

## **FINAL REPORT - THE INVITATION**

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### **Overview:**

In our research project we set out to explore the role of the audience in theatre and attempted to identify the tipping point(s) between a social and theatrical experience.

We chose costume as a visual constant that spans both social and theatrical experiences in order to look at what makes the social theatrical, and what makes theatre social.

We were inspired by what we discovered in our research into body altering clothes that restricted breath and movement, as well as greatly increased the amount of space a person took up. Throughout various historical periods, people, and women in particular, modified the shape and size of their bodies with clothes (such as corsets) that constrict movement and breath. At the same time, many of those clothes (in contrast to modern dress) occupy a large volume of space surrounding the body.

We thought it would be exciting, edifying and fun to ask an audience to let us strip them down and dress them up publicly in historically referenced undergarments, codpieces, tight corsets, crinolines the size of a smart car, and remarkably heavy formal wear in styles from Renaissance to Victorian.

Through the ritual of dressing ourselves and our invitees, we sought to observe how the process of transformation of an individual effects the style and tone of interaction among a group, and the performative qualities of the audience when the audience becomes the performance itself.

In this report we will describe the structure of the experiment, note our observations, give samples of participants' reactions and comments, and reflect on the questions that such an experiment inevitably raised.

### **Structure of the experiment**

The experiment took place over 2 nights. We chose to have women only on the first night and a mixed audience on the second.

We created an explicit act structure:

- i. Invitees arrived and were taken into an antechamber to undress from their normal street clothes and put on neutral undergarments, which Moynan designed and constructed.
- ii. All the guests, in their homogeneous white underclothes, were taken to the main theatre space for drinks and snacks. They mingled with each other, the dj played music and photos were taken.
- iii. One by one they were taken onstage and laced into corsets.
- iv. The women were dressed in crinolines, farthingales, petticoats and gowns; the men were dressed in blouses, stockings, cod pieces, breeches and jackets
- v. Once dressed, they rejoined the assembled guests for more photo taking and mingling. They each filled out a questionnaire on a laptop.
- vi. They were undressed one by one.

### **The questions in our questionnaire:**

1 – Does this remind you of anything?

2 – Do you like what you're wearing?

3 – Are you on the inside looking out, or on the outside looking in?

4 – What do you see?

5 – How would you feel right now about going outside to save a lost cat?

## Observations, Comments and Reactions (w/quotations from the questionnaire in italics):

### PSYCHO-PHYSICAL SPACE

*Rosalba: These costumes conjure up feelings too metaphysical, esoteric, and mystical to be explained in the little time I have to spend on this questionnaire.*

#### Self Consciousness

There was lots of looking in the mirror, posing for the camera. I guess we encouraged this by supplying those things. One mirror was on the stage so that they could observe their own transformation and one was at the foot of the stairs so that they would see themselves in their undergarments as they entered the space. We tried to keep the camera separate from the actual dressing. We set it up so that people could photograph themselves and each other.

*Kirsten: My eyes go right to my waist.*

*Ester: if I try to ignore the fact that I am in a room full of people I can fully become the princess that I see in the mirror.*

#### A Heightened Sense of Power

Elitism, class and clothing. Class and high art. Art implies access to a certain class.

*Brian: Hard not to feel powerful in this uniform.*

*Lisa: I feel very rich (lying around the house with servants tending to everything because I can barely breath in my beautiful tight dress rich). Rich, beautiful, proper, proud people. Some richer than others.*

#### Power vs. Ability

A heightened sense of power, but paradoxically a diminished ability to move or actually accomplish anything. Power that is performative rather than actual.

*Pearl: taking up SO MUCH space is very different. There is no being a wall flower*

*Viv: My ass feels like it can take up any amount of space it needs to, and I feel tall and very important with the amount of space I'm taking.*

*Ester: I would feel entirely ill-prepared and useless. Who can run in such a thing! I can barely sit on a chair*

*Anna: I am larger than life ....Very concerned about my physical capabilities...bending down could be a problem. I am extremely compromised in what I can do.*

*Lisa: The louder you are the less extravagant the dress. The more beautiful your dress the less you have to talk.*

#### Play

A childlike sense of playing dress up and role-playing.

*Rosalba: 'playing dress-up'*

*Ester: Swirling, dancing, posing*

### SOCIO-PHYSICAL SPACE

#### People Watching People.

People watching people watching people watch in a kind of endlessly reflective hall of mirrors. A participatory theatre.

*Michelle: I see a group of strangers in a space who begin in a very shy manner. I see some people who are very aware of their bodies, the shoes they're wearing, the corset they chose, the dress they're wearing, their breasts, changing their hair, catching themselves in the mirror. I see people watching other people in a very active way. I see people watching people watch.*

*Brian: I rather prefer the experience of others looking at me, this new, other me. Their reactions are part of the pleasure, a pleasure that we don't live in or share so much in our sartorially lazy culture. Complimenting what other people are wearing, or indeed praising beauty has almost become a taboo. Tonight, the applause that greeted each person as they were revealed, and our delight and interest in looking at each other – at one another's bodies – was very real and very fun. Rewarding even.*

### Metamorphosis

A ritual transformation from the casual way that contemporary people usually dress, to a more elaborate, and confining mode of dress that abandons the clothes by which they define themselves and the tribe they belong to, into something with historical and literary resonances.

*David: One summer I played junior football. The process of getting ready to hit the field was similarly complex and led to similar surprising metamorphoses*

*Pearl: The exchanges between people when they were in various stages of dress and the transformation of people as they were being dressed was interesting. The more elaborate ritual of it.*

### Film and Television

Almost half of the questionnaires made reference to movies. We know how to walk, sit and behave in period clothes from watching people on film and tv. There might be some nostalgia for the romance of that, and the pristine quality of fiction.

*Naomi: I just went up and down the stairs and I realize how much I have learned about what to do from film and tv...*

*Anna: Dress period of the night: I feel flushed and daring. I feel ready to accept a marriage proposal...I feel as if I am Waiting for many marriage proposals.*

*Cathy: reveling in the novelty of the experience and imagining "what it might have felt like to live like this"...*

## SEX AND SEXUALITY

### Physical Sensation

We noticed in ourselves a heightened physical awareness. Invitees mentioned being more aware of how they walk, breathe, etc.

*Natalie: I keep adjusting myself – try to pull the boobs up, figuring out how to walk and noticing how it affects my posture, etc.*

*Anna: Corset period of the night: Love it, never seen my waist so ladylike, from the front, from the back.*

*2 hours later: I must admit, this dress is being to exhaust me. I am exhausted by my frills and corset and endless hot layers. I want to tear off my dress, just rip it off, tear off my corset, my hands are itching to do violent things to this dress, beauty be damned, I want to rip and tear and emerge and breath again!*

*Dress off: I feel as if I was bruised and battered by the dress...it was deceiving in its beauty, it was a tease, all show and no sympathy.*

*Lisa: I observe a lot because I'm too breathless to do anything else. Breathing is hard.*

*It reminds me of having an asthma attack and not getting enough air*

*Brian: the feeling of stockings on the calves is very powerful, accenting the lower leg and foot and demanding that you always think about your foot position. The cravat also demands better upper body posture.*

### Femininity/Masculinity

Women wore corsets for 500 years. There is a way in which this kind of clothing almost defines gender roles.

Invitees claimed to feel more feminine/masculine with the clothes on. Is this a physical feeling? A sexual one?

Something we learn from books, movies?

*Natalie: I'm fascinated by watching others get dressed – especially the rather aggressive effort it requires. We're wearing such traditionally feminine clothing – clothing that makes it hard to breathe and hard to do anything physical (some would say these are definitions of femininity), but the effort required to get into the costume, to adopt the persona, is incredibly physical and potentially intrusive,*

### Sex

Our research indicated to us that there was a distinct and pervasive fetishism associated with the corset and that there is historical evidence that arousal has always been a part of dressing up.

*Naomi: Controlled and aroused*

*Pearl: immediate intimacy of dressing with others, eroticism of being dressed by someone (and the potential of the prolonged undressing)*

*Keith: right now....boys are the last thing on my mind.... I just want to breathe!!*

### THE TIPPING POINT?

Particularly on the first night there was a very noticeable shift in the collective mood that corresponded with the act structure and what the women were wearing. In their undergarments they all sat on the edge of the stage, they mentioned that it felt like a slumber party. In their corsets they were interested in the process of lacing, and wanted to help lace each other up. They preened in front of the mirrors and took pictures of one another. When they were in their dresses the atmosphere became festive or celebratory. There was dancing and twirling and picture taking too.

*Natalie: The most interesting thing so far has been seeing the transformation from the underwear to the corsets. At first, the women look very girlish and innocent, as if at a slumber party. But once the corset goes on, the very adult sexy factor is instantly apparent. But still underneath is the little girl. I bet men LOVED this – it's like the infantilizing of women we see in contemporary fashion and porn.*

While there were many distinct differences in the two nights the participants ended up articulating themselves similarly in the questionnaires.

On both nights each stage of dressing created a dramatic shift in the environment and in people's behaviour. The so-called act structure, however, resolved itself very differently on each night. The anticipation of an inciting action was very early on the first night and much later on the second.

On the first night as the women arrived there was a sense of anticipation that completely dissipated as the dressing progressed. On the second night this sense of anticipation dropped in when everyone was fully dressed – as though now something was supposed to happen. The act structure took on very different significance each night.

#### On the first night:

Few of the women knew each other on the first night; nevertheless there was a total sense of giving over and intimacy. There was a comradeship and sisterhood that occurred progressively and surprisingly quickly, perhaps as a result of watching and helping each other dress. The impression by about half way through was that all these women were friends.

#### On the second night

Many of the people were acquainted with each other on the second night. Interestingly, whenever a person was fully clothed in their final outfit the others would clap as they stepped off the stage. As if there was a more defined performer audience role. The invitees also had more of a desire to control the environment – such as requesting that the music be changed or that people dance a particular dance. After observing the first night, Will, our hired DJ asked if he could be dressed up. We had not anticipated going into the area of cross dressing or drag but it made its way into the event without being contrived by us.

### **How this research informs our practice and the questions it has incited us to ask**

We are both interested in the question of ownership. What does it mean for an audience to feel ownership of a work of art? How does an artist give ownership to their audience and what are the results? Is this relatively chaotic experience still theatre?

We observed varying degrees of conformity and its opposite (an increased individualism and a willingness to express grandly). We observed the paradox that a sense of belonging or ownership is linked to a willingness to give over, or to conform. Which of these divergent reactions is theatrical and which is social? Is conformity inherent in theatricality? The fact that everyone was dressed the “same” informed a collective agreement that we're all in this 'show' together.

On a stylistic or visual level uniformity influences our perceptions deeply. This is the aesthetics of the experiment. Does predetermining the way that a group of people is going to look predetermine the way they are going to feel?

This slides into the question of intimacy and its degrees. Does the intimacy of such an experience diminish the role of art by breaking down the barrier between 'art' and 'life' or is art meant to be as intimate as possible? Is still art if we're all doing it together or is it just a party?

### **Limitations**

-This experiment was conducted in a theatre. Certainly this formal environment gave it a very specific context. We're curious how it would have been different in another place – in a public bar for example, or someone's home.  
-We chose to limit our scope to traditional gender dressing. On the second night, however, our dj asked to be dressed in drag. This touched on the question of how these clothes would affect the performative aspect of gender. For reasons of time we did not accomplish one of the elements included in our proposal, which was to costume ourselves and go out into the unsuspecting larger world and observe the possible shifts in response and expectation. We decided it was not a priority relative to the group event.

### **Selected Bibliography:**

*Corsets & Crinolines*, by Norah Waugh  
*Corsets: A Visual History*, by RL Shep  
*The Corset: A Cultural History*, by Valerie Steele  
*Fashion & Fetishism*, by David Kunzle  
*Freaks of Fashion*, by William Barry  
*The Physiological Bearing of Waist Belts & Stays*, by Professor Roy

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