

The Argus

A Machine To See With, Secret location, Brighton, September 1-24

5:00am Saturday 27th August 2011

By Duncan Hall

Anyone who hasn't ever come out of seeing a spy or heist movie at the cinema looking out for bad guys in the style of James Bond probably isn't human.

It was this idea which inspired Portslade-based Blast Theory's immersive cinematic experience A Machine To See With, which premiered at last year's Sundance Film Festival.

The piece, which recreates the feel of a heist movie using just a mobile phone and a set of recorded instructions, was commissioned by the Utah-based film festival in 2009, in association with the ZERO1 San Jose Biennial and Canada's Banff New Media Institute.

"The brief was that they wanted something that was a 'locative cinema' project, something out in the streets, but connected to film," says Ju Row Farr, one of the artists behind Blast Theory.

"We all know heist movies, we've seen them or acted them out again and again.

"The commission came about 18 months ago at the time the financial crisis was happening and in our minds the two things tied together."

A Machine To See With is recommended for one person at a time, and requires just a mobile phone and a willingness to get involved.

"We wanted it to have a certain time angle, that you show up somewhere, go to a place at a certain time and don't know what to expect," says Farr.

"It is a series of automated phone calls, you get a call a couple of hours before the start time so you know which location you're in – we have several around the city.

"There's no live calling, and no actors on the street. Often people think that they've seen things that aren't there while they're doing it.

"We are trying to create an immersive experience. I don't know if anything is completely immersive but it's an attempt to do that, to make you feel like you're doing something you wouldn't normally do.

"You feel like everyone is looking at you, and you look at other people more carefully."

Although the piece is carefully structured, Farr, who developed the show with partners Matt Adams and Nick Tandavanitj, is keen to point out that it doesn't feel like you're being pushed through a maze.

"There are things that happen in a certain sequence," she says.

"There are moments where you partner up with someone, and there's a few sections where you have to answer questions based on observations about your partner.

"Like anything with a structure we want to make it appear as organic and without structure as possible!"

As well as Sundance, A Machine To See With has been to Banff in Canada, Minneapolis and San Jose in the US, and made its Edinburgh debut this month.

"There are some things we've kept the same with all the performances," says Farr.

"We have to change the locations and the navigation, but every time there are certain things we want to say to people.

"It's quite a commitment to each different location, as we want to pick up a flavour of each place."

From commissioning in July 2009 to its premiere in January 2010, the project took several months to put together, although Farr admits it was one of Blast Theory's simpler ideas as much of the software was already in existence.

The group is a cultural partner with Brighton Festival, contributing the project Rider Spoke to the 2008 Festival, which saw audience members take to their bicycles around the city.

Other works have seen the group kidnap two people for 48 hours in 1998, encourage game players to search the streets of London, Manchester and West Bromwich for "Uncle Roy", and get chased around a virtual city by unseen runners in the award-winning game Can You See Me Now?

* Weekdays every 15 mins between 5.30pm and 7.30pm, Saturdays every 15 mins between 2pm and 4pm, tickets £8/£6. Call 01273 709709.

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