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## Experimental theatre to spill into the mainstream

Experimental theatre is challenging, hard-hitting - and booming.  
Lyn Gardner on why the genre is finally coming in from the cold



Lyn Gardner  
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Gob Squad need your help to save the world. Next week, the Anglo-German theatre collective will be building what they describe as a Noah's Ark of information: armed with cameras, they will accost passersby in the streets of Greenwich, south London, and ask them to speak about their hopes and dreams, their view of the world and how it could be improved. This will then be turned into a film time capsule.

"There are two audiences for Saving the World," explains Gob Squad's Sarah Thom. "The passersby who help us in our quest, and the observers who come along later in the day to watch and talk about the film we've made. Often, those two audiences overlap. We see the audience as being one of us, a collaborator. Whatever we do, we do together."

Thom's belief that the audience is made up of participants, and not just passive spectators, comes at a time when traditional British theatre is having something of an identity crisis. Regional theatre is torn between finding a new audience and the risk of alienating a loyal but often ageing one. Just over a year ago, Jonathan Church, artistic director of Chichester Festival Theatre, announced that too much time and money had been wasted on trying to entice people to the theatre who just didn't want to go. Around the same time, Arts Council England, in its initial proposals for funding cuts, suggested theatres such as the Northcott in Exeter were attracting the wrong sort of audience. More recently, at a debate at the ICA in London, director Katie Mitchell suggested that she found audiences too complex to even think about, while the Royal Court's Dominic Cooke pronounced: "Work that is audience-led is showbusiness."

Really? This would come as a surprise to Robert Pacitti, founder of Spill, the biennial London festival of performance, live art and experimental theatre. Over the coming month, Spill will stage UK premieres of work from international giants such as Romeo Castellucci, whose Dante-inspired trilogy *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso* is at the Barbican; Belgian artist Jan Fabre's *Orgy of Tolerance* will be at the Southbank Centre. An array of UK artists will appear, too, from Julia Bardsley and Rajni Shah, to Mem Morrison and Tim Etchells. It all adds up to an explosion of high-quality experimental work - all made in this country.

While a lot of the work isn't new, what is new is the way Spill brings it together: a critical mass gets noticed. The programme doesn't just include performances: it runs to feasts, in which artists and audiences share their thoughts over dinner. This year Kira O'Reilly, who once caused a storm at the Newlyn Art Gallery in Penzance by performing with a dead pig, will be thinker-in-residence, holding afternoon discussion salons. In 2007, such attention to theatregoers paid off: 65% of Spill's audience was under 26. On a questionnaire, they spoke of having been "engaged", "challenged",

"surprised" and "fed".

"We're very aware that we are the new kid on the block," says Pacitti. "We're not here to usurp, but to add to the ecology - and that ecology includes supporting both artists and audiences."

Much of Spill's experimentation could be considered difficult, but its organisers use plain English to describe their work. They are also web-savvy, with lots of virtual marketing replacing theatre brochures. Such a strategy targets audiences who want new ways to engage with theatre - and there are plenty of them. According to Louise Jeffreys, the Barbican's head of theatre, there is mounting evidence that challenging work can actually attract audiences rather than put them off.

"Difficulty encourages debate and engagement," says Jeffreys. "There is a growing audience who want a more equal relationship with those who are making the work. It's quite challenging, like doing a cryptic crossword, but it is not impossible. Because it needs a bit of effort and time before it reveals itself to you, it can be all the more satisfying."

Rajni Shah, whose *Dinner with America* will be performed as part of Spill, agrees that audiences enjoy this feeling of empowerment. *Dinner with America* is built on the premise that, in the 21st century, "we all carry a piece of America inside us". This show, too, shares food with its audience. "People have a problem with politics," says Shah. "There is a growing distance between us and the people who make decisions. This kind of performance makes us feel part of something, that we do matter. There will always be room for the traditional theatre experience of sitting in the dark, but this work can embrace that audience - and a new audience, too."

The trouble with festivals such as Spill is the perception that they can only ever have a niche audience, that they are for those in the know. But with 91% of tickets sold at the last festival, this doesn't look as if it is the case. Pacitti admits that a proportion of the 2007 audience came from within theatre itself, but says: "When there has been a drought and you suddenly turn on a tap, it's not surprising that the people nearest are going to rush for it."

The most striking thing about this year's productions is that artists are clearly getting better at using new tools, including technology, to engage with a younger crowd, and that venues and critics are often left playing catch-up, such is the speed at which audience conceptions are changing. A generation who one week will go to see Franko B (whose use of his own blood in his performance art has caused audience members to faint) will be at Punchdrunk the next, or taking part in projects that combine social gaming and theatre. This audience might take in *King Lear* at the Young Vic, but they will also - literally - get on their bikes for Blast Theory's *Rider Spoke*, a piece where you cycle the streets directed by a handheld computer. This audience won't ask: "Is this theatre?" because they are relaxed enough to embrace all its possibilities.

Pacitti believes there is no longer one audience but many different audiences, and that theatre-makers need to get cannier about finding them. He is critical, too, of the reluctance among venues to put on work that might frighten their audiences. Jan Fabre may have taken over a wing of the Louvre, and an entire island at the Venice Biennale, but his performance work - sexual, violent and highly graphic - hasn't been seen in London for 17 years (he has, though, played Glasgow's Tramway).

"Fabre can seem shocking," says Pacitti. "And I think programmers fear giving offence. People say to me, 'Our audiences are not ready for contemporary theatre.' How can people know if they've not programmed any experimental work in that venue? Some

said London couldn't sustain a festival like this, and lots of venues didn't want to know. But I had a hunch that there was an audience out there and took the risk. Now people want to be on board. That's great - but it is all about taking a risk. If you are not taking a risk, you shouldn't be taking public money."

Aftermaths, the final piece in Julia Bardsley's Transacts trilogy, will be another highlight of this year's Spill. Audiences are told to wear black and bring an object with which they are willing to part. On arrival, they will find themselves cast as the congregation at a mourning ceremony inspired by the Book of Revelations and the current crisis of capitalism. "I don't mind if they are hostile," she says, "because at least that shows they are engaged. It is passivity that is deadly."

• **Spill** starts tomorrow. Details: [spillfestival.com](http://spillfestival.com)

## Giants, ghosts and masks: Productions that transformed theatre

### The Raising of the Titanic

Limehouse Basin, London, 1983

A skeletal boat structure was raised from the watery depths, as the crew of the Titanic created fairground-style side shows, in this extravaganza by Welfare State International.

### Oraculos

King's Cross Coach Station, London, 1997

Entering through a wardrobe, you found yourself on a solo journey through a labyrinth. There, you played with nymphs and then had to lie in a coffin. Created by Enrique Vargas, this scary, sensual show had you as its star.

### Desert Rain

Riverside Studios, London, 1999

Blast Theory responded to the Gulf War with an installation-cum-performance-cum-video-game that made the audience combatants on a virtual mission.

### Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me?

Southbank Centre, London, 1999

Forced Entertainment's 24-hour performance turned day into night and back again through the telling of bedtime stories. The audience slept, chatted, watched, left and came back again.

### Dining With Alice

Larmer Gardens, Dorset, 1999

A sumptuous Victorian meal was served to the audience while characters from Alice in Wonderland ran amok, subverting the niceties of the dinner party.

### Linked

London, 2003 onwards

Free, three-mile installation still in operation by Graeme Miller, charting the lost voices of the East End community removed for the building of the M11 link. Ghostly messages are transmitted via headphones.

### The Sultan's Elephant

London 2006

A million Londoners came out to play, dance and watch puppets stop the traffic, as Royal de Luxe's giant elephant disrupted everyday life.

### Masque of the Red Death

BAC 2007

Punchdrunk's unique take on Edgar Allan Poe's stories put the audience in masks and plunged them into a parallel universe.

### The Smile Off Your Face

Edinburgh 2007

A comment on the artificiality of performance by Belgian company Ontroerend Goed, in which you were put in a wheelchair and subjected to smells, tastes, sounds and intimate encounters.

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