

# CULTURE

Theatre

## A piece of the action

**Rob a bank, get kidnapped, take your pyjamas for a sleepover and eat breakfast with a murderer — immersive theatre is pushing back the boundaries, says Stephen Armstrong**



Nothing planned for the bank holiday? Why not take advantage of the collapse of law and order in London by creeping through desolate streets with a small group of friends, getting ready to jump strangers and take your newly acquired valuables to a safe place, unmolested by authority? If rioters can experience the thrill, why shouldn't theatregoers? ...And *Darkness Descended* is the latest production from the British company Punchdrunk, currently the acknowledged rulers of Broadway. *Sleep No More*, a vast and complex blend of *Hitchcock* and *Macbeth*, set in more







**Blood, sweat and fear: Un Peu de tendresse bordel de merde! saw a naked cast clamber over seats at Sadler's Wells. Left, Hotel Medea, in Edinburgh**

the inevitable climactic murder. The post-show breakfast with the cast is an intense business.

Although the show was inspired by ritual drumming patterns, the audience — believes the artistic director, Jorge Lopes Ramos, the Brazilian half of the creative team — is drawn from digital natives and experi-

time — and locked in a room with a pillowcase over my head. It was a mind-altering experience that remains potent 13 years later. Although I knew it was only a game, the terror of isolation and interrogation, the dream-like panic as my mind lost sense of the time of day, the disorientating effect of alternate punishment and reward, left a visceral memory that surges back if I see a hostage scene on screen or read about a dungeon in the latest Nordic noir.

an almost childlike state. At some point in our lives, we have wondered what it would be like to rob a bank, to be hunted through a city, even to be murdered in our beds. Cinema, books, radio, TV and the mighty internet can only explain. Theatre can re-create.

In the digital age, this is increasingly vital. Anthropologists know that the brains of tribal people are more active than those of urban westerners — measuring wind strength, reading animal tracks and judging distance in a split second are clearly more demanding than making coffee, getting to work and staring at a screen. Culture has always been about escape. With our souls parked online, this new wave of theatre is about a return — to being human and alive, with all the peril, fear, pain and joy that enviable



cups of hot chocolate. That's nothing compared to the "immersive" experiences on offer from the original cadre of British participatory ensembles, most of whom have shows on this month.

Hotel Medea, at the Edinburgh Festival, pioneered the all-night show recently aped by Lullaby. An Anglo-Brazilian production, it begins at midnight and finishes with breakfast. Along the way, the audience incite murder, back quasi-fascistic politicians and are ultimately slaughtered by their mother in the wee small hours as they slumber in bunk beds.

"We began with the idea of producing an all-night show — working out how to keep the audience awake and involved emotionally," says Persis-Jade Maravala, co-creator of the piece, who plays Medea. "We'd been researching dancers in northeast Brazil who could go into trance-like states without drugs or alcohol, and we found that certain drum patterns locked into key parts of the brain. We'd wanted to tell the story of Medea from the outset, and we combined the two — it took years to prepare, teaching the actors how to take care of every audience member, working out how to tell the story. It's exhausting, too."

You arrive at Hotel Medea ready to spend the night. The first hour or so is a pulsing, ritualistic physical theatre performance, with Jason and his bare-chested female Argonauts arriving in full riot gear to claim the fleece from the tribal dancers who surround Medea. Conflict, humour and threats lead to Eros intervening and pinning the hapless priestess with a love dart. She slaughters her family and leaves. Part two moves on 10 years to Medea's bedroom, while Jason campaigns for office. Rooms of surveillance equipment and heartbreakingly sweet bunk beds host small groups who eventually represent Medea's children, with

They call it  
survival theatre,  
and think the  
audience will  
leave with  
bumps and  
bruises

are used to narratives they can join and feel they can influence," he explains. "Participatory theatre's challenge is to take thrillseeking and carve out a story filled with emotion that allows for individual experiences and the feeling that you can control the story." Fans of shoot-'em-ups might find themselves inciting violence, a more morally complex experience than pressing a button on a joystick.

Pushing this into a sharply focused extreme is Blast Theory's *A Machine to See With*. It begins on the street, with a call to your mobile phone. A man's voice leads you through the streets of the city and into an immersive heist movie, with you as the protagonist. You move from hiding money to meeting up with a partner in crime and onwards to the bank as the tension rises. The robbery itself isn't even the finale — you must deal with its aftermath, in a playful satirical swipe at bankers' bonuses and the current financial panic.

To an extent, Blast Theory have been here before. In 1998, the company kidnapped two paying audience members and held them for 48 hours in a secret location. I took part in the dress rehearsal. I was hauled into a van on a pre-arranged day — but at a surprising

our sight, the most sophisticated sense and the last one to evolve, and deal directly with fear, despair, hope and human bonding while playing with our imaginations as they hover, briefly, in

*The Darkness Descends*, Waterloo Station Arches, SE1, Sept 1-4; [facebook.com/playstationaccess](http://facebook.com/playstationaccess). Hotel Medea, until Sat, Summerhall, Edinburgh; *A Machine to See With*, Wed-Sun

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