

CULTURE

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Part Film, Part Theatre, all Toronto: *My One Demand*

A pioneer in interactive gaming and theatre, the UK's Blast Theory arrives in Toronto for the world premiere of *My One Demand* at Luminato.

BY CARLY MAGA



Julian Richings, one of the performers in *My One Demand*. Photo courtesy of Blast Theory/Luminato Festival.

My One Demand

TIFF Bell Lightbox (350 King Street West)

Or [RSVP to watch online](#) for free

June 25-27, 8 p.m.

\$15

It's hard enough to make a film on its own, let alone to make a film all in one take as it's being live streamed to an audience in a nearby cinema and on their computers at home. The UK's Blast Theory will do this not once, but over three nights this week as part of the Luminato Festival.

Titled *My One Demand*, the film/theatre hybrid will track seven local actors as they travel a predetermined pathway as a narrator tells a story of unrequited love. Beginning at 8 p.m. each night, the "Golden Hour" of light as the sun sets, a crew with Steadicams and streaming equipment will reach from the Toronto General Hospital to the Don River to Cherry Beach, with pit stops at a bar and parks and who knows what else along the way, over nearly two hours—rain or shine or technical malfunction or any other kind of interruption from the outside world that you could imagine.

It's sure to be a quiet, introspective, subtle production from a company known for more radical projects, like *Karen*, a life coach app that learns personal information and turns into a combination of *Her* and *Fatal Attraction*, and *A Machine To See With*, which require audiences to travel a city in a large-scale game of video tag (where the point is to capture someone one camera, but not get filmed yourself).

We spoke with Matt Adams, co-founder of Blast Theory, about *My One Demand*, Toronto in the winter vs. Toronto in the summer, and gaming in theatre.

Torontoist: How did Toronto, and then the Luminato Festival, become the site of the world premiere of *My One Demand*?

Matt Adams: Sara Diamond, who's the president of OCAD has been a supporter and a colleague for many years, and an opportunity came up for three European arts organizations [The Patching Zone, Blast Theory, and Translocal] to collaborate with a Canadian partner, so we approached OCAD to come here as a residency and *My One Demand* has eventually grown out of that.

We knew we would be doing something around this time of year, so with OCAD's help we approached Jorn [Weisbrodt, artistic director of Luminato] and he's been incredibly supportive from the beginning.

And had you been to Toronto before at that point?

I came to speak at Hot Docs a few years back, but I didn't know the city well.

***My One Demand* is very much in conversation with the city around the characters, how did you get the scope of what the production would include?**

That's really part of the work we make. All of our projects are interactive in one form or another, and it's a real theme in our work to think about the city as a stage and to think about the artistic possibilities of a city. And we have a few projects in the UK that you, as an audience member, walk through the city and explore. We did *A Machine to See With*, where you stand on a street corner until your phone rings and the voice on the other end says "You're about to go on a bank robbery" and the rest of the game takes you through the city to prepare you, to find the bank, stake it out and so on. So this is a bit of a departure for us, but we're always keen on going to new cities and trying to see it fresh and find ways of presenting it to residents of the city that maybe haven't seen it that way before.

We had been working on the project for about two years, a year and a half, and doing lots of testing and workshops in the UK and working remotely with Toronto. My colleagues Ju (Row Farr) and Nick (Tandavanit) and I came to Toronto for a couple of weeks in January, and that's when we really started to survey the city and choose the route, shot lots of video, and we've been working with a lot of OCAD students since that point as well to test and explore while we were in England.

January isn't the ideal time to visit Toronto, especially to plan for an event happening in the summer! How did the route change unexpectedly for you?

Oh, yeah. It's funny, we were doing some test video while we were there, and if you watch them now all you can hear is me and heavy breathing in the background of every video walking around in minus ten. The whole route looks very different, it really, really does. Suddenly there's an explosion of green everywhere, the streets are more active and people are out, so yes but it's actually been great because things that look great in January look even better in June.

What were you looking for when you were planning the show's route?

We knew we wanted to make a story about unrequited love, and we wanted to make a journey where our seven performers are walking in a daisy chain where each one meets the next one and we also knew that we wanted to make a story where each cast member is older than the next, so our youngest cast member is Max who was born in April. So we knew we wanted to start at the General Hospital, with his mom Gia bringing him out of the hospital. So we had those ideas in play, and then it was a question of exploring things that are either emotionally resonant, or make sense in why these characters would be here or what would make them walk this way, or what activity would they take part in here, and building from that.

So it's not about checking off the big sights, it's about what best builds the story?

Obviously we're making something that's partly theatre and partly cinema, so when you're making something cinematic you have to think about how it's going to look on screen, you want visuals that are strong, so we've been as ambitious as we possibly can. So hopefully we've got something that can be surprising and rich for people living in this city. When we first walked the route with the cast and a few people from Luminato last week, people were pleasantly surprised and a lot of people in the group said "I've never walked down here in my entire life," so that was nice.

That's interesting, you're the outside eye to show us our own city.

Of course, we're all like that in our own city aren't we. We settle into our own grooves and routes and normally you don't have a reason to look at an alley and say, "I wonder where that leads? I'm going to follow it and have a look." Where's that's greatly a part of what Ju and I were doing in January.

Blast Theory asks a lot from its audiences, to get out in the streets and jump right into your story. How is the audience interaction going to work in *My One Demand*?

The interaction in this one is very subtle and gentle. The nature of the interaction is that while you're watching, in the cinema or online, you can occasionally answer a question we ask and send that in. And then some of those answers are incorporated into the script in real time. It's not interactive in that you change the course of the story or the path the characters take, it's more in the emotional arc of the piece.

How did the theme of unrequited love become the thing to use in this real-time, live streamed, continuous shot movie?

In this case, we really wanted to try something that would feel cinematic in this one continuous shot, that was interactive, and done in real time, as far as we know no one has done something like this before. So, even just technically, it's pretty forbidding. But I think we also felt that watching the film and knowing that it's all happening right this moment has an emotional quality all on its own. And we wanted to do a film about unrequited love because it's a jumping off point for thinking about our lives and other forms of unrequitedness.

Yes, there's something similar to the isolation of unrequited love and the loneliness of a tech-obsessed society. But this same technology that makes us feel isolated is the same thing that's letting us feel connected to these strangers, these characters, walking and talking about our city.

I believe that the essence of theatre is about a live interaction and a live moment between the audience and a performer, and that can happen in a lot of different ways. I think that the idea that theatre itself exists in certain buildings, with a room of rows of seats facing a stage... you know there are many other ways in which you can create live experiences. Ju, Nick, and I have been working together for over 20 years trying to look at this particular moment in time, with the tools that are available to us, how can you create fresh forms of theatre on one hand, and on the other how do we react as a society to the massive social and cultural change that has been brought about by technology. We're really in uncharted waters in regards to how technology affects our societies, our communities, how we speak to the people who are dearest to us. We'd love to have a critical voice around some of those changes.

Given the narratives, the drama, the interaction, do you think all games are inherently theatre?

No, I wouldn't say so because obviously some games are closed software systems. There are some when you're not interacting with anyone, just the computer parts. Some would argue that it's live because it's live to the player, but in my point of view, I think it's the human interaction between the audience and the performer that is required. In my view then, even in multiplayer games and shared environments, it may have theatrical qualities but to me it's still not theatre. But I will say that games are incredibly immersive, sophisticated, exciting experiences, and theatre certainly overlaps with games and we certainly use game design and techniques very heavily in our work. We've learned lots from game designers and the indie game community, and we've made several projects that are essentially games; they have rules, they have goals, you could lose, etc. And we've always found that really exciting, it's a community we've always felt a real affinity for.