



The Tour de France is coming to Cambridge this week, and it feels like the French mountains have arrived in town, too...like the scenery and culture of the race have been draped across our sweet, flat city like a yellow jersey. The Cambridge Junction cannily scheduled a bicycle-themed art event for this weekend: *Rider Spoke* by the internationally-renowned UK art company Blast Theory, a show which premiered with a sold-out season at the Barbican, London and has since been touring worldwide. It is a participatory piece of modern theatre on bicycle: each audience member is given a bike that is fitted with a small computer and headphones by the artists. Then you are instructed to cycle off into the city alone, led on an individual journey by the voice in the headphones, and interacting with the bike's computer touch screen at different stopping places.

Yesterday evening Molly Flynn, Georgie Grace and I did *Rider Spoke*, and afterwards we cycled to the corner of York and Sleaford Street where my favourite pub in Cambridge, the Geldart, is hidden away in a suburban maze of terraced houses, and we wrote interactively about the show. Here is what we asked each other and ourselves, and how we replied.

*Joy asks, 'What was artful about the experience of Rider Spoke?'*

*Joy...*As an audience member, your interface with the piece was completely different to usual theatre-going. When the Blast Theory artist met me outside the Junction and took my bike away to put the computer on it, it felt like handing my bike over to someone in a bike shop, which is a prosaic experience in

Cambridge. But even though it was a completely different way to 'go to the theatre', it still felt like the start of a Piece of Art, with the boundary of a Beginning and an End, which imbued this mundane happening with a heightened sense of art-magic. For example, I re-considered my bike: it now felt like a prop in the theatre, which made it more magical, more transporting... And then the living, real streets of Cambridge were my scenery, and I found that fascinating. And I was a moving, thinking, breathing element of the theatre, as well as an audience member.

After I was given a short introduction about how to use the little touch-screen computer and instructed to put the headphones in my ears, I cycled away. And then music and a voice came through the headphones. The voice was kind, and the music was whimsical, gentle, and slightly poignant – appropriate for cycling. As I stopped at the Junction of Cherry Hinton and Hills Road, the voice said, 'I will be with you all the way...I bless you on your journey...'

And what I thought was artful was that the project had these two dimensions: the Material – the computer gadget, headphone buds in my ears, my bike, the road, the pavement, direction, traffic lights, other people – and the Immaterial: my choices, memories, impressions, feelings and thoughts rising up in response to the questions the voice asked me, like 'when was the last time you held someone's hand in the street?'. The answer to this question was a long, complicated, multi-dimensional story about love, and having it called up to the surface was very stirring for me. I recorded my answer about the last time I remember holding my ex-Beloved's hand in the street. We had true love, but we were forced by circumstances and time to acknowledge that sometimes even true love doesn't work out. When I listened to my recording, I felt a lot of love...for myself – because I heard the strength in my voice as I told the story, and I loved myself for being able to travel through that experience and keep my heart open and hopeful. It was really interesting to listen to myself tell this story, and it kind of surprised me to hear the strength and hope in my own voice, to regard myself from a very unusual vantage point, and see something extremely positive that I hadn't seen before. And at that point, I appreciated the gentle power of *Rider Spoke* for creating this experience. But it was interesting to discover later, talking with Molly and Georgie, that we were all given different questions, and we had quite different experiences as a result. It was also interesting to realise that this story of mine would become theatrical content for someone else in the coming days.

*Molly asks, 'When you left the Junction, where did you go, and why?'*

*Georgie...* I can't help feeling like I went the wrong way. This is the theatre of free will: you don't get a seat, you don't get to surrender yourself and sink into your perceptions and...receive the theatre. You have to keep moving...you have to keep going out and getting experience. It's all up to you. You might see nothing, experience nothing. It's hard to drift, it's hard to surrender. It's hard not to feel like there's a conclusion you're supposed to be working towards. It's hard to feel free.

*Joy...* I watched you and Georgie go off, and I wondered where you were going, but I wanted to be alone with the experience, so I went a different way. I felt a really strong pull towards the river closest to the Junction, and almost as if I could see the path laid out for where I wanted to go – over the railway bridge,

left down Brooklands Avenue (I love the leafy, green stillness of Brooklands Avenue), and then across Trumpington Road into the meadows by the river there.

*Georgie...* I saw Joy go one way and I thought I shouldn't go the same way, so I went the other way. I went down Cherry Hinton Road, and the traffic was bad and loud. I was trying to get away from...crowds? people? traffic? I was expecting/wanting a ... what kind of experience? I felt a lot of pressure to experience something... new, or real, or...interesting.

*Molly...*I didn't know where I was going. I went away from the places that I knew, thinking I might discover something. I had the idea that I was meant to get lost. But it was so....suburban, but in an English way. I was supposed to find a place that I liked. That's what the voice on the computer told me. But you know, I struggled to find a place that I felt a genuine affinity for. So eventually I stopped and listened to the recording and reassured myself that there was something redeeming about the place where I was.

*Joy asks, 'What effect did the questions have on you?'*

*Molly...* In the world I live in here, people don't share their personal stories. In fact, I wonder if they even have them. They must, but I never hear them. I used to have personal stories to share, but these days I have fewer and fewer. Work has become so dominant, and, for the first time in my life, relationships have become secondary. The questions posed to me in Rider Spoke asked me to confront these aspects of my life. I can't say that I learned something new about myself, something I didn't already know, but I did appreciate the time to be really honest.

*Georgie asks, 'What would you have done differently?'*

*Molly...*I'd have started off by going to more familiar places.

*Georgie...*Would you do this again?

*Molly...*Yes, in fact, as soon as it was over I wanted to do it again right away. I wanted to hear all of the stories and answer all of the questions, and I felt disappointed that I didn't have time to do it all.

*Georgie...*Do you think you gave good content?

*Molly...*I think I gave honest content.

*Georgie...*Did you get good content?

*Molly...*I felt it was worth listening to.

*Georgie...*Did you re-record?

*Molly...*No.

*Georgie...*Were you tempted to lie?

*Molly...*No.

*At one point we digressed away from the questions and wrote...*

*Georgie...* It made me realise that I feel really bored of living here. Like, how do I get lost in a place I've lived for so long? I mean, I did get lost, because I'm always getting lost, because I have no sense of direction, but ... meaningfully lost ... interestingly lost ... lost in a way that's worth recording? I was just in the fucking suburbs. I was going around in circles.

*Molly...*I also feel bored living here. Actually, it's not so much that I feel bored as much as I feel alone. Although, I've come to accept that loneliness and even value the time I've spent here, but I did feel throughout the piece that my life in Cambridge has been quite solitary. Extremely solitary. And I've often thought that there must be people around who might think or feel the kinds of things that I think or feel, but I've struggled to find them.

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During our spoken and written conversation after the show, in the glow of our laptops and candlelight in the Geldart, we talked about how modern theatre is increasingly involving the audience in the work – how the audience becomes the work, with different interactive frames around their essential, live, unfolding humanity. And we talked about how the structure of this show suggests existential parallels and mirrors the tensions between how we navigate

the fixed circumstances of the world around us using our free will. We talked about the different questions we were asked – the questions appeared to branch off from each other in random patterns, presenting each rider with a different set – and it turned out that Georgie didn't like her questions, and so she had a totally different experience to Molly and me, and didn't enjoy it as much. Molly had started off feeling like there was a 'right' way to do the experience, but by the end, she said, 'Eventually I let go of the idea that I had gone the wrong way or made the wrong choice.'

Georgie, who is particularly attuned to picking up the level above the level, commented that it was a bit insane to find real connection in Cambridge – to hear the personal stories of the people surrounding us – via a piece of modern theatre creating a web of recorded stories deposited in different locations of the city that you can only access by buying a ticket for it. And today, looking back over it and the things we wrote last night, what strikes me most was that after having this thoroughly enjoyable, though solitary, artistic experience, I felt so grateful to be able to spend time in the safe, conspiratorial huddle of friendship talking about it afterwards, in the magical environs of the Geldart – a place where the lay lines of individual life trajectories come together. The Geldart, in particular, seems to understand and embrace its deeper role as a 'Place' for the magic that happens when we meet, when we connect. It seemed that for all of us, the show teased up an awareness of the reality or depth of the connections we have in Cambridge, to places and people...that it highlighted an awareness of what our 'community' of Cambridge is like, and what we *wish* it was like... Through the artistic lens of *Rider Spoke* we experienced a deep, anonymous sharing with other people, and a heightened sense of relationship to the streets, corners, and shady groves of the city, alone on our bikes, and this made us realise, as Georgie wrote later, that 'the real thing that we care about is sharing something real with people we know. And knowing people, having people in our lives, so we make new memories and feel genuinely attached to places. We want our actual lives to have good content.' It's interesting to reflect at the end of this review, with the heightened awareness that *Rider Spoke* gave me, that my favourite two things about the experience were, actually, Molly and Georgie.

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3 thoughts on “‘Rider Spoke’ by Blast Theory: Three Riders, Three Spokes (A Communal Review by Molly Flynn, Georgie Grace, and Joy L. Martin)”



**Matt**

July 4, 2014 at 4:54 pm

Thanks for your post: it's a fascinating and complex response to Rider Spoke which I really enjoyed reading.

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**Eduardo**

August 8, 2014 at 9:18 pm

That was a really interesting piece about an intriguing experience. I wonder if I'd have overcome my fear of bikes (generated by some not-so-serious events in my childhood and the unfriendliness of my city towards them) and took part in it, and what my thoughts about it would be. This time, more than on the other essay of yours I read, it got me wondering about my own reactions, especially after discovering that an apparently inward experience was remarkable for you because of the connection with other people that followed it.

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**Joy L. Martin** Post author

August 13, 2014 at 3:51 pm

Hi Eduardo, Thank you so much for your comment. It's always wonderful to hear your thoughts about things. I wonder if the theme that resonates for me the most out of any art I see is 'Only Connect' (from Howard's End by E.M. Forster)... And I guess I am always most interested in the relationship of the piece of art to life.

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