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Independent

## **Sexist and Racist People Go to the Theatre Too**

For years I thought that immersive and interactive performance is the best thing that ever happened to me as an artist. It offered me the possibility of building, for a moment in time, intimate relationships with complete strangers. Thousands of relationships later, I found myself with some degree of emotional baggage.

A few years ago, my then-boyfriend had a genius idea: he suggested that we go to couple's counseling. I dismissed him and called him a western bourgeois. However, the idea of talking to a couple's therapist stayed with me. At the time, I was about to take a solo show to Forest Fringe at Edinburgh Festival. I decided to change my show to a new one: I was going to ask the audience to be a couple's counsellor for my boyfriend and I. My boyfriend thought the idea was insane, and refused to perform it with me. He did however agree to write a signed letter to the audience stating what he thought was going wrong in our relationship. I was to tell them my version of the story in person – live. This was going to be my first one-on-one show, though at the time I did not call it that.

On the train going to Edinburgh, I read an article in *The Guardian* on how one-on-one performances are the real deal at this year's festival and I came across terms that seemed new to me in relation to theatre. These terms included 'intimate', 'conversational' and 'confessional'. I wondered if everyone else had problems with their partners that year, and decided to make confessional shows ranting about it in an intimate way. *Fuzzy* was the first show that I devised in which I learnt about the audience as much as they learnt about



Figure 1: *Fuzzy* © Tania El Khoury. Photograph by Ludovic Des Cognets.



Figure 2: *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* © Tania El Khoury. Photograph by Ibrahim Fakhri.

me. Some audience members would listen and leave acting like real therapists. Some would interrupt me, and agree or disagree. Others would shout: 'This is exactly what my boyfriend does. I can't believe it!' Some others would take sides, and some would offer their advice. Critic Mary Brennan from *Herald Scotland* wrote that she enjoyed playing along in the role of the therapist and playfully advised me to leave my boyfriend. She then wondered, 'what if it's not "play" – and my pronouncements are being taken to heart?' She then said that *Fuzzy* made her think about 'the nature of relationships and the reality of role-playing' (Brennon 2010).

It turned out that many people were preoccupied with whether my confessions about my intimate, sexual and domestic life were true or scripted. I remember a man following me in the streets and then stopping me to say: 'Why would you do this? I have been thinking about you and your life for three days. Why would you tell me all this?' I did not have an answer and felt attacked, but wondered whether all he was trying to do was to find out if what I told him was real or fictional. I didn't tell him. The only nice thing about theatre is that it is ethical to lie.

After *Fuzzy*, I created two other one-on-one performances – both commissioned by the one-on-one festival at the Battersea Arts Centre. After all, it did become a trend. One of them was entitled *Jarideh*, which is set in a busy cafe where no one other than the audience member is aware that a performance is taking place. The audience member and I are partners in crime. Together, we go on a secret mission inspired by the metropolitan police's terrible methods of supposedly identifying 'terrorists' in London. The other piece is called *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* and was for male audience members only. The idea was that I pass in the streets, by a man's window. I wanted to give him the perfect passing by of a woman underneath his window, so I invited him to create everything about me: my name, my walk, my look, even my feelings. I would perform his choices for him. This piece – having been for male audience members only – sparked an interesting debate on the nature of relational art and whether we, as artists, should be allowed to choose our audience like they chose us (Gardner 2011).

*Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* made audience members cry, open up, confess things and think about their relationships to others as well as about power dynamics. But all this did not come without a price. During this show, I was asked by members of the audience to jump in front of a moving car, run into the wall, punch the pavement, hurt myself, touch myself and scream abuses on passers-by – all of which I did. I listened to racial and sexual stereotyping and discovered the most obscure Orientalist fantasies. The police stopped me three times during these performances. I now feel terrified every time I am asked to perform it again at festivals.

In one of my performances of *Fuzzy*, an audience member shouted at me, sounding like he was talking to his own girlfriend: 'Look at you, you always do this! You act like such a fucking victim. You're full of lies and I feel sorry for your boyfriend'. This experience made me always have my phone on me during performances of *Fuzzy* so I could call for help when I feel in danger, having just invited a stranger into a closed room. After a few performances of *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* it became clear that we had to make up a rule that every man can experience the show only once. This was to avoid stalkers and harassers. I also stipulated that I would need somebody watching me at all times while I was in the streets to avoid dangerous situations my audience members would like to put me in.

In discussing one-on-one shows, artists and critics often talk about intimacy and the 'beautiful' and 'sexy' encounters between audiences and artists. It is indeed true that audience members would allow themselves to act differently in such performances when not being watched by a large crowd. However, these actions need to be viewed in a manner that goes beyond the romanticization of intimacy and the 'opening up' of audiences.

When faced with challenging performances that might ask the audience to position themselves in regards to gender politics, injustice and resistance, people would certainly 'open up', but only to reveal their own values, politics and nature with all its ugliness and beauty. Being immersed in performances that invite them to collaborate, audience members often act instinctively. What comes out of this is not always beautiful. Sexists, racists, control freaks all go to the theatre too.

After spending the last few years discussing how intimate performances allowed me to develop a deeper relationship with audience members, I now believe that a crowd of people can be my saviour. Perhaps I was digging too deep.

## REFERENCES

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