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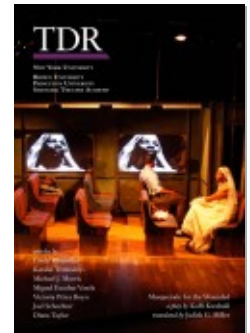
The Audience Is the Message: *Blast Theory's App-Drama*

Karen

Erin B. Mee

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The Audience Is the Message

Blast Theory's App-Drama Karen

Erin B. Mee

A message pops up on my iPhone's home-screen: "I need to talk to you. Now." I launch the app to videoconference with Karen, and she just stares at me, her mouth tightly scrunched up, as though tasting something sour; her head leans on her tabled elbow. She is not speaking to me. Instead, she types her questions, which appear on the screen over her image: "Do you sometimes harbor guilty secrets that you're afraid will come out one day?" Did Dave tell her? A continuum pops up on the screen: at one end is "Very Often." I drag the bar to "Very Often," and tap on "Continue." "And what is it that you feel guilty about today exactly?" she types. I choose one of the response options: "I should tell you something about Dave." "Dave already told me. You asked him to search through my stuff." I did not! I click the response option that reads: "Hold on. I told Dave not to." Is Dave lying to cover his own snooping? Is he trying to create a rift between Karen and me? "Yeah? Well that worked," she types (her letters dripping sarcasm). She glares at me. "What did you find?" Did Dave tell her he showed me the file she has been keeping on me? I click: "I need to tell you something about Dave." "What about Dave?" She leans in to the camera, but her eyes are wary, and her mouth is still drawn down in disgust. "He's in love with you." She is not to be distracted. "How would you feel if Shanker searched your stuff when

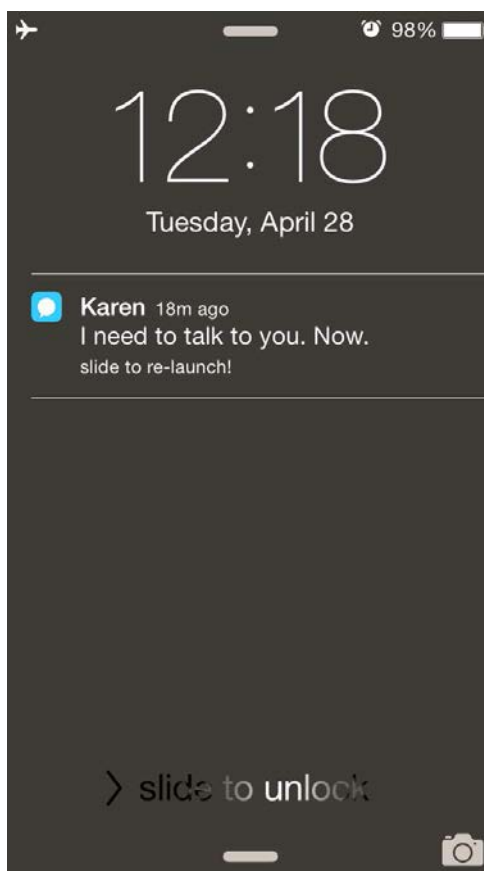


Figure 1. Karen was insistent; I had to respond to her text NOW. Blast Theory's app-drama, Karen, 2015. (Screenshot by Erin B. Mee)

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Figure 2. The image on the screen would remain the same, no matter which choice I made in response to Karen's question. My interpretation of her facial expression changed based on my own feelings about my behavior. *Blast Theory's Karen*, 2015. (Screenshot by Erin B. Mee)

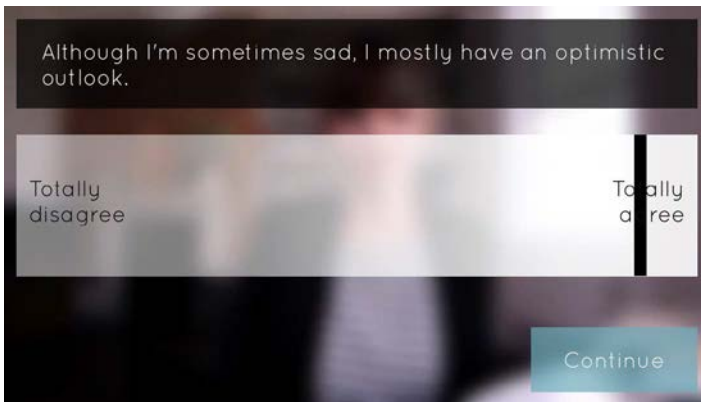


Figure 3. Karen had me rate all aspects of my life on a continuum. *Blast Theory's Karen*, 2015. (Screenshot by Erin B. Mee)

you were out?" When did I tell her my husband's name? Oh yeah, in one of our first sessions, when she asked me a few basic questions. "I'm sorry. I know it's not right." She leans back. "I'll get in touch tomorrow. Bye." She disconnects. Our relationship—such as it has been—seems to be over. Karen is justifiably angry because I have betrayed her trust.

Karen is my life coach. Or she was when we began videoconferencing 10 days ago. In our first meeting Karen asked a number of introductory questions "drawn from psychological profiling questionnaires" (Blast Theory 2015), such as: "Which area is most important for you right now? A. I want to take more control

of my life; B. I want to change my attitude to relationships; C. I want to review my life goals." She asked a few questions that allowed her to discover more about my personality and approach to life: "Although I'm sometimes sad, I mostly have an optimistic outlook. Totally disagree; Totally agree." At the end of the session, she asked me to "Take some time to think about something that you're grateful for today. Once you've thought about it, write it down. It can be on a Post-it note, or a message to yourself on your phone. Then I'd like you to read it back to yourself tomorrow morning and call me when you get a chance. OK?" Although I remain suspicious of the new-ageiness of life coaches, Karen's assignment proved useful: it made me sit and think about what I was grateful for (something I don't take enough time to do), and choose one thing to focus on (difficult for an overcommitted multitasker). The next day we reviewed my answer: "I am grateful to Shanker [my husband] for focusing me on the important aspects of my relationship with Leila [my daughter]." I answered a few questions about my childhood, said that I am somewhat relaxed most of the time but get stressed out very easily, and that I have no difficulty understanding abstract ideas. Karen's voice is a calm nondescript alto, she looks straight at me, and she asks probing questions matter-of-factly.

She seems like an ideal life coach; someone I can trust. I decide to answer all her questions honestly, which means sharing intimate details about and approaches to my life.

A few sessions later, I call Karen at what I think is the appointed time, to find her in her sweats, holding a glass of red wine, half-sitting in her roommate Dave's lap, while he shows her something ridiculous online. "You really are jealous." "What have I got to be jealous of?" They tease each other, but at some point it seems that Dave might be jealous of Karen's

relationship with *me*. Huh? What relationship? I'm her client. Dave pulls Karen off the chair and onto the floor, where he tickles her. When she extricates herself and reclaims the chair, she notices her computer has been on the whole time, and correctly guesses that I have seen the whole scene. "Oh shit." She turns off her computer, and my screen reads: "Next episode available tomorrow at 11:00." This is the first glimpse I have of the "real" Karen, who is not as "together" as she would like to appear. In fact, the next day, my screen reads: "Crap, I'm running late today. Quick chat?"

We have one of our sessions while Karen gets ready for a date. "Did I ever tell you about my ecstasy days?" she asks as a prelude to oversharing. After telling me a bit about her drug experimentation, she says, "I believe in taking my pleasures where I find them, do you know what I mean?" She is testing my responses. She then goes on to say, "Absolute faithfulness for life is nearly as silly as celibacy, am I right?" and "Sex with a stranger is more exciting," while noting my answers. At one point, she asks for my advice about which top to wear on her date. By the end of this session, it's clear that Karen's life is a bit of a mess. In fact, she has begun to depend on me for advice; I have become *her* life coach.

Karen is an app by Blast Theory available (ostensibly in perpetuity) for free on iTunes and Google Play: a participatory smartphone theatre production/game/film about the virtual relationships we create through oversharing private information in virtual spaces. As our relationship develops, *Karen/Karen* uses the data I provide to tailor her conversations specifically to me. When psychological profiling is combined with the surreptitious use of personal data (for example, *Karen* tracks your location in the background unless you change this in Settings), *Karen* becomes an exploration of trust: whom do we trust, why do we trust them, and with what information?

In contrast to proscenium-based theatre, or even other smartphone

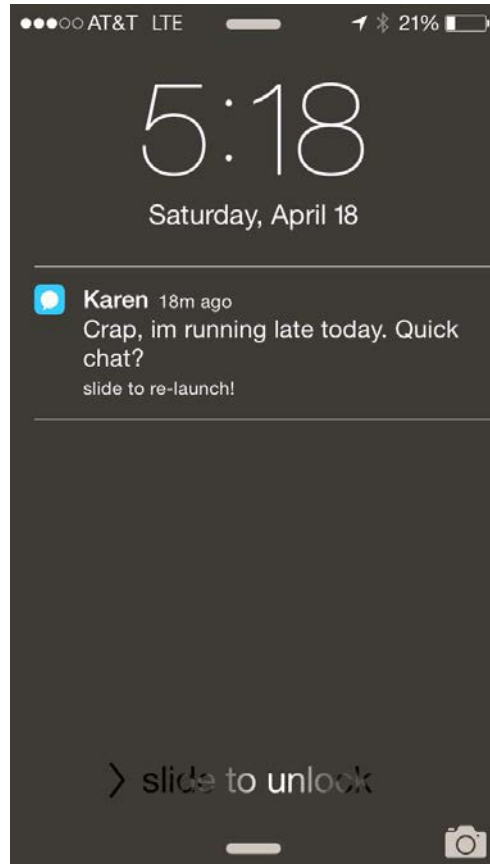


Figure 4. As time went on, I began to see the "real" Karen. Blast Theory's *Karen*, 2015. (Screenshot by Erin B. Mee)



Figure 5. I had apparently become Karen's life coach; she needed help picking her outfit. Blast Theory's *Karen*, 2015. (Screenshot by Erin B. Mee)

plays that are experienced collectively, such as podplays,¹ participants interact with Karen by themselves—in my case, alone in the privacy of my apartment—rather than experiencing a play alongside other audience members whose responses create a feedback loop of emotional contagion not just between performer and audience member, but also among audience members themselves. Blast Theory has reversed the location of private and public (and communal): a private experience that goes public (via the data mined) rather than a public experience that feels private and internal. “A lot of the works we make in Blast Theory sit on the boundary between the very private and the very public,” notes Matt Adams (2016), cofounder of Blast Theory, a Brighton-based company known for interactive performance that combines live performance with interactive media for audiences spread out “across the internet” (Blast Theory 2016).

There are a number of reasons for that; we find that a very interesting place to be creatively. That partly reflects making interactive work, and how you can make interactive work that is both personal and communal. But it’s also driven by the internet as a driving force in our lives, and as a platform for the work that we make, very often. Most of our online presence exists on that boundary. When you make a post on Facebook, you kind of know who’s reading it and who it’s for, but you are also aware that there is almost certainly an audience that you have no idea is there, or you never intended them to read it. We all make our status updates alone, even though they’re an entirely social and collaborative thing. You sit and look at that sentence, and decide, before you hit return, “that’s it, that’s right” and then you broadcast. [...] And you’re aware that within a few seconds people are reading it. So there is this curious merged social space of private and public. And alongside that, you have the Edward Snowden revelations, in which even the

most private of all private isn’t private. And that Skype sex session you had with your partner three years ago may well have been recorded, and still exists somewhere, and someone could be watching it at this moment. So you have all that sense in which the public and the private is horribly conflated and confused. (Adams 2016)

Karen explores—or we explore through *Karen*—the ways we personally negotiate the “public” and the “private.” It is, arguably, not only a play but also a training exercise to sharpen our awareness of how and when we constantly shift between public and private in the course of our daily lives. This is true even though—or perhaps because—*Karen* is a digital app. The questions about trust that exist in any relationship are amplified in *Karen* because we have to decide whether we trust Karen the character *and* whether we trust the app itself—and Blast Theory, its makers.

The app-drama is a new theatrical genre that exists in the liminal space between live performance and electronic prerecording.

The notion that Brook set out in *The Empty Space*—of the basic interaction in theatre being between performer and audience and space—is much more muddled and fragmented [in this historical moment] than Brook could have imagined when he wrote that book. We have tried to create artistic strategies to bring the vigor of live performance into electronic spaces. [...] These things interpenetrate, they are confused, there are frayed edges around all these domains, and those frayed edges are very interesting spaces that we do not yet fully understand. So we’re always looking to try and explore those spaces. (Adams 2016)

Karen is durational: it takes anywhere from seven days to two weeks if you keep all your appointments; if you let a few of them slide, it can take much longer. It is also intermittent: sessions usually last three to five minutes, and

1. See for example Daniela Hahn’s article on Rimini Protokoll’s *50 Kilometres of Files* (2014).

there are one or two a day, timed so these fictional interactions are interspersed with other quotidian activities of real life, blurring the lines between fiction and reality: they are brief videoconferencing sessions like any others that might occur during the course of a regular work day. *Karen* is somewhat flexible: the app tells you when the next session will be available, and you can do the session any time after it becomes available. Don't postpone too long, though, because *Karen* will start texting you: "I'm ready to get started when you are" or "Alright, treasure? Give me a call when you've got a minute." As *Karen* becomes more dependent on you, she can get even more insistent, even needy, if she feels ignored, sending four texts within 30 minutes: "You awake?" and three minutes later: "Psst. Are you still up?" And seven minutes after that: "Hey, give me a call. I can't sleep." Until, twenty minutes after that, she texts: "If I read another page of this book, I'm going to be crying myself to sleep. Call me." Thus *Karen* offers not only a new location in which theatre can occur (on your smartphone) and a new time-frame for theatre (both in the sense that "the play" takes two weeks to complete, and in that it is always and everywhere available via a phone app—and for an indefinite run), it offers a new dramaturgical structure, new modes of engagement, and creates a solo theatrical experience in which the participant—and her responses—become both medium and message.

Karen has no plot: there is a set-up (*Karen* is my life coach), and there are a series of sessions, but there is no story. In fact, we are very quickly sidetracked from the set-up, and only return to it a few times in the piece. What, then, moves the piece forward? In my case, my ever-changing relationship with *Karen*, my curiosity about what she would do next, and my desire to find out more about her—as well as my desire to find out more about my own responses. Other participants—undergraduate students from my Drama in Performance class—were drawn in by the desire to please or impress *Karen*: "It was my unique relationship with her that kept me invested, because I cared about what she thought of me" (Berkshire

2015). My student Myung-In Sohn "soon realized that the information [she] was providing *Karen* was in turn being used to keep [her] engaged and coming back for more" (2015). Sohn noted that "social media channels engage similar mechanisms as *Karen* to collect valuable data which is used to lead us to further consumption"—in this case, of *Karen* itself. Our awareness of the reasons we engage with *Karen* and continue to reengage with her throughout the event, adds another layer to the performance text—an internal commentary on our personalities and values that is parallel to the overt analysis provided by *Karen* and *Karen*.

I experienced *Karen* three times.² Since I knew I would be writing about *Karen* for *TDR*, I was aware of answering certain questions—such as, "do you like biting or scratching during sexual intercourse?"—in a way that could be reported in a scholarly journal and read by my parents, my daughter, and the Chair of my department. The second and third times through, I followed my impulse to respond in a completely out-of-character manner just to see how *Karen* would react. Other participants, including my student Vera Berkshire, had a similar impulse: "It suddenly occurred to me that I was acting out of character, almost like I was taking on a different persona in the world of this app." Berkshire was drawn in by the app's exploration of our "perceptions of others: how much we reveal to each other, how much we don't, and what we build upon that" (2015). Exploring the dance of perceptions drew her in. Although I was trying to "test" *Karen*'s responses, and to see how our relationship would unfold if I answered her questions differently each time through, I almost always defaulted to truthful answers. Adams said this was true of many participants, who found it more interesting to see how *Karen/Karen* responded to *them* rather than to a fictitious version of themselves (2016). My answers to *Karen*'s questions, the choices I made, and the things I said, were gathered into a personality assessment data report that was given to me at the end of the play (via an in-app purchase for \$3.99), and could be said to be the "culmination" of the experience. My data

2. April 2015, July/August 2015, and September/December 2015.

report claimed that I am “really open” to new experiences, highly neurotic, have an internal locus of control, like capturing moments, want to address life goals, and am disrespectful of Karen’s privacy. Of course, this is Karen’s interpretation of my personality, and therefore perhaps not to be trusted.

Karen was meant to culminate in a live party at an Indian restaurant in Cardiff, Wales, which had to be canceled for legal reasons that Blast Theory cannot divulge.

What we hoped to do was create a performance in which we knew a tremendous amount about everyone there. The idea was that we had a cast of five, and when you arrived at the train station, the MC was there to greet you, and to stick a little sticker on your chest that said “Hi, I’m Erin.” In fact, that sticker would be carefully configured to reveal 8–10 different pieces of information about you, in terms of the font that was chosen, the color of the lettering, the shape of the sticker, and so on. So then we were in a position where anyone could come up to you at any point and interact with you knowing how you had interacted with Karen in the app. [...] The structure of the whole evening was based on the question: Can you make a piece of theatre in which you know a lot of data about each audience member? (Adams 2016)

This would have been a highly personalized theatrical experience, further blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, that might have shifted the app-play *Karen* from being an experience in and of itself to being a means of gathering data for the “actual” performance.

At first glance, Karen is the protagonist of this play. I have been cast as a client who develops into a friend who can be depended on to dispense advice. *Karen* is participatory without being interactive: my answers to Karen’s questions determine the tone of the piece, but do not change the events that occur. For example, when Karen asks for my advice on which top to wear on her date, my answer determines what she wears in the next video session. But the date itself is exactly the same. In

one session, when Karen is out of the apartment, Dave sees me and says: “I need to look for something in Karen’s room. Do you want to come?” The first time through, I selected option B: “OK.” The third time through, I selected option A: “You shouldn’t look at other people’s stuff.” I never selected option C, “Get lost you creep. I’m out of here. Bye,” because it seemed rude. But answers A and B led to the same place: we went to Karen’s door, at which point Dave said “Are we going in or not?” to which I could reply: “Stop now”; “What are you going to do?”; or “Yes, let’s see what she’s hiding.” The first time through I chose C, the third time through I chose A. Both answers led into Karen’s room. Dave sifts through Karen’s drawers, and asks if I “want to see what Karen’s into,” to which I can reply, “Yes, go on. Let’s see.” “No, not really.” or “Uh. No, you’re sick.” Again, A and B lead to the same place: Dave shows me a photography book and Karen’s favorite photo—a reference to a quiz Karen administered at the beginning of our sessions, in which I was asked to choose between a bracelet, a camera, and a family of deer, to assess aspects of my personality. Dave also finds, and shows me, the file Karen has been keeping on me. “Gotcha,” he says triumphantly, and then with “See ya, friend,” he disconnects. Our search leads to Karen’s anger, which was absolutely justified my first time through when I happily snooped around her room, but not the second time through when I said we shouldn’t go through another person’s things and tried to stop Dave. In this case, my choices made no difference to the substantive direction *Karen* took. However, they did affect the tone of our interactions: when I felt guilty for having invaded Karen’s privacy, I perceived anger in Karen’s treatment of me in the following scene. When I hadn’t willingly gone into her room, she seemed to me to be a bit less angry, and more disappointed. According to Adams, the video of Karen is exactly the same in both scenarios, though what Karen types and appears on the screen is slightly different (Adams 2016). What changes in the two viewings is not what I see, but the way I interpret Karen’s facial expressions based on my own assessment (or judgment) of my own behavior. *Karen/Karen* shows me how I respond to, react to, and behave in certain circumstances; my choices are then at the center of the play—and

are analyzed and given back to me in the data report. I am not the audience for Karen's escapades; Karen is the audience for my self-investigation. Or, arguably, the app itself, as it gathers data about me, is the audience—or spy. My actions have become what Gareth White calls “the work’s aesthetic material” (2013:9–10) as well as the subject of the production. Like much interactive, immersive, and participatory theatre, *Karen* switches up traditional theatrical roles and relationships: I am not “just” a “passive spectator,” I am cast in the play—as the lead character. My participation is both medium and message.

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Abstractions of Whiteness in Downtown Los Angeles

Ate9's Kelev Lavan

Meghan Quinlan

The Ate9 Dance Company was one of four ensembles presented at *Moves After Dark*, an event commissioned by The Music Center in downtown Los Angeles in July 2015. Organized by Renae Williams Niles, the center's vice president of programming, the site-specific works presented over four nights (13–14 and 20–21 July) promoted local contemporary companies with smaller budgets than those normally presented in the center's large theatres. Ana María Alvarez, artistic director of Contra-Tiempo, created *Wade en el Agua* for the Mark Taper Forum Pond featuring her dancers, a live singer, and a large splash zone. BODYTRAFFIC, led by

Lillian Rose Barbeito and Tina Finkelman Berkett, reworked an existing performance titled *Restructure* for the Dorothy Chandler Plaza, adding a new set by Gustavo Godoy comprising intersecting wooden beams painted yellow. Lula Washington Dance Theatre presented a pointed political statement against recent police killings of black men in a work called *Message for my Peeps* on the exterior steps of the Walt Disney Concert Hall. Each of these pieces invited passersby to enjoy the work, with no limitations on access or recording. The only piece performed inside a building, thus limiting access to ticket-holders, was Ate9's piece *Kelev Lavan* (2015) presented

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