

Some Thoughts on Total Immersion Theater

By Todd Blakesley

What is Total Immersion Theatre?

There are many forms of immersive theater which offer different levels of engagement. Here are just four examples:

FLY-ON-THE-WALL: essentially a tour of scenes. Audience members are in close proximity to the action and may even brush against actors. Their function is to observe (much like a traditional audience) albeit in unique and changeable environments. They may or may not be free to touch and examine objects within the scene. -- Examples include TAMARA (Los Angeles in the 1970's) and currently SLEEP NO MORE in New York.

EXPERIENTIAL: Audiences have a fully hands-on relationship to the story, guided by actors with whom they may converse. Examples include: THE JAMES JOYCE LIQUID MEMORIAL THEATRE (Company Theatre, Los Angeles in the 1970's); and, more recently, OJO (Bricolage, Pittsburgh).

PARTIAL IMMERSION: Participants are not directly engaged in the story but make decisions that may shift the course of the story or its outcome. One example would be THE NIGHT OF JANUARY 16th. Audience reaches a verdict at the end.

There are other types. But what follows is my definition of "TOTAL IMMERSION." The key difference being that participants (theatergoers) are fully engaged in the story and actively make choices along the way that affect the direction and the outcome.

How It Began for Me.

When I mounted my first total immersion play in 1972 ("Center Earth Trialz" at the Crystal Palace in San Diego) I thought I was on the crest of a new wave in theater: essentially a playhouse for everyone. In "Center Earth" patrons and actors were thrown into the same situation. No actor-protagonist, but potentially multiple patron-protagonists all negotiating the dramatic labyrinth, empowered by choice and energized by the scent of the unknown.

In this production patrons became passengers and were issued visas prior to boarding a rickety train car destined for the center of the earth. Once the harrowing excursion ended, with a thud into the earth's core, they disembarked into a darkened courtroom lined with mirrors. A panel of

Inquisitors informed them of their duty to render verdicts in the cases of several defendants for which no charges had been levied. (Yes, yes... very Kafkaesque).

Then visas were pulled and they discovered which of their fellow passengers would face interrogation. When the questioning was over there was little consternation over rendering judgment. Those found guilty remained in the center of earth pending appeal. Those not guilty received luxury accommodations back to the earth's surface.

The theme of the questioning, and for that matter the play, is topic for another discussion. The point I want to make is that this new environment and relationship to the play kept everyone on the edge of their seat, in the moment, totally immersed in plot and action. These encounters were bizarre, funny and often deeply revealing.

In the four decades since, I have "wrought" several total immersion events (the last being a different kind of trial scenario: "A Patriot Act: The Trial of George W. Bush" in 2006). But as I was saying, I initially thought this form would sweep the country and all I had to do was point the way. Then I could do what I really wanted: buy a ticket and immerse myself in other worlds.

Alas, there has been barely a whisper. Some hybrid fly-on-the-wall treatments, participation in comedy weddings, a handful of non-theatrical behavioral science experiments. But little to tap the rich potential of true total immersion. Yet this is the arena that can pull people together in powerful collaborative reflection, unattainable in any other form. It can connect people on a level that is intimate and transformative. It is definitely 21st century.

A Call for Total Immersion Theater: THE DARK RIDE TOWARD CATHARSIS

Imagine opening your local entertainment guide and finding listed among the concerts, movies, museums and art galleries, a special section inviting you to be a TRAVELER¹ to the center of the earth, or a DELEGATE² to a raucous third-party national nominating convention, or a HIGH-ROLLER in a casino booking wagers on human foibles, or a SPECULATOR³ on the floor of an international stock exchange, or a REFUGEE on a flight to the edge of the universe, or even as a WITNESS⁴ at the trial of the President of the United States. In each of these you have the opportunity to plunge into an experience devoid of consequences in the outside, or if you prefer "real", world... except as you may later reflect upon your actions. You can return the next night to change tactics, or switch roles, or simply pose that question you were too cautious to ask on the first go-around.

Live theater is the only performance medium that affords the possibility of flesh and blood interaction because everyone involved is in the same space, at the same time; in the same dimension. It can't be replicated digitally or by computers or long-fantasized interactive holographic images. It is simply a matter of vision and will that can turn it into playhouse for everyone. Total Immersion Theater gives you a chance to test yourself, to experiment with

forbidden morals, to try on new ethics, to touch hidden emotions, or to simply step outside of yourself.

People crave experiences that thrill them, transport them to worlds beyond, but usually from the relative safety and obscurity of the padded auditorium seat. Total Immersion eliminates the separation between actor and audience by throwing them into the same dramatic situation. What was the audience now has power to alter the flow of events. And by extension... the outcome. The play is significantly in their hands.

Initially the concept of Total Immersion seems scary. But of course it's not. People do it every night when they dream. They step into situations suddenly, unexpectedly, into bizarre circumstances where dialogue is cryptic and death seems frighteningly imminent. The imagery may be metaphorical but the night sweats are real. And yet they addictively return to their slumbers and the all-embracing horrors and euphoria it affords. -- Total Immersion is like that. Perhaps we should simply call it Dream Immersion.

With Total Immersion there is no audience, only players. It is critical that these **PLAYER-PATRON-THEATERGOERS ARE TREATED AS IF THEY ARE IN A DREAM... *not as an audience.*** -- That is the first commandment of true Total Immersion.

Total Immersion is NOT audience participation. For me, "audience participation" conjures up images of agit-prop, scream-in-your-face theater where "bourgeois" audience members are singled out for humiliation. Except for noble traditions like magicians asking for volunteers or comedians inviting ridicule, audience members should never be physically dragged into play. Audience membership is a well defined role: mostly that of an objective observer. Audience members hold sacrosanct the arms-length relationship between themselves and the action being played out before them. Once they are wedged in their seats the amount of energy necessary to overcome audience inertia, by asking them to participate, can destroy a play.

In Total Immersion, theatergoers are already in motion before entering the main playing area... sometimes before entering the lobby... sometimes half a block away. They must acquire their new role seamlessly, in the context of the situation in which they are involved.

- In "The Exchange" they were welcomed as returning members of an exclusive stock exchange, oriented to the stock being offered and the status of world affairs.
- In any of the several election year plays ("The Convention", "Cigars & Stripes", FritzCon 96") they were assigned a State delegation, issued credentials and a menu of issues that defined the factions vying for party control.
- In "A Patriot Act" there was a security screening process that revealed their new role in a way that seemed natural, at least a natural as, well, as finding themselves in a dream.
- In all cases, they were suddenly surrounded by an environment, by a situation, and they had to deal with it.

Here is the second commandment in Total Immersion Theater:

GIVE PLAYERS (Theatergoers) OPTIONS, not ultimatums.

- In “The Exchange” they speculated in companies that seem to satisfy their social agenda or their lust for power.
- In the convention plays delegates could support any of the front-running fictional party candidates or run themselves.
- In “A Patriot Act” they were given the option to be a witness for the defense or the Prosecution, or be on one of three juries. Those that declined those options naturally became “observers” at the trial. But the opportunity to participate was always there. Many “observers” were inspired to testify later.

The option of NOT having to engage must be honored. To put someone on the spot who is unsure or unwilling is self-defeating. -- This does not mean to let them opt out of the play and sit on the sidelines. They’ve committed to being a part of the whole. But give them space to observe within the play’s context that keeps them within the action.

Some Notes on Acting:

using, as an example, the requirements for performing “A Patriot Act: The Trial of George W. Bush”

Acting in Total Immersion Theater is both exhilarating and disorienting. The primary job of the actor is to perform tasks that elicit responses from player-participants. Those tasks are clearly linked to the character’s goals. For the attorneys in “A Patriot Act” the goals are to obtain a conviction or an acquittal of the President. They solicit favorable testimony from witnesses supporting their position and attack testimony opposing it. The need to listen to everything being said is critical. They must improvise, switch tactics, show compassion or disgust when appropriate.

But unlike “real world” attorneys embroiled in their own courtroom drama, the actor’s focus can’t be totally on “winning”. Indeed, “winning” is irrelevant. Though they must appear to want to win (which is key to the player-participants taking it seriously), their principle job is to coax testimony (stories) from witnesses. AND when those stories are genuine and compelling, the attorneys may often have to back-off from their original game plan. They must let those stories unfold, even though a “real world” courtroom an attorney would be inclined to cut them off, demanding a yes-or-no answer.

And here is the third commandment, (especially with regards to “A Patriot Act”):
LEARN TO TAKE THE BULLET. –

In the course of cross-examination, if a witness should defeat a line of questioning. because they are more knowledgeable, or because they catch a flaw in the argument, or because they have an emotional eruption, RESIST the temptation to top it. The actor must ask hi/rself: “...was the witness statement a dramatic button on the scene? Should the scene end there even though it appears to give points to the other side? Even though it made me look foolish?” – The answer, nine times out of ten, is YES.

Perhaps that commandment should be restated in a more positive light:
SEEK THE SALIENT MOMENT IN A SCENE (Testimony) AND LET THAT RESONATE.

The key to all this is the actor needs to discover when to step back and let the player-theatergoer with something to say, consume valuable stage time, AND when to control rambling discourse. And the difference between the two. It takes practice. Give your self plenty of previews.

“A Patriot Act: The Trial of George W. Bush”. opens the floodgates to personal testimony. The public. *The People* have stories to tell. Stories of frustration, anger, bewilderment, loss, shame; and pride, patriotism, righteousness and fear. To say their words before a congregation of strangers is an elating experience, a lightening of soul.

The theater, through Total Immersion, can extend this conduit for catharsis to Player-Patrons directly involved in the story. It may not always be readily apparent while the play unfolds. Sometimes the effect can manifest days or weeks later. But when it does the result can be profound

This is the power of totally-immersed live interaction. Use it wisely.

(NOTES 1, 2, 3, 4: These Total Immersion examples were productions of mine at the Crystal Palace Theatre, Fritz Theatre, Adams Avenue Playhouse and Sledgehammer Theatre in San Diego between 1972 and 2006. The casino play has yet to be produced and space venture is being prepared for 2010.)