

Immersive Theatre and Burning Man - One Writer's Journey to the Playa

**NICHOLAS
McINERNEY**

66 BRAND

Once whilst struggling over a play, my producer gave me a piece of advice – ‘You have to work through the complexity to the simplicity beyond’. Fighting my instant reaction to dismiss it – a value judgement I convinced myself was an aesthetic one I missed what was most interesting: the nature of the reaction itself. Why did I react in that way? Get so defensive? Feel so *threatened*? Only later did I realise what was really happening – and that my reaction was really driven by underlying assumptions about what good writing was about. These assumptions were bound up in a sense of its necessary complexity, difficulty, even a kind of wilful obscurity. I saw writing plays as predominantly an intellectual pursuit which either looked to express new ideas in dramatic form or it

played with theories of representation, politics, philosophy. And somehow I believed if it wasn't hard to create then it wasn't worth it. The complexity was what you aspired to.

I know where these assumptions come from. A degree in English Literature established the pattern. This was then consolidated by an English Playwriting Tradition which offered two distinct alternatives, with an emphasis on either Philosophical Investigation (Tom Stoppard/Michael Frayn) or Political Engagement (David Edgar, David Hare, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill et al). All new productions of classical texts were explored through the lens of interpretation, which was invariably a conversation with the past. Even when I read key texts that were highly influential on my thinking – Brooks' *An Empty*

Space for example, or Howard Barker's *Arguments for a Theatre* – I absorbed them primarily as intellectual argument rather than felt experience. I would then look for evidence of their correctness in the drama I watched. Of course any intellectual journey has to start somewhere and grow out of its influences, but any such journey is built on convictions too. If you're unsure of those – as I was – then there's something deeply seductive about subscribing to a theory. It reinforces the sense that fundamentally you are a serious person. It also means you belong.

Five years ago I became aware that this cerebral approach was no longer enough. Although professionally successful I was creatively adrift. Formal considerations of structure, genre and concept took precedence over depth of feeling – and my writing resembled nothing so much as two huge ornate mirrors facing each other, searching for infinity. But to admit to the problem would have meant questioning these deeply held assumptions. So I ploughed on, undergoing the strange experience of being re-commissioned yet each time feeling less and less confident in my abilities. This internalised self criticism became deeply corrosive.

I decided, as an intellectual, I had to try and shift the focus away from the head and into the body. A lifelong love of dance led me to a 5 Rhythms class. 5 Rhythms is a meditation practice that puts the emphasis on movement. Fundamental to the practice is the idea that everything is energy, and moves in patterns, waves and rhythms. By freeing the body, you still the mind. From there I started to explore the world of Tantra. Sharing some common roots with Yoga in Hindu Philosophy, Tantra has come in

the West to be primarily associated with sexuality. In fact it's far more than that, taking in ideas of creativity and fulfilment that draw their power from a way of being that is about experience rather than interpretation, feeling rather than thought. Central to this is our capacity for pleasure. Release that from shame and judgment and we can fully embrace what is, including all our contradictions. It also allows us to see ideas of 'Truth' as not fixed – a concept familiar in post-modernist theory but here expressed as something felt in our bodies. In Tantra, truth is complex, flowing, relative. It is the dance between energy and consciousness.

Here was an existential philosophy with an enormous power to transform on a personal basis. Politically radical too, in a way that directly challenged the British intellectual tradition, as seen in the drama of the last fifty or so years, mainly associated with the Left. And the Left has always had a huge problem with pleasure, distrusting its power to subvert didacticism. *'The authoritarian art form is the musical,'* writes Howard Barker in *49 Asides for a Tragic Theatre*, continuing, *'The baying of an audience in pursuit of unity is a sound of despair.'* His objective is unequivocal – *'Ideology is the outcome of pain'*. But this view of drama requires the audience to be the mere recipient of the playwright's vision – ideally to be passive. And it seems to be especially ironic to me that out of all the experimental drama of the sixties – The Living Theatre of Judith Malina/Julian Beck, or Jerzy Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory – in which the whole relationship between performers and audience was broken down in new and innovative ways – we should end up with such a narrow and joyless

notion of what political theatre should be today. Barker articulates the problem perfectly – ‘*The narrative form is dying in our hands*’ – but his solution is prescriptive and puritanical, and regards the audience as the enemy. There seems to be no space for the spontaneous, the random, the purely pleasurable as a kind of opposition, no space for the *total experience* that theatre can offer – unmediated by concepts – that energetic exchange that enables us not only to feel as individuals but also to create a real connection with others.

It is this ‘total experience’ that I believe underlies the new contract audiences are searching for in performance, an ‘immersive’ theatre in which they are both participant and spectator. Although there has been a long tradition of Performance Art, until relatively recently it played to small audiences in specific venues. But over the past ten years many of the techniques, concepts, approaches – *energies* – have burst out and are now gloriously infecting the mainstream in ways that were previously inconceivable. You see it in the work of Forced Entertainment, Improbable and Punchdrunk, in the growth of festivals (Shunt, Spill) . Whether you experience it in the High Temple of Culture that is the Barbican, with the mixture of visual art and puppetry of Bite09, or in the more populist West End, with a heady brew of cabaret, burlesque and circus at La Clique, there seems to me to be fascinating similarities. There is a multidisciplinary approach and a common spirit of defiance in refusing to be constrained by boundaries; as well as an emphasis on the site-specific and on playfulness that honours the idea of the tantric ‘dance’ with a slippery truth. Moreover this theatre creates an

environment built not around common ideas or concepts but around common *experiences* the theatre-makers share with their audience – through cinema, the graphic novel, clubbing, recreational drugs, polysexuality and the fetish world, the huge rise in summer festivals (over 400 at the last count), interactive video games – and crucially, the internet.

For me this found its complete expression in the Burning Man festival, which takes place in Nevada, USA, 250 miles north of San Francisco. Beginning on the last Monday in August and ending a week later on Labor day, over 50,000 people gather on a vast and remote Playa – a dried out lake bed. Together they create Black Rock City.

I have been three times now, in 2004, 2006, and 2008. Each time I approached it as a colossal piece of theatre. The cultural reference points were obvious. Surf the official site and you are presented with both a Mission Statement and Ten Principles that read like a theatrical manifesto. They address the twin fundamentals of Community – *Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace*; and the individual – *Radical Self Reliance, Radical Self Expression*. Each year there is a different theme – in 2004 it was Vault of Heaven, 2006 – Hope and Fear, 2008 – The American Dream – to which you are invited to respond. The anticipation of that, along with travelling out to the desert in Nevada and preparing for a week in an inhospitable environment only increases that sense of expectation. And what theatre ticket have you ever received that carries the following health warning: ‘By attending this event you are voluntarily risking serious injury and/or death’? How thrilling is that?

Whenever I write for the theatre I am searching for that key moment of transformation for my characters – that exciting spark of change. Burning Man is, as you would imagine, obsessed with the fire that spark can create. Some see it as a destructive force but I have always considered it purifying. This energy is everywhere at Burning Man, creating a mood that is hugely liberating – but in a way that throws back responsibility onto the individual. As you leap onto a fast moving Art Car or clamber over an art structure, or cycle out into the middle of the Playa, the cry goes up ‘Safety Third!’ – and you are making a decision that has to balance personal risk against duty to others. And this isn’t the only kind of interaction that enhances your experience. Every day you are invited to take part in small pieces of theatre – whether it’s to attend an interview to Adopt a Garden Gnome, or to go to a cocktail party at the Ashram Galactica, a fully furnished hotel, or volunteer to deliver pizzas randomly for Pizza Sluts, the City Pizzeria or perhaps watch two contestants battle it out in a fully recreated Thunder Dome. Once I was buying stamps at the Post Office, when I had an old 1970’s copy of *Playboy* thrust into my hands and told to go offer it to a leather clad dominatrix walking past; overcoming my natural inhibition felt like a significant breakthrough, as well as embodying another Burning Man principle – *Don’t Spectate, Participate*.

At night Black Rock City is transformed into another world altogether. It emerges like Atlantis from the depths of the ocean, all glitter and noise – one minute a Wild West Frontier town re-imagined by Mad Max, the next a Fellini Film, then something out of Tim Burton, scattering gothic deliciousness.

Around the Esplanade, the main avenue which faces the Man, clubs pump out their music, as Art Cars sail over the Playa lit up like distant liners, echoing to the sound of laughter. It’s an Adult Playground equipped with Hollywood Technology – all powered by a fascinating combination of American hedonism pursued with a puritan’s zeal. But to suggest those were the only adventures on offer is incorrect – Burning Man is also possessed by an innate radicalism, one informed by a spirit of celebration and playfulness which looks to maximise the pleasure of those involved – to effectively turn every political act into a piece of theatre. So you have the feminist collective The Flaming Lotus Girls creating incredible incendiary sculptures that are interactive, or the Cacophony Society – a San Francisco based group of pranksters and situationists who organise the annual Critical Tits parade, where women cycle through Black Rock City with painted breasts.

Moreover, perhaps the most significant shift in the energy of the entire community is brought about by the second and third Principles – Gifting and Decommodification. Gifting ‘is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value’, whilst Decommodification ‘seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience’. It’s difficult to overestimate quite how profoundly this changes the nature of personal relationships over the course of the week – denied the narrow roles of buyer/seller we not only find ourselves thinking of each other different-

ly – but also ourselves.

On Saturday the main event takes place from which the festival derives its name. A wood and neon effigy of a man packed with fireworks slowly raises his hands to the stars and explodes in a million points of light before being burnt to the ground. The city erupts in celebration and lament. After this Dionysian explosion there follows its Apollonian counterpart. The Temple of Remembrance, a three story structure based on a Buddhist Temple, has been the repository of messages left by Black Rock City Citizens to those they have loved and lost in any number of ways – death, negligence, betrayal, misunderstanding. During the week it slowly becomes a kind of collective memory and altar to atonement. On the Sunday night it is burnt to the ground. Over 40,000 people sit and watch this event in absolute silence, as fire devils swirl into the night sky. Two days later nearly everyone has gone, left Black Rock City to return to the ‘default’ world. The Playa is empty again. Within weeks even the last human traces will have disappeared, our presence totally eradicated, scorched away in the dust and heat. Burning Man is over for another year.

As the ashes disperse, I return to my own writing asking new questions. What do I want from Theatre? What is the role of audience? Are there new ways of telling stories? Where do those stories come from? Burning Man puts the individual experience at the heart of its narrative. And as you step out onto the stage that is the Playa, you move into a realm of pure adventure, having no idea what would happen, or how, or why. The challenge is to remain open to the possibilities. It is an act of faith. And

although there is much about Burning Man that can be intellectualised – I for one certainly see it as an experiment in Utopian living – what is most powerful is when it touches on theatre’s deeper role as social ritual.

Whenever I return from the Playa I am struck by how many echoes of Burning Man follow, often found in surprising places. Its influence means you look at the world in a subtly different way. It is also a template for a kind of ‘immersive’ theatre: interactive, experiential, fragmented, deeply playful, celebrating difference, randomness, and most of all – pleasure. To quote the last Principle: Immediacy.

‘Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience.’