

The Thing Itself

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When I (Jadé) started creating performance that would go on to be defined as ‘immersive theatre’, I thought of its participatory aspects as the only honest way to acknowledge the reality of the situations in which I worked with early collaborators, and of respecting the commitment of those who came to experience it. I have always seen (and *felt*) performance to be something that happens when people, with bodies, become aware of the space their bodies share - be that a room, or a globe. ‘Immersive theatre’ is a genre that has established itself as a household term over the course of the last two decades. Efforts to neatly define what counts are, however, often openly frustrating. Josephine Machon (2013), one of the field’s leading theorists, spends a large swathe of her book, *Immersive Theatres*, identifying the contradictions inherent within the various forms that are labelled ‘immersive theatre’ and eventually settling on a cluster of ‘central features’ - delimiting immersive as a constellation of forms that emphasise ‘audience involvement’, sensuality, space and place, and environmental world-building.

These days, ‘[t]he ‘immersive’ trend now goes beyond the theatre and arts industry. From games distributors to shopping centres, just about every organisation seems to be discussing how immersive events can give their product an edgier public profile or increase sales. Participation is sold as an opportunity to absolve us of the cultural mourning for experiences we know in our bones we are missing out on.’ (Dunne-Howrie et al 2020)

This process - the mainstream co-opting the alternative - is a process of extraction: by which we refer to an economic process that removes things from one context and exploits them in another for short-term value, thus depleting the inherent value of the original context. ‘[E]xtraction and extractivism are usually understood in reference to mass-scale industrial extraction of non-renewable natural resources, most particularly the extraction of oil, gas and minerals ... However ... ‘extractivism’ is increasingly understood also as an analytical and also political concept that enables the examination and articulation of deeper underlying logics of exploitation and subjectification that are central to the present conjuncture of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism.’ (Cortes-Severino and Junka-Aikio 2017)

But it is possible to go further than this, in discussing the immersive trend, and call the mainstream's extraction of alternative forms cultural appropriation. What is cultural appropriation in this sense? It is taking a symbol or practice from its original context and parachuting it in somewhere else and exploiting it for gain. We often call it 'celebration'...

The emergence of overpriced street-food markets, whilst in the non-white, real world, street-food exists to feed working-class people on the cheap.

White tourists visiting black churches in America to watch authentic worship services as some sort of spectacle.

Meditation and mindfulness teachers teaching peace, calm and ethics at investment corporations on Wall Street.

And yet, behind the demand there's a yearning for authenticity, for the kosher, pukka, legit, the real deal.

But you already know this. You feel it.

Authenticity is often associated, subliminally, with the primitive, or exotic, in this fetishistic way, because non-white, non-western culture is connected in the collective subconscious with a longed-for pre-capitalist age - authenticity is 'a reaction, where the authentic is seen as the limit that the market forces cannot reach, the last bastion of the self in a world that is 'selling out'' (Gerber 2019). In as much as immersive or participatory performance is and has been considered a 'subversive' form, in that it 'liberate[s]' the spectators from their role as (allegedly) passive consumers' and marks 'a shift...in the central role of the relation between actor and spectator' (Boenisch 2012), it has inhabited the realm, in the popular imagination, of this 'last bastion'. The 'subversive', in this case immersive performance in its originary forms, has correspondingly also been fetishised (read, diluted), because 'subversive' implies marginal - cultures and people excluded from the dominant frame.



Early immersive performance grew out of our racial and ethnic cultures - those of people like myself, a Yemeni-Iranian-Indian-British performance practitioner, and the people I worked with, who found ourselves together *because* we were literally excluded from dominant, whitewashed culture venues, institutions and practices. The ensembles and collectives I started in consisted of people who also came from global majority cultures in which it was the norm to perform with and for each other. Our training was about physical collective experiences that were distinctly non-western - both in the approach to the body, and to audiences - thereby creating spaces in which we could belong.



I drew (and still do) on my own cultures, an eastern clash of Indian, Arab and Parsi. The practices I have drawn on are barely citable, largely alien to the western or establishment canon, and feed into my practice as hybridised impressions rather than analytically documented methods. Some of the influences are, however, 'proper' disciplines. From my training in Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance-form inherited from my step-mother, I have carried forwards an emphasis on performance as discipline: not only a sense of acquiring and honing skills to be perfected through painstakingly meticulous repetition and muscle memory, but a sense of this deep bodily learning as a spiritually important and transcendent activity - a way of escaping the body through focus on the body. This sense of bodily craft as spiritual goes hand in hand with an understanding of the spaces of training and performance as sacred that has also remained present in the ways I lead groups of performers and artists to this day. Even if we are going to spend a day sat at computers, listening to audio-tracks and fine-tuning bugs in an app, maintenance of the space we work in and with forms part of the act of creation. It is no accident that the western traditions through which I developed my practice as theatre - those, primarily, of Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba - were traditions intimately fascinated by the principles of Indian classical dance. Embedded in the legacies of these practitioners, I felt, to a certain degree, at home and valued in a theatrical labyrinth that otherwise rejected me (Maravala 2021).

No doubt bound up with the trajectory that has led to much of my current digital work as audio-led experience, are the Zoroastrian religious incantations I was schooled to recite as a child.

They have deeply impacted my use of sound and voice as affective actions that generate emotional responses and alter physiology. This is a culture that has much concerned Peter Brook, notably in his work on *Orghast* (1971), but the degree to which Zoroastrian practice very likely impacted his investigations for that production into vocal sound as pre-linguistic action remain underdocumented (Djavaherian 2012).

Other practices, however, integral to my engrained understanding of what participation and performance communities are in their most essential, instinctive human guises (and can be, even in the West, when we carve our spaces and structures into the walls of the cracks in the capitalist bedrock we are stood on), are truly ephemeral. They exist within families, transiently at ill-defined religious gatherings, maybe figuring as a sub-paragraph on a Wikipedia page about esoteric eastern rituals, but, more tangibly, existing in my brain and body as felt memories.

Going to see Hindi films in 1980s India - crammed rows and piles of people, shoulders, backs, bellies in contact, erupting in song and dance at the moments that were, for those people at that time, familiar - irresistibly recognisable invitations to join in.

The 1970s term Bollywood, to describe an industry that had been established for decades prior and frequently outperformed Hollywood in ticket sales, is an insult (The Infographics Show 2018).

My father's tales, as a drummer at Mataji na Garba festivals, of rhythms that keep people going all night, and trance-dancers stabbing themselves with glass.

I have long understood that rhythm, sound, movement, duration and group dynamics can induce behaviours well beyond the day-to-day limits of acceptability and possibility.

The power of call-and-response, collective improvisation, and facilitated communal expression led by the Yemeni nashad, a high-pitched singer who leads group recitations.

Long, casual nights of philosophising, khat-chewing, oud-playing, singing, at which there is no boundary between being together and creativity, thoughts and music - the one expresses the other.

Performance, to me, has never been something made by one person and received by another - it is something that emerges when we are together, something we all do and know how to do - which emphatically does not preclude the skill and craft of artists, of those who facilitate togetherness and transcendence. I want to recognise that these vital aspects of the immersive aesthetic derive from marginalised cultures, communities, and ways of being.

These practices are fundamentally subversive to the ingrained Eurocentric privileging of the cerebral, the analytical, the logical (hooks 1994; Glücklich 1994; Kristeva 1980; Sartwell 2019; Sheets-Johnstone 1992), in that they prize the body, and the physicality of being human, not just as inextricable from mind and thought, but as equally implicated in any quest for meaning.

Features like rhythm, movement, vocalising, or breath, for example, are crucial to my work, in and of themselves.



The dominant traditions of western art encourage an understanding of the world that disavows the flesh. The western philosophic tradition has, in broad brushstrokes, prioritised pursuit of truth as something that is to be understood, rather than as something that is felt and done, by bones, nerves and muscles ('Mind and Body in Greek Philosophy' 2017). Judaeo-Christian dominance demeans body-related knowledge and scorns flesh and fat in favour of a skin-and-bone fetish. This body-snobbery is a Judaeo-Christian, or at least monotheistic, inheritance requiring the rejection of our physical participation in the world (Onfray 2005). Purity is the holy grail, and it's no coincidence that it's this same patriarchal, colonial culture that expects a kind of disembodied moral purity (of women, specifically), as well as valuing purity of thought above and in opposition to the dust and dirt we are literally made of.

In the case of immersive performance, we see body-grounded rituals, and meaning-making through the shared presence of others, ripped-off, used, commodified and sexed-up, with the usual pick'n'mix approach.

But you already know this. You feel it. You've been there.

This is the resource that has been extracted. This training was spearheaded by the intention of creating genuine - not transactional - relationships to our guests, that didn't overlook skin-

colours in a false pretence of egalitarianism, but acknowledged people and bodies in their entirety. The work was and is made of more than intention - it was constructed from years upon years spent perfecting and embodying practices: often up to ten hours a day of hard, physical, back-breaking training.

There is a lot of discussion around what 'immersive' is. ZU-UK, as an interactive performance company, aims to create post-immersive experiences (Dunne-Howrie et al 2020) for those traditionally excluded from the infrastructures of high art and theatre. Correspondingly, ZU-UK's processes are built around rituals and ways of being together that, by foregrounding bodily experience, recognise the infinite variability of the bodies participating, their histories, and the tortuously woven webs of identity engraved just beneath the skin. We want to ask **how** is immersive, **who** it is **by**, and **who** it is **for**. We want people to encounter their own understandings of what it means to participate in performance in their own unique, specific, impeccably imperfect human bodies.

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