

THE SUNDAY TIMES

# culture

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## Theatre

**H**ow's your weekend been? Mine's been busy. On Friday night, I took part in a failed assassination attempt on an extremely famous person, which ended with a police raid on our secret headquarters while the group's charismatic leaders bunked out of a hidden exit. Then, on Saturday afternoon, I was tracking a mysterious radical figure around Whitehall with the aid of a handheld PC and some bizarre online assistants. And that was just my theatregoing.

While central London's auditoriums face a bleak summer of empty seats, a new form of British theatre is emerging in empty railway arches and arts centres. It's a renegade theatre that owes more to the wall-of-noise performing favoured by hardcore Eastern European theatre than it does to Alan Ayckbourn, but it is delivered with an unmistakably British deadpan wit. It's as if Antonin Artaud directed Monty Python and put the audience in the starring role.

Shunt's Dance Bear Dance takes place underneath a railway line in Bethnal Green. As the audience arrive, they are given name tags and sit around a table for the final briefing



## Strange bruin

Far from the West End, a new form of theatre is emerging. By STEPHEN ARMSTRONG



before a bomb goes off.

The mood is absurd, with the ring-leaders sounding like militants from an Ionesco play. As the plot dissolves, Shunt pull off theatrical coups so astonishing that the audience can barely believe they really happened and — gasp — we actually start talking to each other.

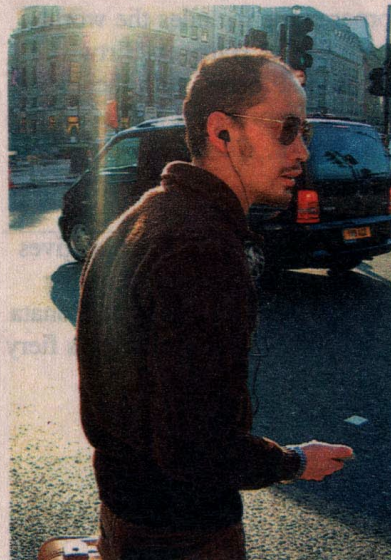
Blast Theory's Uncle Roy All Around You premiered at the ICA in the middle of June and will tour Holland, then travel to Dublin in October. While "players" patrolled the streets around The Mall, they received online advice from visitors to Uncle Roy's website. Clues from Uncle Roy himself further confused, until, when I played, I was reduced to stopping passers-by and begging them for help, in the belief that they were Blast Theory stooges.

Of course, there are precedents. The Argentinian circus-cum-dance-cum-trainwreck troupe De La Guarda's spectacle Villa Villa, which was performed at London's Roundhouse four years ago, is brought to mind by both performances — the risk, the threat and the exhilaration.

Taking part in both shows is a curious experience. Although they are meticulously planned performances, there is the feeling of a game — that the audience can

affect the outcome. To borrow the Shakespearian word for actor, we are all players. "We've found that most people who come and see us have picked us up via word of mouth," says David Rosenberg, the director of Shunt's Dance Bear Dance. "Many have never been to the theatre. We've had guys from heavy-metal bands come down together, and we've even had people get off with each other."

Curiously, both companies have a similar make-up. Blast Theory formed in 1991, when 10 friends working at the Renoir cinema, in Bloomsbury, decided to set up a theatre company. As well as fine artists, they included a DJ, a dancer, an artist, a philosopher and a guy who used to work in advertising. Shunt came together in 1998, and the company boasts a doctor, a therapist and a wine taster. Matt Adams, from Blast Theory, feels that this is a strength. "When we started, we didn't even have a



history of having watched much theatre," he says. "We were more interested in club culture."

Despite this naivety, both shows build to surprising revelations. The tormented vision of hell that closes Dance Bear Dance — it involved the company tunnelling through feet of concrete — draws comparisons with Dante, while the players' final meeting with Uncle Roy turns the whole preceding hour of paranoia on its head. Roy talks of trust, and if you give the right answers, you become tied to another player — morally bound to help them in their hour of need at any time over the next 12 months. My twin is called Kamal. I wonder if he'll call?

Perhaps that's the strength of these shows. For theatregoers, they take the vast moral challenges bellowed from the stage and bring them down to a one-to-one conversation. For clubbers and gamers, they take the interactive leisure experience and imbue it with the kind of questions and riddles that a game or a DJ would never dream of posing. If such performances were nurtured and supported by the artistic establishment, Britain could produce its first new theatrical form for years. So maybe we don't have to worry quite so much about the poor old West End. □

**Ringing the changes: above, Dance Bear Dance; right, Uncle Roy All Around You**

WWW

[www.blasttheory.co.uk](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk)  
[www.shunt.co.uk](http://www.shunt.co.uk)