

Rose Biggin

Labours of Seduction in Immersive and Interactive Performance

Much theatrical work that calls itself 'immersive' uses tropes of the erotic to achieve its intended effects. In this article Rose Biggin identifies structural and performative strategies in the use of the erotic in this genre. What does it mean to identify the process of performed seduction as central to much immersive dramaturgy? Through readings of contemporary productions that draw upon (or appropriate) pre-existing erotically charged environments, the inevitable responsibilities for makers working in this context of immersion are considered, as is the importance of considering the consequences for those working in immersive spaces. Stress is laid on the crucial role that this form of performative labour often plays in immersive performance, and a continued recognition of its influence is emphasized. Rose Biggin is an independent scholar and theatre artist based in London. She received her PhD from the University of Exeter, researching audience immersion and the work of Punchdrunk, and both writes and makes work on gender, history, and language. She is author of *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience* (2017).

Key terms: immersive theatre, erotic theatre, interactivity, intimacy, labour, one-on-one, Punchdrunk.

MUCH PERFORMANCE WORK that calls itself immersive uses tropes of the erotic in order to get its work done. Strategies of seduction are to be found throughout contemporary immersive and interactive performance, operating within a broader frame of commercial imperatives and pressures. Many immersive productions call upon existing, pre-familiar structures from non-theatre events or environments – going out for dinner, visiting a nightclub or strip club – and these prior models come with their own cultural baggage in terms of gender, power, commercial transaction, and the idea of personal service.

It is important to consider how work calling itself immersive negotiates questions of intimacy and exchange, and in particular the relationship between money and power that is inevitably at play in these environments, with a keen eye always on the rights and safety of those working in its spaces.

As Fintan Walsh states, 'We want performance to seduce us, and in its own way, performance wants to seduce us' (2014, p. 56), and the wider marketing discourse of

work that defines itself as 'immersive' often evokes a distinctly sexual promise, a certain frisson in the invitation: potential ticket-buyers are offered the chance to experience hypercharged existence in a heightened environment, they are promised uniquely exciting encounters. The first page of the website for Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (The McKittrick Hotel, 2011–) describes the show in a pull-quote from the *New York Times* as 'a voyeur's delight' (2019); The Guild of Misrule's *The Great Gatsby* (2018) invited audiences into 'an era of bootleg liquor, red hot jazz and hedonistic pleasures. . . . don your dancing shoes, dress to the nines and step in to this heart racing adaptation', with a pull-quote from the *Guardian* backing up the promise they would 'get immersed in jazz-age hedonism'. The company's next project is *The Wolf of Wall Street*, which promises to continue what we might call this dramaturgy of hedonism. At The Vaults, Shotgun Carousel's *Divine Proportions* (2018–19) promised an experience 'Blurring the lines between feast and fantasy . . . the story of the God of Wine, Hedonism, and

ritual ecstasy', and its follow-up show, *Red Palace* (The Vaults, 2019), promises 'pulsating and swirling revelry' and the chance for spectators to 'live your own fairy tale ending'. The Bridge Theatre's promenade production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (dir. Nicholas Hytner, 2019–20) invites audiences to 'sit close up to the action, or follow it on foot into a dream world of feuding fairies and uncontrollable desire.' (2019). Emma Burnell notes that immersive theatre 'is often sold on its implicit sense of hedonism' (2018), but that implicit sense is often quite explicitly present.

The erotic appears in content, tone, form, characters, story: in performed relationships between actor and audience member (perhaps through the structure of a one-on-one encounter, or in a split-second of eye contact); or more structurally, inbuilt into how a show manipulates its audience/actor relations or their route through its world. David Shearing's discussion on voyeurism and intimacy describes a one-on-one encounter in Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* as 'the immersive money shot' (2015, p. 71) – his metaphor is apt. One way productions can promise or achieve this kind of charge is by evoking an environment that already has resonance, from history or genre, where *debauchery* in some guise or other might safely be expected to be found; productions in this article evoke an ancient Dionysian revel, a *fin-de-siècle* bordello, a great big roaring party, a contemporary strip club. But as well as discussing immediate signifiers, I want to argue that viewing eroticism as a dramaturgical strategy provides clues as to how an audience member is invited to view or move through the space they find themselves in, and, crucially what power dynamics are in play as they do so.

One-on-One Performance

There has been much discussion about intimacy, consent, and touch in the context of one-on-one performance (Zerihan 2010; Heddon, Iball and Zerihan 2012; Kartsaki

and Zerihan 2012; Walsh 2014; Hill and Paris 2014; Gomme 2015), and particularly regarding the ethics of risk and consent in the context of performative exchange (Kartsaki, Zerihan and Lobel 2012; Manninen 2012). Rachel Zerihan notes that intimacy is a concept central to many discussions of one-on-one encounters: 'Who carries the intimacy, where it resides, who sustains it and who or what has the ability to destroy it are all subliminal questions that flutter at the core of . . . the lure of One to One performance' (2010, p. 207). The overlap between interactive (specifically one-on-one) performance and eroticism is also often present, particularly in terms of an artist 'performing a desire to please' (2010, p. 220). In the context of pervasive performance (immersive work that overlaps with the real world to the extent that a spectator shares space with oblivious members of the public), Richard Talbot reminds us that immersive performance can be coded as a game the actor and audience member play together:

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. (2017, p. 175)

Either player has the potential (the power) to disrupt, stop, or spoil the game; this model helps to theorize a way in which both parties may be seen to take some responsibility for playing correctly or fairly.

It is helpful to draw a distinction between one-on-one performance as a form in itself and the productions under consideration in this article, which are larger scale immersive spaces where the spectre of intimacy hangs, and a one-on-one or otherwise intimate encounter is built in as a possibility which an audience member *may* experience, either by accident or design, but equally may not. These encounters could be initiated, ignored, enjoyed, or tolerated by an audience member, but they are not guaranteed simply by their attendance. Moments of intimate encounter in these environments therefore suggest more clearly that *decisions* are being

made by audience member/performer: deliberate instigation, acceptance, or avoidance of a chosen target. At the most extreme, one-on-ones become coded as the best way to spend time in the space, the reward for engaging with the show properly or having the best logistical or timing-based strategy.¹ In one-on-one performance, the intimate encounter forms and *is* the content of the work: immersive productions with larger audience numbers instead may choose to deploy the one-on-one as a tantalizing possibility, something you might just be lucky enough to find.

Another reason to draw a distinction between one-on-one and larger-scale immersive performance is the division of labour between a performer in the show and the artistic director/designer of the work. In the majority of intimate one-on-one performance (such as those discussed in the works cited above) the solo performer is also the lead artist and instigator of the project, and their personal labour or risk or otherwise commitment to the performance is an integral part of the dramaturgy of the whole piece. In the larger scale productions under consideration here, the performers who are enacting intimate exchanges with audience members are generally doing the job of embodying and delivering the artistic idea of someone else. This is why it is important to consider the question of performed seduction in these spaces as being closely tied up with who has the power to decide that certain exchanges will take place.

One-on-one performance is often framed as having at least the possibility of equal power between the artist and their spectator. Rachel Gomme describes feeling a detraction from her experience on sensing that she was being treated the same as everyone else: she wanted the performer to reward in particular '*my listening*' as being distinct from the listening of others who came before (2015, p. 287, original emphasis.) As Gomme identifies here, practical economic realities can all too easily undermine the promise of uniqueness in one-on-one encounters; but there is at least built in the form the *potential* for meaningful exchange for both parties (or

at least the successfully performed *appearance* of meaningfulness). This equal-power argument is made manifest in the suggestion to use *one-to-one* rather than *one-on-one* to describe this genre of work (Zerihan 2010; Kartsaki and Zerihan 2012), and in this context the phrase does allow for nuance when considering the flows of intimate exchange, invitation and acceptance. Tropes of eroticism and performed seduction in larger immersive productions, however, do not generally conform to this dynamic and *one-on-one* remains the appropriate phrase: performance is audience-facing and demonstrably for the benefit of the spectator(s), who are unlikely to be invited to view any exchanges as being equally meaningful or unique for the actor. It is therefore clear to see this as an issue of a performer's *work*, a neat embodiment of immersive theatre's dependence on affective labour for getting audiences excited.

A Note on Barriers

I've written elsewhere about barriers to immersion relating to immersive experience in performance (Biggin 2017, p. 38–47), and the metaphor of seduction can be a helpful means of reading the concept. Immersive experience is a state of intense engagement – high levels of concentration, an emotional, visceral response. It is the sensation of heightened *experience* in a piece of work, the phenomenon of 'losing yourself' in it, of losing track of time. This feeling may not last long and is not a guaranteed response to any work of art, even one describing itself as *immersive* on the posters. Makers face barriers to immersion at various levels which must be lowered to allow audience members to smoothly become as immersed as the production wants them to be. Barriers to immersion exist at a utilitarian or functional level, relating to basics of logistics or movement – stage-management or accessibility concerns – and at more conceptual levels of creative or interpretive decisions; all of these might allow for immersion, facilitate, frustrate, or block it.

A production's success lowering any

barrier to immersion for any individual, at any point, will always be subjective, or at least have different mileage. Techniques and decisions will be variously effective for different people, depending on personal factors they bring to the performance with them. I once put this to an immersive theatre company when explaining barriers to immersion by saying: 'You can open the doorway and beckon; you can't push them through.'

Even though I said that about beckoning from a doorway, *seduction* is a metaphor I haven't prioritized until recently in thinking about this process.² Applying the idea of seduction to barriers to immersion, and the conscious lowering thereof, gives us a vocabulary to talk about immersive experience as an index of a production's power over, and responsibility towards, its audience members, and the need for consent and an ethics of care becomes very visible. An audience member happily responding to a production's beckoning finger certainly *sounds* like an inherently empowering idea, or at least one of mutual decision-making in the act of becoming immersed that fulfils the 'we want the audience to be active, not passive' mantra of so much of this genre of work.³ But it also reveals that an immersive production, or an actor in the same, must perform a *conscious* attempt to reach this experiential goal. Metaphorical seduction – the beckoning from a doorway – is deliberately performed to relate to spectator affect.

It is also vital to recall the wider frame in which any discussion of sexualized labour sits. Most of the thinking that informed this article took place while the world was steadily revealing itself to be the one it turns out we all live in, with daily headlines tracking capitalist hetero-patriarchy's continued revelling in its untouchability. Sarah Gorman, Geraldine Harris, and Jen Harvie put it starkly in their overview of the context(s) of a resurgence of interest in contemporary feminisms in performance: 'the fault lines in neoliberal capitalism have increasingly been revealed as gaping

divides' (2018, p. 278). That power dynamic is everywhere, including immersive theatre. Most high profile were the instances of assault on performers in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* in New York (see Jamieson 2018; Soloski 2018; Wingenroth 2018), with performers describing known harassers freely able to get back into the show after being thrown out once, landing the responsibility for safety on those already vulnerable in the space. Performers also voiced frustration with audience anonymity (through the wearing of masks) that prevented further action as well as enabling aggressively entitled behaviour in the first place (Jamieson 2018). Around the same time, similar incidents were also reported in The Guild of Misrule's *The Great Gatsby* in London, leading to the installation of alarms for performers to respond in-moment in the show (Snow 2018). From these most visible examples we can understand that there are many others.

In talking about tropes of the erotic in immersive performance, my hope is to open up space for continued discussions of the realities of power dynamics in a performance space, and to enable us to become better equipped to talk about, or include in our making when we are working as makers, ways of acknowledging – and working to dismantle – the cultural hegemonies that lead to these incidents.⁴ As Alice Saville puts it in her excellent discussion of audience consent and confrontational participatory performance:

It's impossible to create an 'experience', singular. People's identities will inevitably shape their experience of the work, and immersive shows have a funny way of recreating the power dynamics of the world outside. (2019)

Particularly for popular large-scale immersive work, the sexy frisson of freedom promised by marketing rubric might, in the end, mean the freedom to recreate the oppressive status quo. Makers of immersive work will always be positioned in relation to this risk.

Having said all this, I also feel a certain resistance to implying that the *main* reason we might be talking about eroticism is in order to talk about sexual assault. I am wary of implying that the end-game of any discussion on seduction or sexiness must always come back to aggressive embodiments of patriarchal (cis-, hetero-, masculine) entitlement, as this also seems like a reduction of the potential power of the erotic in performance which is not *inherently* linked to these behaviours. This risks allowing the violence of patriarchy to continue to dominate the narrative. The shows discussed below, all of which self-define as ‘immersive’, engage in strategies of seduction and/or invoke the erotic in order to get their immersive work done: i.e. to get their audience emotionally or sensorily invested in, or excited by, their fictional environments and the stories they are telling.

Safety is always inherent to the process of immersion in this context of course, as a marker of engagement with(in) the performance, vital for both audience and performers as a question of who has the power and responsibility in the room. It falls upon makers who use the erotic (and consciously foreground its presence in their design, staging decisions, and marketing) to acknowledge its presence, in order to allow for a clearer address of issues of responsibility and control in their performers’ workplace. But it is also possible to think about actor/audience relations outside of an oppressive dynamic and not to assume that uncomfortable or abusive dynamics are inevitable. Acknowledging the erotic’s presence in theatrically immersive spaces achieves this end too.⁵ Considering immersive performance as representing or embodying processes of seduction reveals philosophies, priorities, and reimaginings: about intimacy, gender, bodies, money, and the nature of performance itself, sexual or otherwise.

Artist for Sale: The Poetry Brothel

The Poetry Brothel is an immersive music and live literature event with performances

spread internationally, broadly cabaret style in form and structure with a mixed bill of writers and musicians performing work loosely connected to a (usually literary) theme. What interests me about The Poetry Brothel is its romanticized roleplay of the dynamics of sex work, and its embodiment of sex’s (and sex work’s) inherent connection to artistic creativity. This relationship is summarised by Poetry Brothel London:

The Poetry Brothel . . . takes poetry away from classrooms, lecture halls and ivory towers and places it in the lush, radiant, and fiery interiors of a bordello. Based on . . . the *fin-de-siècle* bordellos in New Orleans and Paris, many of which functioned as safe havens for fledgling, avant-garde artists, The Poetry Brothel presents a rotating cast of ‘poetry whores’ each operating within a carefully constructed character. For a small fee, you can purchase a piece of the ‘whore’s’ poetical spirit and absorb yourself in the true nature of one-on-one poetry readings in back rooms and other secret and intimate spaces. (2019)

The one-on-one ‘money shot’ (cf. Shearing) in this context is having a poem whispered to you individually, blindfolded, by one of the performers. The description above codes this interaction to be what is quite a common reading (and misconception) of what happens during sex work: that a part of the person *themselves* is bought – and not just any part but the most important, vital, ineffable piece of them: their *spirit*. (Rather than some time of their affective labour.) It’s an idea that still exists in much rhetoric opposed to sex workers’ rights and is a common trope in fictional depictions of sex work. In a characteristically clear-eyed analysis, Angela Carter noted that sex workers are favourite subjects of erotic writers, crucially, in a way that remains strictly romantically fantastical:

Prostitutes are favourite heroines of the pornographic writer, though the economic aspects of a prostitute’s activity, which is her own main concern in the real world, will be dealt with only lightly. Her labour is her own private business. Work, in this context, is really dirty work; it is unmentionable . . . To concentrate on the prostitute’s trade as trade would introduce

too much reality into a scheme that is first and foremost one of libidinous fantasy. (1979, p. 13.) This romanticized approach is not a historic or obsolete mode of troping what happens during sex work. Given a more negative framing it is an idea that continues to influence contemporary narratives of this form of labour. Juno Mac and Molly Smith quote a journalist admitting they looked for 'dead eyes' in the face of a former sex worker; Mac and Smith comment that 'Sex work, categorized as the wrong kind of sex, is seen as taking something from you – the life in your eyes.' (2018, p. 25). Sex work continues to be linked to an idea of some kind of indefinable *spirit* or *joie de vivre* that it is possible to lose, and this metaphor continues to shore up *moral* judgements of sex work and those who practise it.⁶ The Poetry Brothel playfully recreates this misunderstanding.

The Poetry Brothel deliberately flirts with its own binary between art and commerce. To instigate a one-on-one requires purchasing tokens from the Madam,⁷ given to the Poetry Whore who then instigates and guides the performance. The most intimate transaction available in the show is not sullied with actual money but requires evidence that money has been spent. Or at least it is a role-play of these values, with results identical to actually having them. But what is crucial to The Poetry Brothel's eroticized narrative of creativity and sexual labour is that the performer in question – as a *poet* – also has this intangible spirit, equally romanticized at the same time as being described as – and performed as if it were – available for purchase.

Audience members are invited to enjoy their craft as writers and as performers of their writing, but the metaphorical logic of the show subsumes this writing work into that same idea of an ineffable quintessence of artistry that (for the right price) can be intimately transferred. And as this transfer is played as if it will be done only for money, it appears quite literally as a *valuable* exchange. Intimacy and poetry are coded in a more or less equal manner, collapsed together into one and the same thing.

The performers are Poetry Whores; they are not Creative Writing Workers: the erasure of their labour is necessary for its artistic elevation.

All-Consuming Passions: an Evening of Meat and Divine Proportions

Speaking in reference to Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, Colette Gordon's excellent article 'Theatre of the Velvet Rope' draws a comparison between immersive performance and spaces of sexual labour:

Sex shows, while acknowledging their foundation in sex and voyeurism, may in fact produce a theatre less compromised by voyeurism and audience neediness than Punchdrunk's theatre of intimacy. The argument is not that *Sleep No More* isn't serious theatre because it's too much like a skin show, but that the skin show might do more as theatre. (2013)

Environments where the transactional or performative nature of intimacy is understood from the outset allow for issues of consent, value, and boundaries to be clearly stated; where levels of intimacy are known to be negotiable, the terms can be clearly negotiated. The implicit invitation of much immersive work – that magical frisson of captured moments of intimacy, come to the show and see if you get it – can sound like a promise that deliberately blurs these boundaries of what may or may not happen, which consequently blurs what is *actually* permitted or not at any given time. And indeed this ambiguity may be the whole point and a deliberate strategy by makers and/or a show's marketing, of seeming to be making an exciting offer. This makes the wide range of behaviours we might bracket for now under the term 'overstepping the mark' much more likely to happen, either by a genuine misunderstanding – a misreading of some aspect of the affective labour contract – or by a vulnerable person (whether performer or audience member) being taken advantage of through intimidation or social pressure.

High levels of excited engagement can be central to the aesthetic aims of large-scale

immersive performance (not to mention a production's economic aims, given a customer-is-always-right style imperative to maintain their good time), which means the act of fulfilling such promises can all too easily take priority over anything else. It then becomes necessary to redress the balance, and this responsibility can fall to the performers themselves. *Divine Proportions* (2018) was a Dionysian revelry-themed immersive dining experience at The Vaults, with circus and cabaret acts taking place around a multi-course meal, themed around Greek mythology filtered through a contemporary circus/burlesque aesthetic. Aphrodite performs a striptease; Persephone dances for a drag-king Dionysus with hot dripping wax. Notably the show was created by an all-female team and stated its commitment to exploring and subverting gender at the outset (its director, Celine Lowenthal, is also a founding member of a drag-king collective). Any assertion of boundaries from the performers risked clashing with the production's celebratory tone and contradicting the 'ritual ecstasy' promised in the marketing. Audience members responded to the invitation to enjoy themselves – including in ways the performance itself did not wish. As one reviewer commented:

It made everyone a bit sad when [three performers] had to reiterate during their prologue, that the audience can look but not touch. We'd already been informed of this by the host at the door, but clearly it's still an issue. (Machin 2018)

To clarify, the reviewer's problem wasn't that this assertion was made at all, but that its repetition emphasized the need for it. Being explicit with rules of consent was deemed to be necessary and in this instance, because of the nature and context of its delivery, doing so revealed a situation at odds with the debauchery and carefree hedonism of the fictional setting. This created a sense of disappointment, with 'everyone a bit sad' at the need to both make and repeat clear rules of engagement. The assertion of boundaries reminded audience members that the hedonistic setting was indeed a fiction.

An Evening of Meat (produced by *I AM*, The Vaults 2017–18) was an immersive dining experience in which an all-female cast crawled across, posed or remained silently still on the tables, with bursts of dance and movement between courses. The show was described by its director and choreographer Kate March in an interview in *Run Riot* (Goldstone 2018) as a feminist piece deliberately seeking to disrupt the dynamics of patriarchal power and encourage body positivity by returning the problematic male gaze – sometimes literally, with moments of extended eye contact between performers and audience members.⁸ The piece played with the idea of objectification by placing the performers in objectifying positions. The feminist success of the piece, then, would hinge on how much this initial power dynamic was subverted, disrupted, or changed. The director described the piece's overall intent in these terms:

Through witnessing these characters' journey towards empowerment, all the audience members may vicariously feel a sense of connection and inspiration. (March, in Goldstone 2018)

Writing in response to this central contention, Ka Bradley points out that 'satire doesn't work if it is indistinguishable from the dominant hegemony it is trying to critique' (2018). The audience were invited to consume the performers via a voyeuristic gaze upon their (often) still and (always) silent bodies. The title of the whole piece, though certainly intended as ironic, still *does* perform the action of reducing the performers to one of the courses of the meal. As described earlier, these are performers working to deliver someone else's creative idea: it is not a name they have given themselves and so (beyond agreeing to perform in the piece) they are necessarily objectified by its own fictional logic. If a problematic male gaze was aggressively returned in the piece, it had been specifically invited in order to be aggressively returned, disrupting only problematic power dynamics of its own making.⁹ Broad strokes such as this leave little room for actual

investigation into what is going on when a spectator watches a sexual or sexualized performance. *An Evening of Meat* deployed pre-existing erotic aesthetics (lingerie, fishnets, red light) to immerse its audience in a performance world highly charged with a frisson of complicated intimacy. The issue for Bradley was in its apparent subversive qualities:

I cannot even really say where the subversion or disruption is supposed to be. It's not subversive for people to pay money to see women dance, even in very little clothing. It's not disruptive to have burlesque at dinner; the Moulin Rouge makes a mint from it. This transaction already exists in other places. . . . We have consumed the meat, and we haven't learned anything about it, except that it tastes nice. (2018)

For Bradley the production offered a fun time for audience members up for enjoying some naughty consumption, with the performers themselves among the commodities spread out on the table. Their performed eroticism embodied an absolute confirmation of a culture's current and dominant priorities, not a subversion or criticism of them.

Gender, Work, and Who Has Power

The relationship between art, fetishized bodies, and the commodification of authenticity in sexualized spaces raises questions that could easily fill a book's worth of discussion. Having established the performative nature of the spectre of the erotic in immersive spaces, it becomes vital to consider the inevitably *gendered* labour of much of this work: the casts of *Divine Proportions* and *An Evening of Meat* with (respectively) their inviting and accusatory gazes out towards the audience. A performed and dramaturged gaze outwards inevitably contains implications about the audience member who is presumed to be looking back, and a projected reading of what a spectator in turn might be assuming about the performer. *Divine Proportions* was compelled on at least one occasion to interrupt its two-way exchange of a flirt-

aciously ambiguous gaze with a straightforward declaration of boundaries, a statement of fact from one group to another; *An Evening of Meat* displayed an over-generalized reading of a de-facto heteronormative gaze some reviewers found too crudely drawn to be put to useful critical work. Poetry Whores are not always only female, and of course the one-on-one interaction in the context of The Poetry Brothel is not literally sexual labour – so what exactly *is* it that influences a spectator to choose to give their coin/token to one Poetry Whore and not another? Where does gender come into this, as indeed it must? I am less interested in asking whether their skill as a poet is really the most important thing here, and more in considering *why* that might seem like a cynical question. Would an audience member feel it necessary to emphasize to their chosen Whore that poetic skill was the crucial or indeed the only factor in making the decision of patronage?

When actors are training in the skills of immersive performance, 'the use of core facilitation skills such as rapport, listening, reading micro gestures, and effective questioning can be used by the performer to effectively manage the demands of the now and the imaginary worlds' (Hogarth, Bramley and Howson-Griffiths 2018, p. 189). The performer in a moment of interactive exchange with an audience member is reacting in an intimate, personal register but is also, necessarily, never completely living in the fictional world; the real-world actions, atmospheres, and developments are as valid, and as important to respond to as the fictional or otherwise *imaginary* narrative in creating and maintaining immersive experience for the spectator – not to mention upholding appropriate professional conduct during the actor's own time at their work. If contracts of touch and intimacy vary depending on the performer's personal judgement in the moment, perceptions of gender inevitably factor into how decisions are made about *who* and *how much* will result in the balance of *exciting* for the spectator and (crucially) *safe* for the performer (indeed, *safe* for both). Makers of immersive work do

well to acknowledge the inherent eroticism of much of their performers' labour, indeed the *crucial* part this form of labour often plays in achieving their work's intended effects. Working in the implicit/explicit erotic context of immersion may well give makers a number of artistic freedoms, but it also comes with responsibilities; particularly when a maker considers who has the power to dictate when and where intimate exchanges take place in their production, and especially if they themselves are not planning on performing in it. Being aware of the erotic's presence in immersive theatrical space will help performers and directors better understand its effects – at an absolute minimum, to manage its effects to ensure the rights and safety of performers in their place of work. But this can also lead to a broader range of artistic goals: acknowledging its presence in the room allows us the better to harness it; seeing it clearly allows us to put it to use; knowing it is a valid part of the artistic toolbox allows us to use it with generosity rather than cynicism. Understanding immersive theatre's general reliance upon performances of seduction or sexiness allows us to understand how a piece might subvert or (re)assert dominant power dynamics, both in the fictional world it builds for its audiences and in the reality of how performers navigate the space.

Makers need to be aware of the potential ramifications of using tropes of the erotic in immersive work and recognize the broader power dynamics of the culture in which any immersive show is made. Social pressure to go along with an uncomfortable situation can be shored up by a large-scale production against an individual, implying a risk of social embarrassment (for an audience member) or the danger of seeming unprofessional or unreliable (for an actor). Or else the power teeters on the hinge of the economic investment of an expensive ticket price or the need to remain able to negotiate a precarious job marketplace. Artistic choices made at the stage of designing and directing a production, as well as changes made to action or text across a theatrical run, will reveal whose experiences have priority in

the space, and how this priority is embodied in the moment of performance.

Notes

1. For more on one-on-one seeking in the context of Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*, see Biggin 2017, p. 87–8. It is difficult to be unaware of the perceived 'value' of one-on-ones when one inhabits a space where this desire is embodied in the behaviour of other spectators. An audience member can reject or ignore the suggestion that these encounters are to be particularly valued, or else modify their behaviour (whether enthusiastically, competitively, reluctantly . . .) to join the search for this scarce commodity.

2. Writing in the context of marketing, Clinton Lanier and Scott Rader note that 'while the extant marketing literature has focused primarily on how sex influences both consumer acquisition and identity construction, less research has addressed the consumption of sex as an erotic practice' (2018, p. 17). While sexual imagery can be ever-present and hyper-visible, and easily discussed, actual sexiness can be easy to miss.

3. James Frieze identifies the simplistic assumptions underlying this widespread binary: 'Within both critical and commercial discourse . . . the binary of progressive/traditional has often worked in tandem with other binaries: sensory/rational, haptic/optic, agency/passivity. Together, these oppositions have aligned immersion and interaction with liberation from convention' (2017, p. 2–3). The former term in these binaries is generally seen as negative, the latter positive. Geraldine Harris also recognizes 'a traditional, hierarchical divide between thinking and feeling' (2017, p. 277) at play in some discourse on immersive performance. Similarly, I have argued elsewhere that immersive experience itself is not a felt/not-felt binary, but exists as a series of graded states of varying intensity (Biggin 2017). The language of eroticism used in the marketing of much immersive work adds a further binary of sexy/not-sexy to the above: the more active, sensory, interactive, empowering, immersive the show, the sexier, the better.

4. It can be equally difficult to go along with problematic power dynamics as to resist them. In *Living a Feminist Life* Sara Ahmed notes the loudness of inaction being read as a form of action: 'if you don't participate in something you are heard as being antagonistic toward something, whether or not you feel antagonistic' (2017, p. 153). Not to engage can be its own critique, especially in an environment where there is a perceived or actual pressure to play along. Ahmed's 'feminist killjoy' employs deliberate disruption and refusal to play along as an inherent part of her necessary personal-political survival.

5. Similarly, this article's discussion of seduction-as-labour-as-performance must also acknowledge a common critique of immersive work. *The Drowned Man* (and Punchdrunk's model of large-scale immersive productions more generally) has been repeatedly criticized as being a 'decidedly neoliberal' cog in the experience economy machine (Harvie 2013; Alston 2016; O'Hara 2017; Blyth 2017), the ultimate result of which is a narcissistic, self-serving spectator-consumer chasing

down their prepaid nugget of theatrical experience at the expense of everyone else. Geraldine Harris (2017) has questioned the assumptions lying behind this theorization, opening up what we might mean by experience in this context and (re)allowing for considerations the erotic or pleasurable in particular. She quotes from bell hooks' study of race, sex and class in cinema:

[W]hat logic equates pleasure experienced in the theatre with narcissism and neo-liberal values? Such logic must simultaneously hold that, as Bell Hooks argues in relation to film, the realm of fantasy is not necessarily 'completely separate from politics', while disavowing the possibility that 'our desire for radical social change is linked to our desire to experience pleasure, erotic fulfilment and a host of other passions' in ways that (as her discussion underlines) embrace *sociality* rather than narcissism [hooks, 1996, p. 29]. (Harris 2017: 280, original italics.)

6. An emphasis on morality shifts the emphasis away from material perspectives, the preferred focus of activists. For more on the contemporary sex-workers' rights movement, see Grant (2014); Mac and Smith (2018).

7. I am grateful to burlesque artist and former Poetry Brothel London performer Miss Glory Pearl for clarifying the mechanics of the one-on-one to me.

8. In discussing a problematic gaze from the direction of audience to performer (a mocking laugh 'at' rather than an empowering 'with'), Geraldine Harris makes the important point that "'objectification" is not necessarily synonymous with desire'. (2013, p. 151). An objectifying gaze can be the distillation of a power dynamic that removes all agency from the objectified party.

9. Bradley identified a further Orientalism in the piece's use of Asian design and pattern in the performers' costumes as well as their general character of silent subservience, adding an additional layer of west 'consuming' east, to male 'consuming' female and the audience 'consuming' (the labour of) the performers.

References

A *Midsummer Night's Dream: Bridge Theatre*. Retrieved 24 June 2019 from <<https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/show/a-midsummer-nights-dream-bridge-theatre>>.

Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2017).

Alston, Adam. *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Bernstein, Elizabeth. *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Biggin, Rose. *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience: Space, Game, and Story in the work of Punchdrunk*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Blyth, Rachael. 'The Fourth Wall and Other Ruins: Immersive Theatre as a Brand'. In *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, edited by James Frieze. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 193–8.

Bradley, Ka. 'Review: *An Evening of Meat* at The Vaults'. *Exeunt*, 23 April 2018: <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-evening-meat-vaults/>>, accessed 29 April 2019.

Burnell, Emma. 'Immersive theatre may be sexy – but we need to start talking about consent', *The Independent*, 28 May 2018: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/immersive-theatre-consent-great-gatsby-sleep-no-more-sexual-assault-a8372641.html>>, accessed 29 April 2019.

Carter, Angela. *The Sadeian Woman: an Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1979).

Frieze, James, *Reframing Immersive Theatre: the Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 1–25

Goldstone, Eli. 'Q&A: Kate March on *An Evening of Meat* at The Vaults', *Run Riot*, 18 March 2018: <<http://www.run-riot.com/articles/blogs/qa-kate-march-evening-meat-vaults>>, accessed 29 April 2019.

Gomme, Rachel. 'Not-so-close encounters: Searching for intimacy in one-to-one performance'. *Participations* 12 (1) 2015, p. 281–300.

Gordon, Colette. 'Touching the Spectator: Intimacy, Immersion and the Theatre of the Velvet Rope'. *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 7/2 (2012–13)

Gorman, Sarah, Geraldine Harris, and Jen Harvie. 'Feminisms Now'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 28:3 (2018), p. 278–84. <www.borrowers.uga.edu/316/show>, accessed 29 April 2019.

Grant, Melissa Gira. *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*. (London: Virago, 2014).

Harris, Geraldine. 'The Ghosts of New Burlesque' in *A Good Night Out for the Girls: Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre and Performance*, eds. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 134–56.

Harris, Geraldine. 'Differences in Degree or Kind? Ockham's Razor's *Not Until We Are Lost* and Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*'. In *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, ed. James Frieze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 265–88

Harvie, Jen. *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2013).

Heddon, Deirdre, Helen Iball, and Rachel Zerihan. 'Come Closer: Confessions of Intimate Spectators in One to One Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22:1 (2012), p. 120–33.

Hill, Leslie, and Helen Paris. *Performing Proximity: Curious Intimacies*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Hogarth, Sarah, Emma Bramley, and Teri Howson-Griffiths. 'Immersive worlds: an exploration into how performers facilitate the three worlds in immersive performance'. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 9:2 (2018), p. 189–202.

hooks, bell. *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class in the Movies*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

Jamieson, Amber. 'Performers And Staffers At "Sleep No More" Say Audience Members Have Sexually Assaulted Them.' *Buzzfeed News*: 6 January 2018. <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/amberjamieson/sleep-no-more>>, accessed 29 April 2019.

Kartsaki, Eirini, and Rachel Zerihan, 'Slots, slaps, sluts

- and other cheap thrills: Promiscuity, desire and labour in one-to-one performance', *Performing Ethos* 3.2 (2012), p. 155–71.
- Kartsaki, Eirini, Rachel Zerihan, and Brian Lobel, 'Generous gestures and frustrated acts: Ethics in one-to-one performance', *Performing Ethos* 3.2 (2012), p. 99–105.
- Lanier Jr, Clinton D. and C. Scott Rader. 'The irrepressible and uncontrollable urge: sex, experience, and consumption'. *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 22:1 (2018), p. 17–43.
- Mac, Juno, and Molly Smith. *Revolted Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Worker's Rights*. (London: Verso, 2018).
- Machin, Freddie. 'Review: *Divine Proportions* at The Vaults'. *Exeunt*. 21 September 2018. <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/divine-proportions-vaults/>>, accessed 29 April 2019.
- Manninen, Saini. 'On Consuming Encounters: Short duration and the material conditions of performance'. *Performance Research*, 17:5 (2012), p. 92–97.
- McKittrick Hotel: *Sleep No More*. Retrieved 24 June 2019, <<https://www.mckittrickhotel.com/sleep-no-more>>.
- O'Hara, Meghan. 'Experience Economies: Immersion, Disposability, and Punchdrunk Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 27:4 (2017), p. 481–96.
- Poetry Brothel London 'The Poetry Brothel London: I Confess I Have Lived', <www.designmynight.com/london/whats-on/immersive/the-poetry-brothel-london-i-confess-i-have-lived>, accessed 29 April 2019.
- Saville, Alice. 'Immersive Theatre and the Consenting Audience', *Exeunt*, 7 May 2019. <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/immersive-theatre-consent-audience-barzakh/>>, accessed 7 May 2019.
- Shearing David. 'Intimacy, Immersion and the Desire to Touch: The Voyeur Within'. In George Rodosthenous (ed.), *Theatre as Voyeurism: The Pleasures of Watching*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 71–87.
- Snow, Georgia. 'Immersive Great Gatsby show introduces "panic alarm" for cast after sexual assaults'. *The Stage*, 6 March 2018. <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2018/great-gatsby-production-introduces-panic-alarm/>>, accessed 29 April 2019.
- Soloski, Alexis. 'The problem with immersive theatre: why actors need extra protection from sexual assault', *Guardian*, 12 February 2018. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/Feb/12/immersive-theatre-punchdrunk-sleep-no-more>>, accessed 29 April 2019.
- Talbot, Richard. 'She Wants You to Kiss Her: Negotiating Risk in the Immersive Theatre Contract.' In *Refraining Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, ed. James Frieze. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 171–91.
- The Immersive Great Gatsby*. Retrieved 24 June 2019: <<https://immersivegatsby.com/event/the-great-gatsby>>.
- The Vaults: DIVINE PROPORTIONS*. Retrieved 24 June 2019: <<https://www.thevaults.london/divine-proportions>>.
- The Vaults: RED PALACE*. Retrieved 24 June 2019: <<https://www.thevaults.london/red-palace>>.
- Walsh, Fintan. 'Touching, Flirting, Whispering: Performing Intimacy in Public.' *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 58, no. 4 (2014), p. 56–67. *Project MUSE* <muse.jhu.edu/article/561939>. Accessed 1 May 2019.
- Wingenroth, Lauren. 'Why I Wasn't Surprised by the Sleep No More Accusations'. *Dance Magazine*, 2 March 2018. <www.dancemagazine.com/sleep-no-more-accusations-2541407201.html>, accessed 29 April 2019.
- Zerihan, Rachel. 'La Petit Mort: erotic encounters in One to One performance'. In *Eroticism and Death in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Karoline Gritzner. (Herts: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010), p. 202–23.