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## Luminato's My One Demand: A single tracking shot, a livestream and a morphing story

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When people talk about risky theatre, they usually don't mean it literally.

The misfortunes that can befall a play tend to occupy a narrow band of bad luck. Maybe there's a power outage, or a missing prop. Or an actor rips his or her costume, or knocks over a piece of scenery or gets food poisoning. But the other day, when the artistic team behind *My One Demand*, a filmed live performance piece receiving its world premiere at Toronto's Luminato festival on Thursday night, convened for a so-called "premortem" to discuss everything that could go wrong during their show, the possibilities ran on for pages.

There could be rain. The police might suddenly intrude. Maybe Brielle Robillard, an 11-year-old actor who rides a bike through the Cabbagetown neighbourhood during an early segment of the piece, will be accosted by a drunk as she crosses Allan Gardens. Perhaps the cameraman tracking her – his livestream signal beaming back to an audience at a TIFF Lightbox cinema – will be hit by a truck. Or his Steadicam will suffer a mechanical failure, his streaming kit will overheat or his batteries will fail. Or he and his focus-puller, both of them being British and therefore unfamiliar with Canadian mosquitoes, will react poorly to a swarm that wafts in off the Don River.



*My One Demand*, which receives its world premiere Thursday at 8 p.m., will be shown live via a video stream as it unfolds on the streets of Toronto. In the week before it opened, the story's ending was still being finalized. (Photos by Matthew Sherwood for The Globe and Mail)

Or maybe – as Matt Adams, a partner in Blast Theory, the British company behind the show, admitted the other day – those watching will simply get bored. "Clearly, for us to engage an audience in a work that has no story arc to speak of, for an hour and three quarters, that's a massive, massive challenge," he acknowledged.

But, he noted, the show does have a few natural advantages: Starting at 8 p.m., it will unfold during the so-called "Golden Hour" beloved by cinematographers for its unique warmth. It will take unexpected turns as it follows a daisy-chain of seven local actors, including the well-known performers Julian Richings and Clare Coulter, who end the show.

And most startlingly – and, okay, riskily – it will comprise a single tracking shot that begins at Toronto General Hospital, travels eastward, lopes south along River Street, descends a set of stairs to the bike path beside the Don, ducks into a tangled thicket of woods, happens upon a temporary encampment next to disused railway tracks and then hops into a car to zip down to Cherry Beach. For Torontonians who think they know their city well, a recent evening walk of the route with the cast suggested that the show will do what art does: take the familiar and make it strange and new.

"We are trying to make a film with none of film's advantages – no editing, no lighting, no control of our set," Adams said, as he strolled past Riverdale Farm, his cast trailing behind like a flock of ducklings. "The audience may think: 'Ooh, I wonder whether they'll get away with this? That seems foolhardy!'"



But then, *My One Demand* was inspired by an equally quixotic event. While it begins as a show about unrequited love, it morphs into a piece about the 2011 social-justice protest known as Occupy Toronto.

"The unrequited love is designed to draw you from a traditional understanding of – well, we all have those romances, the people who got away – to a broader set of feelings that are not requited in other ways," Adams said.

"Speaking very personally, that is the history since the financial crisis – where, even for someone who was relatively jaded and cynical about the world, I thought it was only a question of what level of massive political change there would be. The idea that there would be no political change never occurred to me. The idea that there would be a marked shift to the right, and that it would be the poor's fault, was something that I just did not foresee. I just could not believe that that would be the way the conversation would go."

He hopes that *My One Demand* – the title echoes the original Occupy poster of a ballerina balancing atop a Wall Street Bull, with the question "What is our one demand?" – will lead audience members to ponder broader questions of social justice. But he can't say for certain yet: One week before the show opened, as he sat for an interview in a downtown office space, Adams didn't even know how the piece would end. Though it had been in development for the better part of a year, he had wanted to base the characters on the actors themselves – and he had only begun working with most of them this month.

"We're trying to walk this line of staying true to each of our performers as individuals, while moving them into positions where they serve the broader goals of the project," he said.



Over the 20-odd years of Blast Theory's existence, he has been here before. "There are times when you're this close [to opening], when that problem is real, white-knuckle fear," he said. "For some reason, I don't feel that. It may be because Clare and Julian are both super experienced, and are really confident. They're, like – 'no, let's keep working on it, we'll find it.'"

For those who can't make it to the cinema, *My One Demand* will also stream online. (Users need to register in advance.) Blast Theory has done a lot of digital work in recent years: Its most recent piece, *Karen*, is a beguiling, free interactive app in which a woman who purports to be a "life coach" opens the camera to her own shambolic personal life.

But it has been years since Blast Theory created work for a communal audience and Adams is curious about the effect *My One Demand* will have in that setting.

"Theatre has this incredible power to create a communal experience in a room, and for ideas to change in real time in that room," he said. "At its best, you have this thing where people are changing, individually and collectively, through this experience. That's the aspiration of that art form. And, you know, one of the things we've always been looking to do is to try and find that kind of electrical performative moment, in an age of interaction and of participation and of technological change."

He added: "I think there's an opportunity to explore what that live performance might feel like, in a different way. And to give the audience a curiously slippery experience, where [the piece is] moving around between something that feels live and feels cinematic and feels theatrical and feels real – because the script is verbatim from interviews with [the actors], so it's like their own lives. And yet it's constructed and fictional."

"So, yeah, I think from my point of view, I think there's an opportunity to give people a sense of a very particular version of 'Now.'"