

## Immersive as an Umbrella

Immersive theatre has been a term described as being officially coined from a UK (United Kingdom) based production company called Punchdrunk in the early 2000's. For the purposes of this essay, we will be discussing this contemporary version of the immersive theatre scene. There are arguments to be made that "immersive theatre" has been going on much longer than the beginning of the twenty-first century and outside the UK in many forms. It should also be mentioned when we go on to discuss *Sleep No More* that there is a long theatrical tradition of mobile audiences specifically, going back in Europe at least to the medieval theatre and further, and, outside of Europe, in such productions as the Hindu Ramlila, also dating back for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Immersive as a term for theatre making is extremely broad and envelops many styles. There are all kinds of immersive theatre, but the thing that is universally true of all immersive theatre is that the audience exist \*within\* the world of the story, rather than sitting outside watching it.<sup>2</sup> Immersive theater in terms of engaging the audience and breaking the fourth wall can be split into two distinct types: absorption and transportation. Immersion as absorption is when the audience is being totally absorbed by some activity or interest. They might lose track of time or forget about everything else going on in their life. Immersion as transportation is where the audience really does feel that they are in a different place to their real-world location: they are transported. The word immersive gives the audience an idea of what they will experience at a performance, but audience members and practitioners use other words to describe in more

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<sup>1</sup> Forum Modernes Theater, Volume 27, Numbers 1-2, 2012, pp. 17-25 (Article)

<sup>2</sup> <https://workroom.fastfamiliar.com/immersive-theatre-ultimate-guide/>

detail what type of immersion they experience or create. Audience interactive or audience centric lets the audience know they will be a part of the night. Interactive will tell them they will get to engage in the piece. Promenade tells us that people will walk through the space and explore on their own terms. Site Specific means it will not take place in a theatre but instead in a space created or designed for the show. Intimate tells us that the audience will be small and close to the actors. As we grow as a society and experiment with experiences and performances the list of words used to describe immersive will grow. With modern technology constantly evolving there will be new exciting ways to interact with and involve the audiences in ways that feel fulfilling to not just the patrons but also the creators.

Many books have been written about immersive theatre and the many other terms and phrases that are used to be more specific and there is still so much more to be discussed. In this paper, I will focus on breaking down shows that use the term immersive that are vastly different from each other: *Sleep No More* by Punchdrunk and *The Year of Magical Thinking* by the Keen Company. I will discuss the terms they prefer to use to entice audience members to attend and interact and what the press has to say about their approaches. Finally, I will wrap up the paper with where immersive theatre is going in the future, specifically in New York City, but some global ideas as well.

### **Sleep No More**

*Sleep No More* is a New York City production created by British theatre company Punchdrunk. It is based off Punchdrunk's original 2003 London incarnation, their Massachusetts 2009 collaboration with Boston's American Repertory Theatre and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

*Sleep No More* won the 2011 Drama Desk Award for Unique Theatre Experience. The production is coined as a site-specific, interactive work of theatre. The presentational form of the show is considered promenade theatre, which is when the audience walks at their own pace through a variety of theatrically designed rooms. It is also considered environmental theatre which is when the location is an imitation of the actual setting instead of a traditional playhouse.

The performance is the adapted story of *Macbeth*, deprived of all spoken dialogue and set primarily inside a dimly lit 1930's hotel called the Mckittrick Hotel. Inspiration was also taken from noir films specifically from the works of Alfred Hitchcock and well as the 1967 Paisley witch trials. The performance takes place over three hours where the audience freely roams five floors while they interact with the space and follow or observe different characters. Each character performs a one-hour loop where they return to their initial location at the close of every hour. Some characters move across multiple floors while others are more stationary. For example, the married Lord Macduff spends his time flirting with women and playing cards in the speakeasy while Banquo performs several dances across many rooms and interacts with the witches before being slain by Macbeth. The three witches cause chaos throughout the hotel, seducing and mystifying various characters eventually culminating in their prophecies to Macbeth delivered in an explosive orgiastic rave while the hotel's porter straightens up the lobby while looking for a mysterious object and pining for one of the witches. This is only a few of the actors' paths as there are 25 performers with different tracks and paths throughout the evening.

The setting of this production lends to the immersive aspect of the show in a unique way because it gives the performers and audience members five floors to play in and explore. The audience enters the space and is immediately transported to a 1930's style hotel where they check their coats and bags and are given a playing card and a white mask. They are led into a bar area where they can get drinks and relax before entering the performance areas. This area is open during the performance to people who want to leave the experience for the rest of the time or for a brief period. There is also a stage where they have musical performances after the show. When it is time for the show to begin you are called up in groups based off the playing card you received and put into an elevator where an attendant drops people off on different floors. You might be separated from your group and put on to a floor to explore alone. Each floor is unique with the characters that perform there and the setting they represent. Floor one is the McKittrick Hotel Ballroom where the finale takes place but there are also smaller rooms surrounding it like sleeping quarters and a small crypt. The second floor is the hotel lobby including the Manderley bar, floor three is the hotel residences, and children's bedrooms, an office, and a Macduff family area, and the Macbeth bedroom. There is also a cemetery, a statue garden, and indoor courtyards. Floor four is called the High Street of Gallow Green and features a room apartment and shops owned by a taxidermist, tailor, mortician, and a confectioner. It also has a large speakeasy, a detective agency, and a dilapidated replica of the Manderley bar. The top floor is the King James Sanitarium that is devoid of patients and a gated forest with a small hut. Recorded music, either period such as tunes by the Ink Spots or Glenn Miller, ambient composed by Punchdrunk sound designer Stephen Dobbie, or orchestral mostly consisting of Bernard Herrmann's scores to Alfred Hitchcock films always plays steadily

throughout the entire building. Other sound effects, such as thunderclaps or bells, happen simultaneously on most floors as well, though with different volumes relative to the area of the performance where the sounds originate.

The audience is given three main rules to follow: to remain silent and always masked once they have entered the elevator up until the time, they return to the Manderley bar area they started, no phones or cameras and to keep a respectful distance from performers. They are however encouraged to move freely at their own leisure, choosing where they go and what they see, and they are also free to leave at any point in the three hours the performance is happening. It is encouraged to follow any of the actors and to maintain eye contact with an actor on occasion because that could lead to a one-on-one private encounter. Most importantly the audience should feel comfortable exploring rooms and investigate by opening drawers and doors, and examining the numerous detailed props found like written documents, clothes, or sweets.

*Sleep No More* opened in March of 2011 and has been running ever since. It is one of the top immersive attractions in New York City and has received rave reviews from many publications. The Huffington Post said it is "one of the most entertaining and involving works of theater you're likely to see! If you have any sense of adventure, this is theater you don't want to miss."<sup>3</sup> New York Magazine said "the show infects your dreams. I have felt theater overwhelm me before, but until Sleep No More, I have never felt it pass through me. It was a lovely evening in

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<sup>3</sup> Lee, Amy. "'Sleep No More' Presents a Highbrow Haunted House Version of 'Macbeth'." HuffPost, HuffPost, 22 Nov. 2011, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sleep-no-more\\_n\\_972405](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sleep-no-more_n_972405).

hell, one I will be recovering from for some time.” While the New York Times Ben Brantley was quoted saying *Sleep No More* was “a merry macabre chase. A voyeur’s delight. Messes with your head as thoroughly as any artificial stimulant. Spectacular!”<sup>4</sup> Mark Kennedy from the Associated Press said it was “brilliantly imagined! Utterly unique! Brilliant, sly, and insane. The level of detail is enough to make you swoon.”<sup>5</sup> Not all critiques have been positive, however. Marvin Carlson in *Forum Modernes Theater* was critical of saying the mobility of the audience does not give them truly pure freedom like it claims. He states that mobility, however, is not the same thing as agency, a distinction often overlooked in the recent rhetoric surrounding the new freedom given to the spectator in immersive theatre. There is much talk among reception theorists today about the “emancipated spectator,” a term not, not entirely coincidentally, developed in popular critical discourse about performance simultaneously with that of “immersive theatre.”<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Year of Magical Thinking***

*The Year of Magical Thinking* written by Joan Didion in 2005 following the unexpected death of her husband John Gregory Dunne in 2003. The book follows Didion reliving and reanalysis of her husband’s death throughout the year following it while caring for her daughter Quintana. She recounts events throughout the year multiple times in the book each time focusing on how certain emotional and physical aspects of the experience shift. She also incorporates medical and psychological research on grief and illness throughout the book. The play adaptation

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<sup>4</sup> Brantley, Ben. “Shakespeare Slept Here, Albeit Fitfully.” *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 14 Apr. 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/theater/reviews/sleep-no-more-is-a-macbeth-in-a-hotel-review.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Punchdrunkint. “Sleep No More, New York.” *Punchdrunk*, <https://www.punchdrunk.com/project/sleep-no-more/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Forum Modernes Theater*, Volume 27, Numbers 1-2, 2012, pp. 17-25 (Article)

premiered on Broadway in March of 2007 with Vanessa Redgrave as the sole cast member. It then moved to London. There have been other productions of the play throughout the years in Sydney Australia, Barcelona Spain, Canada and around the United States. In 2022 the Keen Company brought back the first New York revival of the show, this time starring Kathleen Chalfant in an intimate limited run of the bestselling memoir. This production brought the performance directly to the people. It was staged in non-traditional theatre spaces such as living rooms, libraries, and community spaces throughout the boroughs of New York City. What is great about this style of immersive theatre is that it is immersive in the form of intimacy. The audience size of each show during this run ran between 12-35 people based on the size of the space they were in. They focused on accessibility as well, which is not unique to productions, but they went beyond by listing dates when the performance was allergy-free for people with allergies to animals.

This production was the first of its kind made by the Keen Company, but I do not believe it will be the last. The organization's mission is to create theatre that connects. They state on their website that in intimate productions of plays and musicals they celebrate the complexities of hope and the joys of human connection.<sup>7</sup> Connection is at the heart of everything they do. They seek out deeper relations with a community of collaborators, audiences and peers through specificity, honesty, accessibility, and anti-racist practices. They pride themselves on their impact both on and off the stage. While most of their performances take place at Theatre Row on 42<sup>nd</sup> street in Hell's Kitchen New York, they are starting to branch out into other non-

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.keencompany.org/mission>

traditional theatre venues and styles. During the pandemic they did radio shows that anyone could listen to and then moved to stream some performances when it was safer for actors to come together. With their production of *the Year of Magical Thinking* I believe that they will use the model of bringing intimate shows to communities around New York City instead of making them come to them.

The New York Times reviewed the show by saying “This Keen Company production goes small, and in doing so, gets the play sublimely right.” and that “rejecting the distancing formality of a traditional theater setting, it is being performed around the city in living rooms and community spaces whose seating capacity ranges from 12 to 35. Its star is the esteemed Off-Broadway actor Kathleen Chalfant, in what may be her best-matched role.” These types of productions do not allow for many reviews because unlike a typical show that invites press during previews or holds many seats for reviewers these shows tend to only hold a few since seating is so limited and with a limited run.

### **Future of Immersive**

Many critics and scholars argue that immersive theatre is becoming outdated or that it has been diluted from its original form. Some journalists in the UK (United Kingdom) have begun to propose that this trend has had its day, accused it of being ‘tired and hackneyed already,’ and railed at its ‘triviality and low-level fascism.’<sup>8</sup> This way of thinking is outdated and insular and misses what immersive theatre is to the world. Currently things are getting more expensive all around. People must decide between leisure and necessities when it comes to their spending.

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<sup>8</sup> WHITE, G. (2012). On Immersive Theatre. *Theatre Research International*, 37(3), 221-235.  
doi:10.1017/S0307883312000880

Broadway has been pricing many people out for years now and it is getting harder for people to afford to travel into NYC and see shows. Immersive theatre is not just a gimmick or 'low brow entertainment.' It is a chance to invite in an audience of people who are curious and interested in performing arts and want to feel comfortable with their possible limited knowledge of this area. Immersive theatre makes people feel like it is worth ticket prices because they feel included through audience participation, or they feel engaged and absorbed through other styles. The future of immersive theatre is unique compared to commercial theatre. Commercial theatre cares a lot about filling many seats and getting seen by as many people as possible. Immersive is about creating a connection and relationship between the artists and audiences. Rodosthenous has redefined pleasure in voyeurism by extracting its sexual connotations and suggesting that voyeurism is 'an intense curiosity which generates a compulsive desire to observe people (un)aware in natural states or performed primal acts and leads to a heightening of pleasure for the viewer.'<sup>9</sup> These types of performances are more than getting your work seen, it's about feeling the connections that are made or sharing pieces of yourself and the artists with an audience eager to accept. New York City is a unique breeding ground for innovative, immersive, and intimate theatre. Many move to this city with dreams of creating art and being a part of the artistic community here, but the cost of living is rising, making it harder for artists to devote all their time and energy to their craft. There are communities starting to pop up in the Lower East Side and Brooklyn that are about making art together to share within their communities with no intention of bringing them too large stages. The intimacy of these

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<sup>9</sup> Shearing, D. (2015). Intimacy, Immersion and the Desire to Touch: The Voyeur Within. In: Rodosthenous, G. (eds) Theatre as Voyeurism. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137478818\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137478818_4)

productions and the connection with the community is what they are after. Filling apartments with art and spectators and mixing different artists and their mediums to create an experience that leaves everyone in the room feeling seen and appreciated is more to them than the possibility of a Tony. Immersive theatre will continue to expand in many ways. Technology will be folded into theatre much more than we are already seeing. People will experiment with AR, VR (Virtual Reality), projection, apps and listening devices to enhance performances and interact with the audience more than they already have. We are going to see a lot more site-specific productions and with the growing costs of rent and facility fees they will start to find cheaper, more interesting places to showcase their work. These communities will only continue to grow with more popping up in other areas and this trend will mean more people will have the chance to experience theatre and not feel limited because of income, representation, or accessibility. The immersive theatre that is already here will continue and the more commercial companies that are out there doing this work will still thrive but there will be this 'underground scene' for artists and audiences alike to go and explore and play in a safer, cheaper, and more secure environment.

The larger question we as Performing Arts Administrators need to think about is how we can support this type of underground art and make sure that it does not die out or change into something cynical. How can we do that if this scene is not mainstream? That is what is so exciting about what is to come is because we are not going to be able to assist these communities in the ways we have in the past. We can use the knowledge we have gained throughout the years and experiences, but we must be willing to throw any preconceived notions and ideas out the window and learn to think freely to help these types of art grow. I

have been working with people in this scene for a few years now and I caught myself getting frustrated with the lack of structure at times. I was used to traditional theatre protocols and sometimes those just do not fit the production. We might be in a space where you cannot control the sound as easily or you are having to change set decisions because a piece we need is not going to fit or we cannot find it. Lighting might be that you must make your own lights with paint cans and extension cords. This type of theatre is creating a space for administrators to be creative as well and sometimes administrators fall into a rut feeling like there is not much creativity in their field and immersive theatre is a way to break that idea and give people the freedom to be creative and innovative in ways commercial might not allow.