

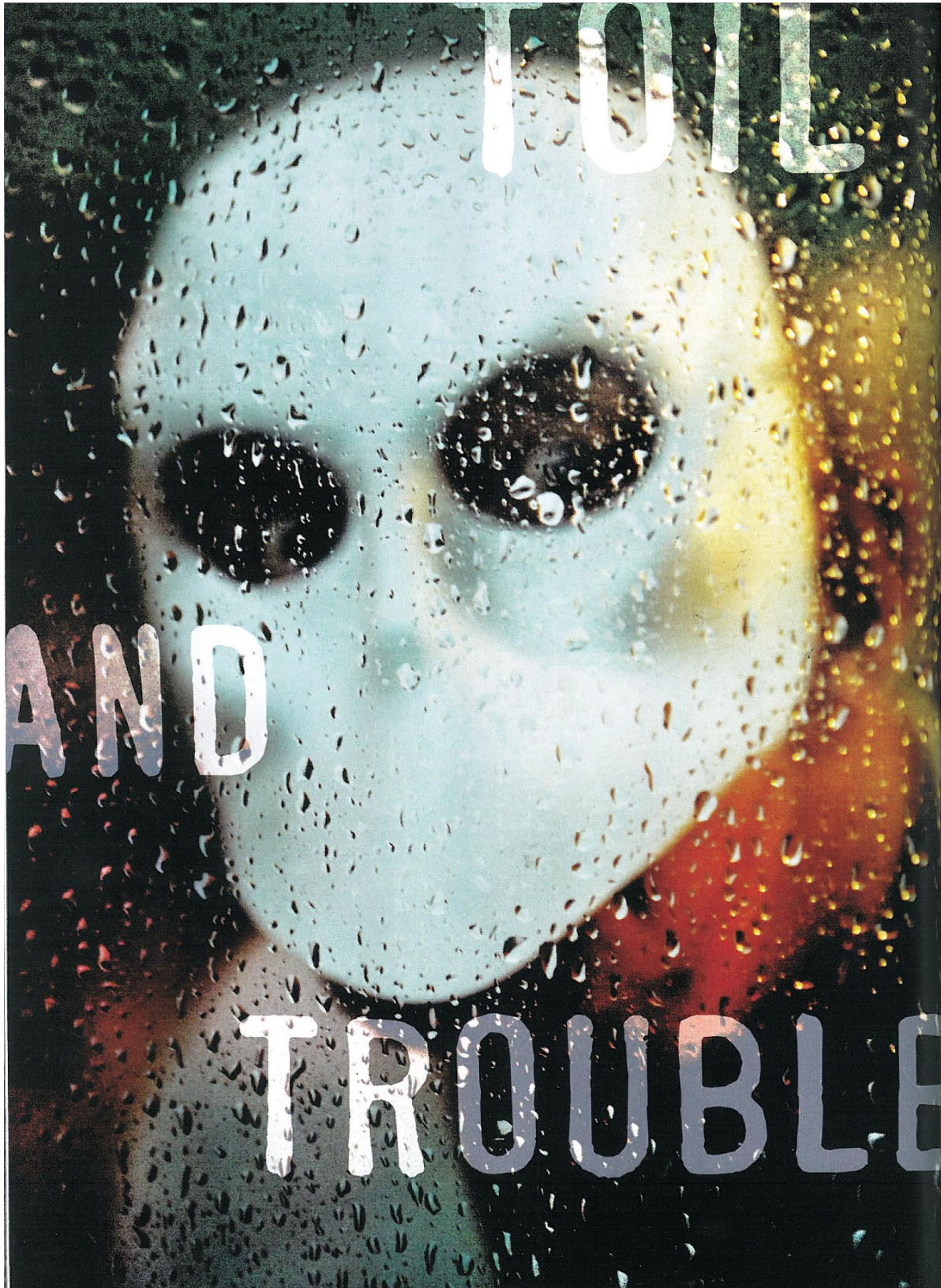
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# Hemispheres

November 2011



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NO SEATS, NO STAGE, NO INTERMISSION,

  
NO ESCAPE.

HOW ONE RENEGADE BRITISH STAGE TROUPE

AND ITS WILD PRODUCTION OF MACBETH

MIGHT JUST SAVE THEATER.

BY JENNA SCHERER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH WILMER

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**I HAD TO PRESS MYSELF FLAT AGAINST THE WALL TO KEEP THE HOTEL CLERK FROM KICKING ME. HE AND A GUEST—A GLAMOROUS WOMAN IN A TRAVELING COAT—WERE WRESTLING ON THE RECEPTION DESK, FIGHTING OVER A SET OF ROOM KEYS. I PROBABLY HAD NO BUSINESS BEING BACK THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE, BUT NOBODY HAD TRIED TO STOP ME—OR, IF THEY HAD, I HADN'T NOTICED. I WAS TOO BUSY THINKING ABOUT THE SINISTER MAN I'D ENCOUNTERED A FEW MINUTES EARLIER, WASHING HIS HANDS IN A BATHTUB. A LITTLE LATER, I FOUND MYSELF WANDERING THROUGH A CEMETERY, FAIRLY CONFIDENT THAT THE SHAPES LOOMING IN THE DARKNESS WERE JUST STATUES—UNTIL ONE OF THEM MOVED. IT WAS A MAN, A HULKING FIGURE WEARING AN APRON, FUMBLING IN THE SOIL.**

This may sound like a dream brought on by bad seafood, but it's not. It's *Sleep No More*: a show that takes your preconceptions about what a night at the theater should entail and completely shatters them. The work of pioneering British company Punchdrunk, *Sleep No More* is a sprawling, immersive performance piece that's part Shakespeare, part vintage Hitchcock and part live-action video game.

The show takes place in a renovated warehouse in New York's Chelsea district. It's a disconcertingly large venue, spread out over six floors and more than 100 rooms. Audience members—if that's what you can call them—are invited not only to watch the events unfolding in the make-believe McKittrick Hotel, but also to throw themselves right into the thick of it all.

Here's how it works: Upon entering the set, you are led through a dimly lit maze into a Prohibition-era bar, complete with a lounge singer crooning the standards. After a drink or two, a nattily dressed but nonetheless ominous man hands you a white beaked mask, which you're required to wear for the duration of the show. From there, you're ushered into an elevator, whose operator gives you the lowdown: no talking, don't touch the actors, head back to the bar if you need a break. The elevator lurches to a halt and he adds, "Fortune favors the bold." The door opens to a misty darkness. Showtime.

The story loosely follows the plotline of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's twisted tragedy, with a bit of Hitchcock's *Rebecca* thrown in. But that's all I can tell you for sure, because the rest is up to you. No two playgoers' experiences are ever the same. You may spend the evening wandering deserted rooms, picking through letters, photographs and bits of macabre detritus. You may choose to follow a specific character all evening, chasing him from floor to floor, or to abandon that character for another one halfway through. You'll be privy to very intimate moments. If you're lucky, you might even get yanked into a secret room by one of the characters for a private tête-à-tête. The point is, it's up to you. You shape your own narrative according to where you go and what you do. It's an entertaining,

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surprising and invigorating experience.

Punchdrunk has been putting on shows like this since 2000, when a 22-year-old drama school graduate named Felix Barrett first founded the company. Its specialty is adapting dark, reality-bending tales, ranging from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* to Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, and the troupe stages its work in derelict tunnels and abandoned buildings, with the only constant being that the audience is flung headlong into the action. The shows sell out wherever they go, and the response has been so positive as to appear, at times, a bit unhinged. "All I can say is 'WOW.' I don't believe that I've ever experienced anything remotely like this," gushed a woman on a Broadway World discussion forum. "I can't stop thinking about it."

**THE PAST DECADE** or so has not been kind to traditional stage productions. People are too busy poking, tweeting and texting to sit still in a theater for two hours. The public demands brevity, interactivity or at the very least a pair of 3-D goggles. The form has tried to update itself, but with the exception of a few brilliant outliers (*The Book of Mormon*, for instance), Broadway seems to have resigned itself to its fate. Attendance is down, ticket prices are up and there's little relief on the horizon.

Punchdrunk, on the other hand, flourishes, owing its success in part to the fact that it anticipated the tastes of a public saturated with media and bogged down by the demands of the digital age. Its shows provide the engagement of social networking, the visceral jolt of a Hollywood thriller, the blood-lurch of an amusement park ride. "Our whole desire is to put an audience at the heart of the action," Barrett says. "You're completely empowered to make any decision you want to. It's the opposite state to conventional theater: that amazing danger that's inherent within giving the audience a choice."

Conceived and directed by Barrett and choreographer Maxine Doyle, the New York production of *Sleep No More* represents Punchdrunk's most ambitious effort to date. The show opened in 2003 as a modest 10-person production in a former Victorian school in London. Six years later,

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**SOUND AND FURY**  
Punchdrunk founder Felix Barrett, pictured, is redefining theater as we know it

“WE FIGHT AGAINST PASSIVE OBEDIENCE,  
THE FORMULAIC SITTING THERE  
THAT ONLY STIMULATES YOUR BRAIN.”

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an expanded version came to another shuttered schoolhouse, this one in Brookline, Mass. Produced with Harvard Square's highbrow American Repertory Theater, it was Punchdrunk's first show outside the U.K.

Since *Sleep No More* hit New York, it's been looking poised to make the leap from cult phenomenon to full-on sensation—in part because of its blockbuster production values and in part because, well, this is New York. "We always wanted to do a show in New York," Barrett says. "It's such a vibrant, passionate theater city. We were really excited about that audience and how they might hurl themselves into the work."

**YOU COULD ARGUE** that the biggest star of *Sleep No More*'s New York run is the venue. Barrett is drawn to spaces that reinforce the mood of a piece, and the warehouse on West 27th Street could have been purpose-built for his needs. "I only saw it for an hour, but I knew it was the right place. It was love at first sight," he says. "It's got that feeling of excess and decay, perfect for the power-hungry, obsessive elements of the storyline."

Another important element of Barrett's productions is music. The film noir soundtracks of the 1940s and the gilded tunes of the swing era were an early inspiration for this show,

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**KEY SCENES** *Sleep No More's* Nicholas Bruder, playing Macbeth, with Kelly Bartnik; opposite page, Tori Sparks as Lady Macbeth, with Bruder (top) and Bartnik (below)

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**DANSE MACABRE** The cast of *Sleep No More* has a ball

and, other than the occasional gasp, groan or muttered verse, their eerie strains are pretty much the only sound you'll hear.

Punchdrunk aims for a physical, sensory style closer to interpretive dance than to scripted theater. Rather than expressing anguish or desire through words, performers crawl up walls, clamber onto furniture, wrestle on pool tables or suddenly take off at a dead run.

*Sleep No More* plays with all the senses: Lady Macduff's neglected apartment smells like rotting food, and the air in the graveyard is tangibly cool and damp. You're invited to rifle through drawers, steal a discarded piece of candy, pick up the phone to see if there's anyone on the other end (sometimes there is). Barrett's approach to theater means no lazing around or stepping back. The harder you work at *Sleep No More*, the more you'll get out of it. "We fight against passive obedience, the formulaic sitting there quietly in a theater seat that only stimulates your brain," he says. "If the body is stimulated as well, if you have to actually make decisions and have ownership, the repercussions fall on your shoulders."

Some people balk at this kind of participation, but most throw themselves into the experience. A few go a little overboard. Conor Doyle, who plays several roles and is also the show's assistant choreographer, once saw a woman attempt to stop a character giving another a glass of poison. "She'd completely forgotten that it was a show and it was fake," he says. "She cared about the character in that moment. She genuinely wanted to save her." Barrett, for his part, recalls a night when a man made for an open coffin, lay down inside it and slept through the entire show.

"People have done some really amazing things. I look at them and I think, Wow, you're doing that right now! OK," says Tori Sparks, who plays Lady Macbeth. "It's hard for a lot of people, to just be shot off into the dark and left to their own devices. I think that your reaction is very telling of who you are as a person."

**PUNCHDRUNK ISN'T THE** only company intent on demolishing traditional boundaries between audience and actor. The trend's epicenter is in the U.K., where experimental outfits like Il Pixa Rosso, Belt Up Theatre and Shunt employ gimmicks such as video goggles, Victorian parlor games and wild goose chases beneath London Bridge. In the U.S., the American Repertory Theater's *The Donkey Show*, a disco adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is performed on and around a sweaty dance floor.

Few, though, have generated the kind of enthusiasm that's greeted *Sleep No More*. Celebs including Trey Parker, Kevin Spacey and Amy Adams have slipped behind the mask. The show has seen its run extended over and over since opening in March, and continues to sell out. There are online communities devoted to it, whose members, in an attempt to get to the heart of the show's narrative, spend hours piecing together the fragments of their experiences.

While Barrett is quick to point out that Punchdrunk's productions aren't meant to supersede the traditional model of stage, actors and viewers in seats—"Conventional theater has its place, and I love it," he says—he does seem intent on further deconstructing the form. This fall will see the launch of Punchdrunk Travel: Participants arrive at an airport, collect plane tickets and a bundle from a locker, and fly off to a mystery venue for three days. "As soon as you leave the airport, you're inside the show," he says. "It's going to be completely global."

Of course, secrecy being paramount to Punchdrunk's mystique, Barrett is loath to divulge any details on his forthcoming travel agency or the inevitable follow-up to *Sleep No More*—though he and his company are most assuredly up to something. "I can't tell you when or where," he says. "But it's coming."

*Boston-based drama critic* **JENNA SCHERER** has to remind herself not to follow random strangers around actual hotels.

SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX