's journey are more implicitly organised around a commission, an induction, surprise encounters, provocations, tests and rewards. Reflections gathered from participants seem to focus on the problem of negotiating co-ordinates of the self rather than the thematics in the works: 'Where am I supposed to be (now)?'; 'Who am I supposed to be?' For Happystorm, tensions between the sign-posted co-ordinates of the journey (the contract) and the effects of unpredictable behaviour surface in the contrast between performer choreography and a free-roaming audience. For Triangle, logistics of space and the challenges of synchronising participant groups shift thresholds between immersion and spectacle in unexpected ways. Oscar Mike's sudden use of choreography in a moment when the professional actors and politicians appear to regress and become boys playing at war creates a striking spectacle and contrast with the experience for the participant of sharing intimate space with an actor. To cope with interruption and digression, Look Left Look Right co-ordinate their participants telematically, using mobile phones and texts. In all these works, there is an impression of creative opportunity derived from logistical 'problems' presented by narrative negotiation and contractual shifts. This slippage between control and freedom, and between immersion and spectacle, can be understood as the invisible contractual adjustments of immersive theatre: the small print, in practice.

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<sup>1</sup> During the InOnTheAct Festival, *Audience* was running at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds. In one particular moment, which appears to precede the show 'proper', a presenter on stage seems to insult an individual, seated audience member with such unabashed aggression, shouting at her to spread her legs, that it provoked outrage in the rest of the audience. People called out spontaneously,

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shouting 'shame'. On the occasion I saw it, some people walked out noisily: it was a demonstration of the power of protest, and a demonstration of 'acting up', which is a theme in the latter part of the production.

<sup>ii</sup> At the same time as IOTA, the touring production, *The Haunting* (Bill Kenwright, 2012), based on Charles Dickens' short story, was showing in the Quays Theatre at the Lowry. Here the audience is mesmerised by traditional theatre technology: flying props, smoke, sudden bangs and inventive lighting; but there is a different notion of agency and the audience does not cross over into other forms of theatre, asserts Porl Cooper. In 2009, *Beyond The Frontline*, a site-specific performance by SlungLow was difficult to sell, he says, but 75% of audience were first time viewers and did not cross over from the more traditional productions.

<sup>iii</sup> Maxine Doyle tells us that people have stolen many items from Punchdrunk sets, even knickers. They are taking away "trinkets" from the experience – souvenirs perhaps to keep the experience alive elsewhere, or to test the reality of the fabrication, in another, "more real" sphere.

<sup>iv</sup> The influence on this project and experiments in human cruelty by Stanley Milgram in 1970 and Philip Zimbardo on prisoner hierarchies at Stanford University in 1971 are acknowledged by the company.

## **Interviews**

Cooper, Porl, 12 September 2013.

Cummins, Ian, 13 March 2013.

Fry, David, 12 September 2013

Lindsey, Laura, 12 January 2013.

Wrenshaw, Susi, 9 October 2012.

## **Participant Feedback**

Browning, Ellie (Assistant Director) and Francesca Moody (Producer), Look Left Look Right, 7 September 2012, Digital World Centre, Salford Quays.

Fry, David (Head of Theatres. The Lowry) and Porl Cooper (Quays Programmer, The Lowry), October, 2012, The Lowry.

Lindsay, Laura, Telephone interview, 12 January 2013.

McArdle, Kathy, Quays Arts & Development Manager, 8 September 2012, The Lowry.

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Sibai, Hannah, Designer/ James Blakey Director/Robert Macpherson and Simon Carroll-Jones, Performers, Oscar Mike, 26 November, 2012, The Lowry.

Waterfield, Carran, Artistic Director, Triangle Theatre, 20 October 2012, Salford University