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# Together Here: Immersive Theatre, Audience, and Space

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TOGETHER HERE: IMMERSIVE THEATRE, AUDIENCE,  
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HOLLY GABELMANN

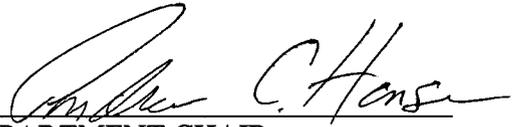
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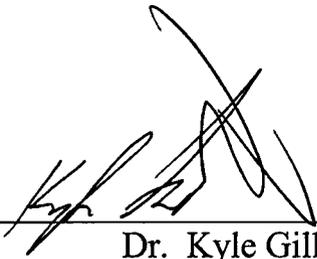
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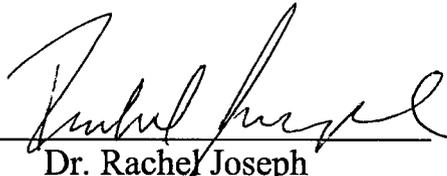
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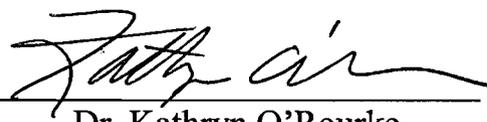
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Pulling me out of the ballroom and away from the familiar crowd, Myrtle asks me, as her friend, to help her pack up her belongings in a tattered suitcase; she is running away, tonight, and needs our help. Next to me, an older woman (Myrtle's other friend from the party) looks vaguely nervous. We both expectantly watch Myrtle rush through the narrow space toward her suitcase. Her black sequined dress rustles slightly as she moves. The room feels smaller than it did earlier that evening, when Myrtle and her lover, Tom, had invited about ten people from the dance floor to the yellow room for party games. I had watched in nervous amusement as Tom dared the guests to kiss a stranger or ride another one of the players like a horse. Myrtle had been lively then, eager and excited to play. Though she and Tom often disagreed, she seemed to enjoy the spectacle. Now she acts differently, tense and pensive, weighed down with a difficult decision.

Myrtle thrusts a thin garment in my hands. I begin to fold it neatly until she, half hurriedly and half kindly, reminds me, "There's no time, just throw it in!" The other woman and I begin to cram things into Myrtle's bag: a string of pearls, a delicate dress, a shoe. Just as Myrtle is snapping the case shut, her husband George storms into the room, flanked by two of his friends. The next few moments happen quickly; they fight, Myrtle runs away to a larger room (the dance floor), George close behind her. As the rest of us follow, the tragedy unfolds; Myrtle is struck by a car in the center of a crowd and killed right in front of us. Suddenly, Gatsby's party, once jovial, transforms into something solemn. I feel a strange sense of guilt for helping Myrtle pack. If I had refused, what would have changed? Could I have stopped the nightmare from ever beginning?

On April 15, 2018, I attended The Immersive Ensemble and The Guild of Misrule's immersive adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*; in this production, the groups brought the West Egg

to the Colab Factory, a London performance venue. The production's website claims it as "UK's longest running immersive theatre show" (*The Great Gatsby*, n.p.). *The Great Gatsby* performers guided spectators through a series of rooms, including Gatsby's study, his bedroom, a large party space, and a smaller open area that represented the Valley of Ashes. The performance space may have included even more rooms that I was never brought to see, as performers pulled spectators out of the crowd to witness certain scenes, such as Daisy and Gatsby's reunion. Unlike the completely designed, exploratory works of Punchdrunk (in which spectators are free to roam and follow performers through a labyrinth of space and story), the undesigned spaces of works like *Wondermart* or *Etiquette* (audio instruction performances in which spectators become actors), or (highly interactive) promenade pieces like *You Me Bum Bum Train* (a mysterious whirlwind journey through a series of vignettes), *The Great Gatsby* allowed some audience exploration, but mostly kept its audience as supervised spectators led from one moment to the next, with some (limited) opportunities for participation. What spectators saw depended on largely where they happened to be standing and what performer happened to notice them. I will use *The Great Gatsby* alongside performances by Adrian Howells, Coney, Punchdrunk, and Silvia Mercurari as frameworks for discussing immersive theatre and its emphasis on bodily engagement and space.

The wide variety of examples listed above highlights a difficulty within the study of immersive performance: immersive theatre can be a vague term as it describes a spectator's experience more than a unified aesthetic. A performance can feel immersive but be not called "immersive" while performances advertised as such may never fully engage their audiences. Other performances may use immersive tactics but keep audiences static (rather than active, sensorially engaged spectators). Happenings, site-specific, (and site-responsive and site-

sympathetic) performances, intimate theatres, and environmental works all seem to display immersive qualities and immersive works often make use of components from these traditions. To help differentiate between these similar (but distinct) performances, Josephine Machon uses several criteria, including the roles of space, spectator, and scenography, to recognize immersive performances along a scale of immersivity: some performances are more immersive than others (Machon 93-100). This scale helps head off binary thinking; performances are not necessarily entirely immersive or entirely alienating. Though a sliding scale is helpful, it complicates the issue of immersive as a genre; if everything is a little immersive, what can we call immersive theatre?

Regardless of whether or not immersive describes an entire genre of theatre or some quality of performance, the term immersive calls to mind a certain type of experience. No longer are spectators asked to sit still, to live vicariously through the actions of the actors. Audience members become the center of their own narrative, in certain works even shaping the piece through their choices or creating their own trajectory with their bodies. Perhaps most importantly, these performances relocated spectators, placing them in the performance space (rather than outside it). This reorientation is one of the key markers of immersive work and is rooted in the work of theatremakers such as Richard Schechner. Schechner's environmental theatres worked to engage spectators "as scenemakers as well as scene watchers," collapsing what he termed "the bifurcation of space" (qtd. in Machon 32). In this legacy, immersive theatre no longer separates the spectator's area from the performer's. Immersive theatre is immediate, it is now; the spectator is pulled from the audience onto the stage, suddenly a performer in a drama of their own making. Regardless of the size or style of immersive performance, an immersive theatre is "an intense, temporary experience, with spatial and temporal boundaries that are

strongly defined and must be adhered to” (Biggin 27). Space and scenography are essential in any type of theatre that works to engage the bodies of its spectators, and immersive theatre is no exception. Space and time are key components of immersive performance because of its emphasis on audience bodies.

Immersive theatre works to engage its audiences’ bodies through their senses; an immersive performance might involve touching an audience member, offering them food, introducing them to a room that smells of strawberries or is completely dark and silent. The experience of being immersed is accomplished through different means by different theatremakers, but on whole, these performance deliver experiences that affect audiences bodily. As Daniel Schulze cautions against creating a dived “between body and intellect” saturated with “value judgments,” it is important to remember that the mind is part of the body, and to engage the body is to engage the mind (Schulze 134). Despite the appearance of focusing exclusively on “bodily” (rather than “mental”) engagement, in writing about one, this thesis also discusses the other. Though immersive theatre plays with wider variety of senses (touch, taste, smell, balance) than other theatrical works (which primarily engage hearing and sight), it is important to note that immersive theatre is not novel in its seemingly more active audience-participants. In writing about the senses and the theatre, Stephen Di Benedetto notes that “being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation” (Di Benedetto, 73). Granted, despite the surface level assertion that audiences in a “traditional” theatre performance just sit there, all theatres are sites of sensory engagement. W.B. Worthen emphasizes that immersive theatre is not new in its attempt to engage audiences completely, explaining:

Theatre has always been ‘immersive’: it would be hard to say that the Athenian spectators, sitting among their tribe, watching its members compete for a prize in singing and dancing dithyrambs, or the courtiers in the highly-charged political and social atmosphere of a Stuart masque, or postwar European tourists crossing into East Berlin to see the Berliner Ensemble were not *immersed* in a complex social and theatrical event. (Worthen 302)

No audience, however static, is passive. Performance stimulates the senses, demands attention, and fosters engagement. Watching *Amadeus* at the National Theatre in 2018, I was struck by how totally the performance demanded my attention. The costumes, the music, and the bold writing all collaborated to completely enthrall me. I was anything but a passive spectator. Indeed, perhaps watching is our default state of being. Humans are a collection of sensory perceptions; as Di Benedetto would have it, spectatorship is our default. The argument is not that immersive theatre is somehow the first type of performance that has managed to engage an audience; rather, the question is how immersive theatre differs in doing so. So what then differentiates immersive theatre from a particularly compelling production of *Amadeus* on a proscenium stage? Immersive productions’ use of spaces and designs that draw the audience into the same world (both in terms of physical space and narrative) as performers, sets them apart from other theatrical forms.

Including spectators in the same general area as performers is not unique; site-specific works have long brought audiences out into places not built specifically for performance. In fact, immersive performance’s treatment of space “can be conceived of as a combination of site specific and promenade work, but superseding them both in its totality” (Schulze 129). Spectators are engaged not just mentally, or through sight and sound, but through a bodily, lived experience. They are pulled physically into the world of the story, existing in the same space as

the performers. From this emphasis on all encompassing environment, the term immersive seems appropriate for this type of work. The word immersion has deep connections to water, of being thrown into something unfamiliar and being completely engulfed. Rose Biggin emphasizes this connection, especially to the act of baptism. Like baptism, immersive theatre seems to have three steps: “(1) *you go in*; (2) *you come out*; (3) *changed*” (Biggin 28). Schulze expands on this importance, saying “[immersive theatre’s] central feature is—the clue is in the name—that audiences are completely surrounded: physically and sensorially involved in the event” (Schulze 129). It is important to note that immersive theatre is different than immersive experience. Immersive experience refers to the sensation of being lost in a work, of becoming completely engaged physically and mentally so that the world of the performance overlays the real. An immersive theatre may not succeed in generating a totally immersive experience, but is recognizable by its attempts to foster such experiences. This problem becomes an issue when define immersive theatres; Biggin notes that “the discussion of existing uses of *immersion* emphasizes the phenomenon as a psychological state” (Biggin 28). As psychological state is not a performance genre. While it is nearly impossible to gauge to what extent (and even whether) a spectator is mentally and emotionally immersed in a work, it is easier to observe the mechanics of performances that attempt to do so. Performances that use space and design to capture their audiences’ attention are more easily recognized as immersive than the specific moments of experienced immersion within those and other works. It is easier to name such tactics as immersive, but much trickier to determine whether or not a piece causes its audiences to feel immersed. As such, I will not attempt to suggest whether a performance “succeeds” in being immersive but rather the different approaches artists pursue towards achieving audience engagement.

In exploring ideas of space, body, and immersion, I will discuss several immersive works including: *Wondermart* and *Etiquette*, two of Silvia Mercuriali's audio immersive performances in which spectators follow instructions in order to performance the piece into being; *A Small Town Anywhere*, a performance by the group Coney which blends online interaction with physical presence; *Sleep No More*, Punchdrunk's enormous version of *Macbeth*, which combines dance with noir film; *Foot Washing for the Sole* and *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding*, two of Adrian Howells intimate, one-to-one piece that bring his body into close contact with the spectator's; and *The Great Gatsby* as described previously. I do not use any of these examples as the epitome of immersive performance; rather, I hope to give an idea of the myriad possibilities immersive performance can offer. Each of these works employs different tactics to engage its spectators, though they are all laden with sensory stimuli.

Immersive theatre's emphasis on bodily engagement is largely the product of contemporary culture. The first section will deal largely with the importance of lived experience in a digital age. Like all theatre, immersive works are deeply connected to the culture which creates them. In discussing how immersive theatre has evolved from and responds to networked culture, the way in which this performance style relates to audience bodies will be made more concrete. After setting up the stakes of immersive performance, I will explore the connection between agency, intimacy, proximity, and body. This section will examine the importance of audiences' bodies as part of an immersive performance, both as sites of intimate interaction and as agents within the work. The third section will consider how space and design are used to engage spectators' bodies through the multisensory experience. In repositioning the audience, immersive performances generate opportunities for a variety of sensory stimulus. Finally, I will

address some of the practicalities of audience engagement by writing about the artistic component of this thesis, a series of immersive performances created at Trinity University.

### INDIVIDUALIZED EXPERIENCE

Spectators are cajoled, prodded, and coaxed from the edges of the large room to its center, while a woman fiddles with a microphone. Behind her, a man settles behind a piano, ready to play. Performers take up stations around us, and someone announces our task: “We’re going to teach you the Charleston!” Tom, breaking from his tough persona, stands near me, demonstrating the steps slowly, then encouraging me as I tentatively pick out the footwork. The man at the piano begins to play jauntily as spectators around me settle into the rhythm with varying degrees of accuracy. “You’re getting it!” Tom affirms. I feel noticed, like I am a Charleston prodigy; really I’m struggling through the basics. Tom circulates through his section of the dance floor, pausing to answer questions or compliment participant’s effort. This part of the performance feels designed to facilitate interaction and create a memorable moment: a community of people in 2018 who likely have never even attempted a 1920s dance step brought together to learn something new. The energy in the room is electric. As we approximate an admittedly simplified version of the dance, performers around us show off fancier variations, complete with flips and spins. I feel like I have been transported from a world of isolated spectators, each experiencing their own version of the piece, to a collective bound in participation.

When describing the typical native of modern culture and their role in economic structures, Adam Alston explains: “the neoliberal consumer is increasingly offered personalized and experiential forms of consumption in an expanding ‘experience economy’” (Alston 16).

Immersive theatre provides audiences with the opportunity to engage with performance in an interactive and often individualized way as they explore theatrical spaces, participate in narratives, and immerse themselves in new worlds, ultimately buying in to the experience economy. Schulze notes that such audiences are “trained in the interactive experience from other media” but also “deprived of authentic experience” (Schulze 137); immersive theatre has the potential to engage audiences bodily, providing lived interaction. Perhaps the most “authentic” experiences are ones felt physically, that are heard, and smelt, and lived; perhaps it is easier to trust one’s own senses because they make up the basis of all understanding of the world. This desire for authenticity and connection situates immersive theatre as a direct response to modern society. To understand immersive theatre’s connections to networked culture and the digital age, it is helpful to consider a few examples of immersive performance rather than trying to tackle the whole of the diverse and widespread form. Though there are a plethora of works that would be highly relevant in linking immersive theatre and networked culture, three performances—*A Small Town Anywhere* by Coney, *Sleep No More* by Punchdrunk, and *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding* by Adrian Howells—offer widely varying perspectives from which to consider the issue. Each of these performances engages with networked culture in a distinct way, while still using space and body to perform immersivity into being.

Modern communication is often mediated by technology, removing bodies almost entirely from the act of communication as people send emails, texts, or tweets to each other. Performances in the age of networked culture often make use of technology in novel ways; though these performances may communicate with audiences online, the use of technology is often a gateway to physical engagement. By leveraging the Internet, the theatre group Coney is able to talk with its audiences before the physical performance ever begins. In fact, the artists

that make up Coney “believe the experience starts when you first hear about it and only ends when you stop thinking and talking about it” (Machon 23). This idea feels particularly connected to an increasingly digital world full of potential for both meaningful conversation and, perhaps more shallowly, peer-to-peer marketing; networked culture shapes itself around connections and intersections between events, creating a web of interrelated information. In networked culture, nothing exists on its own and there is constant overlap between ideas and occurrences. *A Small Town Anywhere* does not happen in a vacuum; its connection to Internet causes it to take on life beyond physical performance. Though this idea is in some ways an elegant one—perhaps a performance only ends when its audience members forget about it—it also feels heavily based in neoliberal ideas of marketing. Individuals exist to consume experiences, so the every moment of an experience must be tailored to suit the consumer. Furthering this emphasis on the individual, *A Small Town Anywhere* provides audiences with the chance to develop their own role in the performance before they arrive at the venue. After booking a ticket, audience members have the choice to engage with a tidy website that allows them to explore the town before they arrive in the performance space. If spectators so choose, they can provide the town’s historian, Henri, with answers to questions. In exchange for answers, Henri provides information about the town and asks further questions. (Hadley, n.p.) Through these interactions, Coney begins to develop the participants’ roles in the performance, building a backstory for each audience member who chooses to engage. By the time audiences arrive, the performance has long since begun. Importantly, the performance still has a lived, temporal component; this component separates *A Small Town Anywhere* from an online role-playing game or a social media site.

Coney’s digital communication with spectators is ultimately a prelude to the corporeal part of the performance. Once audiences arrive at *A Small Town Anywhere*, they are assigned

roles such as Postmaster or Bookie, and given a hat to signify their place in the town. The performance occurs in a room divided up into sections that represent different areas of a village. As the audience perform their roles as citizens, they write each other letters, join rival political factions, and ultimately choose one person to evict from the town. (Hadley, n.p.). In addition to telling a moving narrative about politics and belonging, embodied and enacted by the audience and their choices, the piece is laden with a longing for personal connection. The original performance ran in London, a city of around eight million inhabitants; the small town formed by the audience consisted of a much smaller thirty (Hadley, n.p.). Networked culture makes connection possible on a macro-scale—the world is rendered much smaller by the Internet. *A Small Town Anywhere* fosters connections on a micro-scale, people interacting face-to-face or through “old-fashioned” letters to develop a tiny community in just two hours; people coexist in the performance space, watch each other, converse, physically read and write letters. Tassos Stevens, co-founder and Co-Director of Coney, explains that in this short time “strangers made these intense, playful relationships” (Machon 201). Unifying strangers into a small, thirty person community is no easy task; through performance, Coney is able to express themes of connectedness and politics that echo the broader phenomena of networked culture.

On one hand, *A Small Town Anywhere* is only possible through networked society and electronic mediation. In an interview, Stevens discusses how technology influences their work, explaining “[t]he most important technologies are ones that enable us to be in touch with our audience in some way. The prevalence now of mobile phones or email makes it possible to be responsive in the type of play that’s happening” (Machon 203). Clearly, *A Small Town Anywhere* makes use of technology to draw its audiences into the world of the town through its website and emails, giving spectators agency in the performance by setting up their role in the physical part

of the work. This agency mirrors that which is afforded to people online; just as a spectator can decide who they will play in *A Small Town Anywhere*, many people curate their online personas. Despite this dependence on technology, there is something resistant to networked culture in *A Small Town Anywhere*. The small community formed by audience members is not mediated by technology; it occurs spontaneously in the inherent liveness of the work. Machon explores this tension between the mediated and the live, asserting that “in immersive practice any use of technology seeks to foreground the sensuous nature of the human body” (Machon 35-36). An entirely online version of *A Small Town Anywhere*, though certainly possible, would be a different performance, perhaps not a physically immersive one but something like an immersive work. Without the bodily interaction between spectators, the piece would lack part of its immediacy and vitality. Seeing the other citizens of the town, hearing their voices, and watching them as they move through the performance emphasizes the spectators’ physical relationships and fosters personal connections different than the ones they might develop online. Though digital communities often form very successfully, there is something more personal about interacting physically. Perhaps this is why users of social media, fans of a certain podcast or website, and devoted online gamers arrange to meet up in person for conventions or get-togethers.

Large-scale immersive works, like the oft-cited performances by Punchdrunk, engage with audiences, and indeed, networked culture, in a different way than Coney’s blend of technological and corporeal performance. Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, a retelling of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, opened in London in 2003, was reworked in 2009 (in Massachusetts) and moved to New York in 2011. In its current home in New York, a 100,000 square foot space renamed the McKittrick Hotel, spectators experience a version of *Macbeth* set in the 1930s

(Soloksi, n.p.). Spectators wander through the performance, choosing to follow the main narrative or set out on their own to explore rooms and discover intimate, one-to-one encounters. In a review for the Washington Post, Sarah Kaufman writes about the performance's connection to networked culture, explaining:

It's a fully functional feedback loop, customized by you, perfect for Twitter-age attention spans. But this isn't faddish hipster ephemera. Far from it. Chances are, you'll walk away from "Sleep No More" obsessing over its myriad details, chewing over your peculiarly intoxicating trip in a way no traditional theatergoing can match (Kaufman).

These details are often more sensorial than narrative; the performance is largely dance and the elaborate storyline is impossible to see all at once as audience members can only be in one place at a time. The world of the play becomes responsible for delivering narrative. Each spectator is given the opportunity to move freely through the performance and follow whatever interests them; this potential for exploration means that each member of the audience has the potential to witness *Sleep No More* in a radically different way from other spectators. Punchdrunk's obsession with individualized experience gives the impression that *Sleep No More* is a game of sorts, filled with choices fraught with possibility and real stakes—choosing to follow one narrative means losing out on a dozen potential stories.

Though Alston notes that these stakes generate what he terms "entrepreneurial participation" (in which audience members are incentivized to take the lead in creating a performance), he also observes that "the likelihood of encountering risk is something that may well decrease over the course of a live event, or with repeat attendance" (Alston 138). Once spectators begin to understand the rules of the game and familiarize themselves the space, there is less chance that they will miss something significant. To counteract this, Punchdrunk actively

creates moments that are meant to be hidden; Felix Barrett (Artistic Director of Punchdrunk) describes this practice with an example from *Sleep No More*: “a room that’s been locked and only opens when 95 percent of the audience are on the opposite side of the building” (Machon 162). Moments like these must fascinate audience members in a culture where nearly any information is available online within seconds. Sometimes it seems that there are no secrets in networked culture; the mystery created by *Sleep No More* can be read as a reaction to a society in which nearly everything is public. Even Punchdrunk, however, is not immune to this phenomena. In fact, a committed group of fans write online blogs about *Sleep No More*, tracking the various encounters, hidden surprises, and potential pathways a spectator can follow in the piece. These unofficial blogs connect the performance to the digital world in a manner similar to Coney’s website for *A Small Town Anywhere*. The performance no longer begins when the audience arrives at the venue; the show’s digital presence (though not part of Punchdrunk’s plan for the work) means that the performance begins long before the start time printed on the ticket. Not only do these blogs augment the actual experience of the performance, they foster a community amongst the audience. One blog, *They Have Scorched the Snake...but not killed it, bitches*, offers advice about exploring *Sleep No More*; the blogger, Evan Cobb, has facilitated a community focused on how to best experience the performance (Alston 126). This community feeds networked culture by moving the hidden parts of *Sleep No More*, initially meant for a lucky few, into the public eye.

While Punchdrunk’s audience is free to roam, they are set apart from the performers with plain white masks. This anonymity mirrors that afforded by the Internet, an anonymity both freeing and dangerous. At its worst, this anonymity sparks serious problems; *Sleep No More* has dealt with several allegations of spectators assaulting performers. In a review for *The Guardian*,

Alexis Soloski wonders if perhaps the anonymity is part of the issue and if the masks that free audiences to explore also liberate them in more troubling ways (Soloski, n.p.). Networked culture, particularly social media, seems to insist that people live their lives as publicly as possible; Punchdrunk demonstrates that while people are drawn by the thousands to a performance where they can explore behind a mask, this choice comes with consequences. Aside from the potentially harmful effects of facelessness, these masks are not just tools to make audience feel safer; in 2012, Punchdrunk collaborated with the MIT Media Lab, which used the masks to connect physically present spectators with remote participants via speakers and Bluetooth. Certain objects within the performance, including a mirror and a typewriter, allowed the virtual spectators to write directly to their counterparts (Biggin 161). This collaboration between the digital and the physical transforms the masks from vehicles of isolation to connectedness; plain, white masks which once kept audience members separate from the performers and each other now unify people potentially hundreds of miles apart. Not only is such a concept made possible by the technology of networked culture, it is a product of the culture's core ideas: that the world is made smaller by technology so that no event occurs on its own. The tension between the body and the disembodied inherent in modern culture is made evident in the collaboration between present and absent spectator.

Despite (and possibly because of) its popularity, Punchdrunk has endured its fair share of criticism, particularly after producing a couple of immersive works at the behest of large corporations and transferring *Sleep No More* to New York (Biggin 7). Though these projects generate revenue that, as Alston notes, "support projects that might not otherwise benefit from more lucrative commercial appeal," critics have expressed concern about these profitable ventures (Alston 128). The perceived tension between theatre-making and economics in part

comes from a desire to experience something “real.” There lurks an unspoken promise in immersive theatre that though spectators will engage in fiction, the emotions they feel will be genuine and the events they experience will occur in real time and space; bringing money into the picture can make everyone a little uncomfortable. Perhaps immersive theatre, in its intense physical connection with spectators, somehow feels more authentic and therefore more difficult to commodify. Theatre-makers have expressed this discomfort alongside their critics; even Punchdrunk’s Felix Barrett insists that the group “would never do anything just for commercial gain. It would be boring” (Soloski, n.p.). This insistence that immersive theatre is somehow above capitalist structures seems to imply that people attend immersive theatre for something that they feel is beyond money, an experience that is somehow too pure to attach a dollar value.

Intimate one-to-one immersive performances push back against networked culture in their focus on the live relationship between individuals. Adrian Howells in particular reacts to technology and spectacle in the simplicity and honesty of his works. His one-to-one performances “engage on a deeply personal level with each individual audience-participant with whom he works, establishing highly ritualised, unquestionably safe spaces for authentic and profound encounters” (Machon 17). *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding* by Adrian Howells is a prime example of his emphasis on interactions between individuals, a product of and a reaction to networked culture. This performance invites one audience-participant at a time to remove their clothes before being ritually bathed, fed, and cradled by the artist for twenty minutes (Machon 18-19). Just as networked culture emphasizes the importance of connection between individuals, so does Howells’ work; where networked culture offers curated and remote connections, Howells performs a type of interaction that can only be experienced physically. Machon, who had the chance to participate in *The Pleasure of Being*,

describes this connection, explaining “the ‘narrative’ and themes were produced in the moment, created by Howells and myself in a delicate exchange” (Frieze 40). Interaction is prioritized in a way made possible only by networked culture; users of the internet are perhaps more used to interacting with strangers than any other generation. At the same time, the potential for curation and artifice created by social media means that Internet users distance themselves from each other by crafting highly curated online personas. In this digital age, humanity is no less dependent on human interaction and connection; social networks have simply expanded as they develop online.

Adrian Howells is not subtle in connecting his emphasis on the body to the digital age. When asked by a journalist if his works were “about the fact that we live in an age of instant gratification where pleasure comes from spending money on iPads or whatever,” Adrian Howells responded, “that’s exactly what it’s about” (Machon 266). Though his one-to-ones are often short (no more than twenty minutes in the case of *The Pleasure of Being*), Howells foregrounds the importance of liveness in intimacy; Howells’ performances break down physical barriers, removing as much mediation as possible so that liveness is essential to the work. In some ways, Howells’ pieces (and indeed, other immersive works) react strongly to the sense of alienation and removal cultivated by networked culture. His performances require the audience-participant to be present in a way that is vulnerable and rare. Machon writes that Howells’ “unique interaction denies any opportunity for a spectatorial relationship” (Frieze 41). This work demands physical, unmediated presence; there are no theatrical, digital, or technological barriers between Howells and audience-participant. Despite this apparent emphasis on the individual, Howells is quick to assert that his works ultimately are about community. In an interview with Josephine Machon, he explains:

I have started to get a bit concerned by how my one-to-ones might be in some way encouraging individualism. I've always argued, if I ever come up against that criticism, that what I offer in one-to-ones is an opportunity for people to take time to invest in themselves; to have qualitative time and recharge, to then go back into society and to be an effective member of their community. (Machon 261)

Though the age of the Internet emphasizes the experiences of individuals—think of the hours people spend curating their social media pages, unliking or blocking people they disagree with, or scrolling past things they find uninteresting—Howells' pieces attempt to strike at the potential for a community made up of individual bodies. His work feels both like a result of and a response to networked culture, an attempt to deepen the potential for connections amongst networked individuals, albeit in a vividly live medium (rather than mediated through technology).

Just as it unifies the globe, the Internet creates distance in its emphasis on the digital rather than the physical. The loss of presence in communication seems to create a sort of void that Howells attempts to fill in his work with intimacy. He explains, “[w]e are living in very brutalised and unloving times and we need to learn to ‘tenderise’ ourselves through intimacy. Our society is not very good at being intimate, at touching and really engaging in that qualitative, loving-kindness kind of touch” (Machon 263). Howells attempts to confront an intangible digital society with touch and to bring an increasingly anonymized community into contact with intimacy in ways that networked culture cannot. Though Howells' work is thought-provoking and compelling, like many works of theatre it lacks danger in a way that perhaps renders its particular brand of intimacy sterile. In describing another of Howells' performances, *Footwashing for the Sole*, Fintan Walsh describes the cracks in the piece's intimacy: “the

performance took place within a carefully choreographed structure of actions that both enabled intimate contact and kept at bay the more obvious risks, such as either of us feeling exposed against our will, vulnerable, or even violated” (Walsh 59). There is a certain safety to any performance, a promise that both audience and performer will come out unscathed, that seems to feed into the neoliberal values of networked culture. Though the audience-participant must perform alongside Howells to achieve the desired result of intimacy, the piece places Howells in a service position and the audience-spectator in the position of consumer (Alston 208). Though these pieces appear to be a willing collaboration between spectator and actor, they are also an exchange, part of the experience economy just as many other immersive works are. Walsh is quick to point out that there is a feeling of responsibility as an audience-participant in one of Howell’s works, a sense that because the piece has been described as transformative and sacred, the spectator must live up to that role (Walsh 59). When considering the beauty and intimacy of Howells’ work, it is important to not take for granted the role that expectations play in a spectator’s experience of a performance. Just as in the website prelude to *A Small Town Anywhere* and the fan blogs discussing *Sleep No More*, *The Pleasure of Being* does not exist in a vacuum.

In a culture that offers experience that is frequently mediated and commodified, such experiences might feel hollow, unmotivated by anything deeper than a desire for more experience. Immersive theatre is often subject to such critiques: “[t]he most obvious criticism is surely that immersive theatre is nothing but a cheap thrill that lacks artistic quality” (Schulze 155). Perhaps some immersive theatre does rely on “cheap thrills,” offering up performance as yet another commodity for consumers to enjoy, share on social media, and then forget, like (perhaps pessimistically) a form of theatrical tourism. Despite this, immersive theatre is fraught

with artistic potential in the variety of human connections it fosters. By placing spectators inside the action, immersive theatre offers new ways to interact with performers and other spectators. Beyond the experience of immersive theatre lies its potential for both real and constructed intimacy, something that perhaps exists both within and without systems of commodification.

### INTIMACY AND AGENCY

“Would you go upstairs and comfort Gatsby?” a performer asks, almost whispering, “I don’t think he should be alone right now. I know you two are his friends. He’d appreciate it.” My friend Jillian and I stand timidly, and ascend the narrow stairs to Gatsby’s room. When we arrive, Gatsby is seated on his bed, head in hands. His room is small, but lavishly decorated. Jillian later told me that this was the room where she and a couple of others witnessed Gatsby and Daisy reunite to revel in piles and piles of shirts. There are no longer any echoes of joy in this room. Gatsby looks up at us, quietly offering a couple of seats near the foot of his bed. I am startled to notice the tears in his eyes. He is incredibly tall, handsome in a clean-cut sort of way, and utterly devastated. The effect is shocking. In a quiet voice entirely unlike the jolly tone he’s taken every other time we’ve heard him speak, he tells us in fragments what happened. He’s worried about Daisy, that the fragile relationship they’ve rekindled will sputter out. As he speaks, he leans in close to us, as if in this moment, we are his dearest friends, the only people who could ever understand the pain that he is suffering.

I am entirely intoxicated by the proximity, swept away by a familiar narrative that—when purchasing a ticket—I had worried would bore me. Tears sparkle in his eyes as he describes a longing for simpler days, when he was a child and would swim. I watch the idea form slowly: he will go to the pool, just for a little while, to have some time to think. He hesitates to

get up. Timidly, he reveals he's afraid that he will miss a call from Daisy while he's swimming. "Would you wait by the telephone? It's just right through there. Let me know if Daisy calls. Please," he entreats us. Jillian and I obediently pass through the curtain wall to find an end table with a telephone waiting on a balcony overlooking the central dance floor. From our perch, we stare down at party-goers in the throes of gossip, dancing, and laughter. The party, once exciting and decadent, now appears hollow and sad, reframed by my experience of Gatsby's grief and fear. Though there are stairs leading down to the dancefloor, the two of us hang back and keep our promise, staying near the small table and perhaps missing some of the action below. Though we wait willingly by the phone, even until the very end of the performance, Daisy never calls.

In this gripping scene, Gatsby offered me two things: a feeling of intimacy as he revealed perhaps his deepest fears and a sense of agency when he asked me to watch the phone. In a culture where experience is often mediated by technology, genuine feelings of closeness (both in proximity and emotion) can feel far removed from daily life. As technology brings us together, it also pushes us apart, creating highly curated online selves. Schulze recognizes that a "perceived lack of honesty, intimacy or integrity in people's lives is not only felt on the side of the spectators. Practitioners also seem to struggle with the same issues. One-on-one performance may be an expression of a shared need for intimacy" (Schulze 105). This statement can be expanded to much of immersive theatre, which, even at its largest, often relies on one-to-one contact between performers and individuals. These theatres are marked by a strong desire for intimacy, sometimes constructed, sometimes honest, and sometimes accidental. Immersive theatres bring audiences into close contact with performance and in that proximity, a new type of relationship between actor and audience is born. In large scale, open world (to borrow a term from video games) works, spectators shape the performance with their chosen trajectories; in

doing so, they translate the space into their body, a kind of intimacy usually left untouched in theatrical performance. There is something thrilling about moving through a performance, viewing a piece from all available angles or else choosing not to view at all. Watching Gatsby weep quietly while sitting next to him is entirely different than witnessing his emotion from twenty, fifty, or even a hundred feet away. In smaller one-to-one immersive performances, the intimacy is born of the incredibly intense contact between spectator and actor. When you are the sole audience member, there is a sense that you are especially close to the action. A unifying factor across many immersive performances is bringing audiences closer to performers; as separation between actors and spectators is lessened, the divide collapses and a type of intimacy is born. Up close, actors lose part of the mysterious power that distance affords (this is not to say that actors in immersive pieces have equal power to their spectators. There is of course a power exchange—present in all theatre—between the watcher and the watched, the ignorant and the knowledgeable). Bringing the spectator and performer into more equal footing generates a sense of closeness available only when the two brought into the performance space together.

Though parts of *The Great Gatsby* separated the spectator and actor firmly (in more than one scene, performers shepherded the audience into surrounding a playing space similar to theatre in the round and enforced a hard border that the audience could not cross), other scenes dissolved barriers completely, casting the spectator as a character in the show: a close friend of Gatsby, a 1920's partygoer, a visitor to mechanic's ash-gray shop. Immersive theatres work to transform the audience from seemingly passive spectator to active participant, often using different tactics and to varying degrees; immersive theatre makers have engaged audiences in everything from free-roaming exploration (Punchdrunk) to intense physical contact (Adrian Howells) to performing the piece themselves (Silvia Mercurari and Coney). In my exchange with

Gatsby, the separation between the character of Gatsby and the spectator, began to break down. Though I had been close to Gatsby throughout the performance, there had always been a barrier between us: he spoke to other characters in the show or to the audience as a collective (like a Gatsby in a staging on a proscenium stage might have). In my moment in Gatsby's bedroom, this barrier broke down and he spoke directly to me (or rather, the version of me that existed as a character in the play, that version who was Gatsby's friend rather than a paying spectator). My encounter with Gatsby felt intimate, unique even, and I felt like something more than a spectator—I felt seen. Whenever I recounted the performance to friends, my moment with Gatsby was always the first image that I would evoke.

Despite the strength of this memory, the feelings of intimacy evoked by the scene were far from perfect. Even as I felt Gatsby's pain, made even sharper by physical proximity to his grief, I noticed a sense of skepticism brewing within myself. An annoyance with his forced American accent, a knowledge that though I'd been told frequently that I was his close friend, we had never met before, and a vague awareness of the small flaws in the room's design all kept me from feeling the same familiarity and intimacy that I might feel when talking to a friend. Part of me wanted to cry with him and part of me wanted to laugh at the absurdity of a grown man performing a scene familiar to every high school student just for me. Did my physical closeness expose these flaws as much as it created a sense of intimacy? Would these imperfections disappear with distance? Regardless, immersive theatre's promise of intimacy exists within the framework of theatrical performance; indeed, the intimacy that immersive theatre offers is highly constructed. Worthen describes this dilemma, saying:

The physical environment of immersive theatre recalls that of the naturalist

stage, a foreground on intense intricate and detailed activity, in which spectators figure as present but virtualized subjects, and also as objects, furniture of the production, whose freedom is controlled by an offstage, backstage apparatus that joins the social and economic to the technological and presentational in ways that offer the illusion of knowledge (fourth-wall realism) or of individually experienced immersion while simultaneously withdrawing access to the structuring mechanism, the hardware and software running the machine (Worthen 308).

Being closer to Gatsby, being present in his room and aware of the fact that I was in a converted warehouse (as well as how I had been guided from scene to scene within the drama) marred the feelings of closeness and honesty the scene was trying to convey. The attempt to construct intimacy only made me more aware of the mechanisms working to do so.

Immersive theatre's proximity is not a panacea. Placing audience closer to actors (even in traditional theatre) does not guarantee engagement or successful immersion. Arnold Aronson notes that "the destruction of frames, the collapsing of distance, does not always succeed in absorbing the spectator. It is possible to remain uninvolved in the midst of a total environment, just as it is possible to be totally absorbed from a significant physical distance" (Aronson 212). If intimacy is merely a product of proximity, buses and trains would be perfect sites for immersive theatre. Wagner's attempts to make more engaging (and perhaps even immersive) performances "placed the action even further away from the audience, who were deliberately separated from singers by what he called 'the mystic gulf'" (Kennedy 243). Immersive theatre's promise of intimacy partially relies on repositioning spectators, moving them out of theatre seats and into the playing space, but this is only one of many tactics immersive scenography uses. The repositioning alone is not enough to create a feeling of closeness; sensory stimuli, deliberate

contact with spectators, and an inclusion of the audience in the narrative are other strategies such performances employ.

So if the intimacy seemingly offered by immersive performance is flawed, what then of the agency Gatsby offered me? In asking me to wait by the phone, Gatsby gave me an apparently important part of the show. Should the phone ring, I would go fetch Gatsby (or not), and in doing so potentially alter the course of the night. Immersive theatre appears to afford its spectators the chance to actively collaborate in creating performance. For example, in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, masked spectators are free to wander a series of enormous warehouses. Each of these spectators carve their own experience out of the wide-array of possible combinations of performances they witness. One audience member might spend the entire three hour performance in one room while another might try to see everything at once. No two audience members will ever have the same experience at *Sleep No More* whereas two audience members at the National Theatre's *Macbeth* will arguably have the same (general) experience of the show. This phenomena is evident in a variety of immersive works, even the smallest. In Adrian Howells' *Foot Washing for the Sole*, the audience is limited to one, creating an extraordinarily individualized experience. Howells must be minutely aware of his spectator's reactions while also staying true to the overall shape of the performance. In a world that is increasingly networked just as it is being individualized, immersive theatres parallel their society by building communities (like those seen in the works of Coney and Punchdrunk) and individualizing experience (like Adrian Howells' one to one pieces, or Silvia Mercuriali's work with audio technology).

This agency, though present, is often less than it appears to be. Despite my excitement to aid Gatsby, the phone never rang and I remained a passive spectator. While immersive theatre is

notable for its repositioning of its audience, the agency this reorientation creates is often illusory. Like Netflix's *Bandersnatch* (a groundbreaking choose-your-own adventure film) there is only an illusion of freewill. Though it seems as though the audience has the power to completely control the narrative, this is rarely the case in immersive theatre. More often than not, spectators follow a series of guidelines that covertly shape their experience of the piece. Certainly, in some works the audience can decide how their path through the performance will go, but are limited in how far they can range by stage managers, closed doors, or other spectators. Of course, in certain pieces, the audience does determine the ending, but from a preset series of options—very rarely does an immersive piece end in a completely unexpected way (though this is by no means impossible). Jason Warren writes about this issue in *Creating Worlds: How to Make Immersive Theatre*. In his production of *Caligula*, audience members had the choice to participate in a plot to kill the emperor. During one performance, a spectator chose to tell the emperor of the assassination plans. Though if this act had happened in real life, Caligula would have escaped death and squashed the rebellion, the performance *Caligula* ended more or less the same as it would have had the emperor not been aware of his impending death. The actors quickly worked around the problem to gently guide the performance back to its intended course.

Even in a seemingly open world performance like *Sleep No More* “the audience’s activity is highly unstructured, however much latitude is given to move through the space... the spectator is part of the machine” (Worthen 305). There are doors that cannot be opened, rules that cannot be violated. Despite the audience’s presence, the story will stay the same. Even *Westworld*, Michael Crichton’s (and more recently, Lisa Joy’s and Christopher Nolan’s) immersive theme park, perhaps one of the closest (if fictional) examples to what immersive theatre might be in the distant future, has rules. There are controls on where audience-visitors can go and what they can

do. Additionally, visitors to Westworld (as the Man in Black can attest) are entirely protected, meaning that stakes of an action are lower than they would be in, say, the real frontier. If this (near) perfectly designed world, curated for the sole purpose of entertainment, cannot promise real agency for its spectators, how can an immersive performance with live actors to pay, a narrative to tell, and safety to ensure promise anything like unfettered agency?

So if immersive theatre cannot completely offer its audiences the agency it promises, what can it offer? Though audiences rarely have power to shape an immersive work's overarching narrative, they may be privy to interactions that shape small moments in the show and they can choose their paths through the work, just as a seated spectator can choose where to look onstage—certainly a form of control in its own right. Perhaps the grand agency immersive theatre promises appears in a slightly more sinister form—spectators can choose to break the rules or refuse to participate at all. In Silvia Mercuriali's *Wondermart*, a spectator is guided through a supermarket by a pair of headphones. As they follow instructions and perform the piece themselves, it seems like the spectator's agency is limited. The spectator is set on a very particular path, much like an actor with a script. However, the audience-participant in this instance has perhaps the most important agency of all: they can simply choose not to engage. Without the spectator following the audio and embodying the piece, that performance of *Wondermart* is entirely changed. When spectators are essential parts of a performance, their choice to not perform can destroy the show. There is no *Wondermart* without an audience participant to embody it.

Spectators have special agency in immersive theatre. Though they may not always have the ability to shape the narrative of the piece by playing along, spectators have the chance to “ruin” the work. While discussing an immersive piece performed by high school students at

Albany Park, Scott Neale (a designer for the work) brought up a trial run where community members were invited to help the students rehearse. After the director and several collaborators informed the audience of what would be happening—essentially, this would be a test of the piece—the performance began. Unfortunately, one of the spectators took the word “test” a little too far, tormenting actors and trying to get the performers to break character (Neale, n.p.). Theoretically, audience members should not have been able to influence the piece’s ending. Though in this instance, the actors stayed true to the performance, such actions could have lasting consequences on the end of a piece. Think about the myriad of sexual misconduct allegations surrounding *Sleep No More*, horror stories of audience/actor interactions gone horribly awry. The stakes for the audience are low: the price of their ticket, entertainment. On the other side of these theatrical events, actors’ well-being and the performance as a whole are stake.

So then agency, illusory or not, is an essential part of an immersive performance. Though immersive works are often deliberately designed so that audiences have little power to ultimately change the narrative, interaction and participation are significant characteristics of the genre. This emphasis on interactivity is part of what fosters immersive theatre’s intimate relationship with spectators. In being physically engaged and near to the performers, audience’s connection to the performance shifts. As part of her *Memos from A Theatre Lab* series, Nandita Dinesh conducted an experiment where she staged two versions of the same play: one immersive and one on a proscenium stage. The narrative of the work was more or less the same, telling the story of an asylum seeker’s struggle to get into the United States. The results of her study indicated that audience members tended to remember the emotional impact of the immersive piece while spectators of the “traditional” production remembered more about the topic as a whole. While discussing the play, the proscenium play’s spectators focused more on the veracity of the story

being told by the asylum seeker while the immersive audience tended to talk about how their experience of the performance compared to other spectators. (Dinesh XX) This difference in memory and perception of narrative highlights a way that immersive theatre affects its audience. By bringing the audience closer to the action and having them live the piece in a more active way (at least physically), the type of experience they remembered was more focused on themselves. Suddenly they became part of the drama, rather than outsiders. As their role changed, so did their perspective. The way that immersive theatre engages its audience is focused on the individual: their sensation, their choices, and their bodies in space.

Physical proximity is an important marker of intimacy; eye contact feels more intimate than looking away, and touch feels even more intimate than meeting someone's eye. Being close to a performance transforms the audience's relationship to the work. Machon includes this idea as a criterion of immersive theatre: "the direct, actual, physical insertion of an individual audience member into the world of the event, into the performance itself, is paramount and absolute" (Machon 98). Immersive theatre demands bodily engagement and the curation or creation (sometimes both) of spaces that facilitate such absorption. These spaces, whether found or created, must do more than just facilitate interactions between performer and spectator, they must serve as an important part of the narrative itself.

### BODILY ENGAGEMENT

After an evening of raucous partying, I am sitting in a decadent room with a low ceiling, crowded with old couches, chairs, and rugs. It feels nice to sit down after dancing the Charleston (or at least attempting it), wandering through narrow corridors surrounded by strangers, and indulging in a party game or two. Though the room is full of furniture and people, its walls are

thin fabric, and I can faintly hear snatches of swing music and laughter leaking through. I had just been out there, surrounded by the music and the chatter, until Gatsby wandered by and softly said, “if you can hear my voice, follow me.” Willingly, I set out after him, eventually being led into this crowded space. People, spectators and performers alike, lounge about in the variety of seating options. I’m offered a small glass of gin, which I accept curiously; I sip at it slowly as I settle into the room. The atmosphere is jovial, if somewhat secretive and the soft red walls absorb the dim light, leaving some of the room’s corners in shadow. There is a faint smell in the air, almost unrecognizable, a mix of alcohol and perfume. For the first time, I feel like I’m actually in a Gatsby party; for all of the noticeable flaws in the room’s design (what millionaire can’t afford hard walls or chairs that match?), the gin in my hand, the feeling of being pressed together in a small room, and the low hum of whispered conversation entice me into the story about to unfold.

As mentioned previously, immersive theatre repositions its audience, taking spectators from a position outside of the performance and bringing them into the playing space. As an immersive performance “moves the audience *into* the scenery, *into* the visual and ideological design, far from repudiating the relations of realism, it stages a continuity within them” (Worthen 305). One of the key factors of immersion is the bodily engagement the performance facilitates. It is difficult to ascertain whether a spectator is mentally or emotionally immersed in a work (is it even possible to forget where one is completely and suspend disbelief in order to become so totally immersed?); it is much more practical to consider the embodied relationship between spectator and performer. As such, space and design become important in considering immersive work; in writing about site specific theatre (similar enough to immersive theatre that his theory applies) Mike Pearson proposes that it is essential “to regard the scenography of site-specific

performance as landscape rather than architecture, as worked ground, as co-emergent with performance” (Pearson 298). While it is tempting to use this proposition to further that the idea that immersive theatre completely breaks down all barriers between performer and spectator, this is not the case. Jen Harvie notes that “fourth wall is not so much removed (as on a proscenium arch stage) as moved, such that the other ‘three’ walls of the theatrical fictional space encompass the audience along with the theatre performers” (qtd. in Worthen 305). This is significant because it means that immersive theatre does not entirely dissolve theatrical barriers; characters are still characters, the audience is still separate from the performer, if only in the knowledge that one has paid and one is being paid. While it is tempting to attribute a complete removal of boundaries to immersive theatre, it is still ultimately a performance.

Immersive theatre relies on multisensory engagement to differentiate itself from other, perhaps more visual and auditory styles of theatrical performance. Biggin describes this difference, and its relevance in immersive spaces: “if immersive experience is a state of intense psychological engagement, immersive theatre is also, generally, concerned with the creation of a (usually large-scale) space that a spectator enters, one that is often scenographically rich and multisensory” (Biggin 32) Where a performance in which the audience sits and watches the action onstage might only engage two of our many senses—sight and hearing—immersive theatre brings others into the mix: smell, taste, touch, proprioception, balance. This fascination with sensorial experience has connections to the work of Antonin Artaud and his focus on the body and the senses. Machon writes that “[a]wakening and engaging the fullness and diversity of sensor awareness is a central feature of immersive practice. This may include the Artuadian idea of the sense being assaulted, invigorated,” directly highlighting Artaud’s influence on immersive work (Machon 75). A discussion of immersive scenography must include an understanding that

immersive theatre often demands bodily engagement from its spectators; in writing about interactive art and atmosphere, Chris Salter strikes about the evolution of scenography in interactive (and immersive) work, explaining:

Scenography thus becomes about temporal, spatial, architectural, corporal diffusion; something that is both everywhere (delocalized) and, at the same time, operation on the skin, the eyes, the ears, the tongue, the nose, and sensing bodies in general, at all different spatio-temporal scales” (Salter 174).

This engagement with the body brings the performance and spectator together in new ways. As a result of this heightened relationship with audience, immersive performances rely on design and space differently than other types of theatrical events.

Theatrical spaces serve to frame performances, to provide a physical place for live art to occur. As such, the way that a space is configured is essential to an audience’s understanding of performance. From the first moments an audience enters a space, some sort of meaning is conveyed to them. A huge stadium theatre feels different than a black box theatre which in turn feels different than an abandoned warehouse. Though the root of the word theatre literally means “viewing place, the space and what it contains is not necessarily limited to a singular sense (vision) perceiving a singular action” (Weinstein, 21). Though Beth Weinstein is writing specifically about theatrical architecture (and immersive theatre is often performed outside of spaces built for theatrical purposes), the idea that theatre is not exclusively a visual art is essential; our perception of space is more than just what we see. Everything in a space conveys meaning and even “[t]he type and style of the seats the audience sit in can also signify” (Di Benedetto 74). When audiences are moved into the performance space, the potential for meaning-making grows greater. Mike Pearson, in writing about his own work with site-specific

theatre, often explores the meanings latent in any space. He considers a site (whether found or built to be performed in) as a host while the performance, occupying the space for a limited time, as a ghost. This host/ghost relationship is important in immersive theatre, where space holds increased significance. Pearson notes that host/ghost may not always align, explaining “[s]ignificantly, host and ghost may have quite different origins or natures. Their relationship may be frictional or anachronistic.” (Pearson 295). Despite these apparent differences, Pearson asserts that “both are always apparent and cognitively active for an audience” (ibid). Even in spaces built to be “neutral sites,” the host must be considered alongside the ghost, as both factor into an audience’s experience of a work.

It is challenging to capture the breadth of uses for space in immersive performance because the genre is so broad. Fascinatingly, theatres deemed immersive have existed in purpose built theatres alongside both completely altered and unaltered found spaces (as well as combinations of the two). Though immersive theatre is often spoken of in the same sentence as site-specific or site sympathetic theatres, immersivity is not necessarily a product of site-specific work. Paradoxically, immersive theatre is often associated with performances that completely redesign their host site; groups such as Punchdrunk and Third Rail are famous for their intricate world-building. In works that attempt to build a complete, closed system of narrative for audiences to explore (*Sleep No More*, *The Great Gatsby*, and similar works), a skillful design engages the spectators fully. Some immersive designs accomplish this with highly curated spaces which are often completely transformed into new worlds. In a conversation about Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* (set in three warehouses repurposed into the fictional McKittrick Hotel), Scott Neale described his experience with the first room he entered, explaining the intricate detail present in the room. After opening a filing cabinet, Neale found himself examining hundreds of

medical records, each exhaustive, even including locks of “patients’” hair (Neale, n.p.). This attention to detail is part of what makes immersive design (particularly open world ones) captivating. Props, furniture, and rooms become characters in the performance. Though as Joslin McKinney notes “scenographic materials always have the capacity to act on us directly and bodily as well as to signify social and cultural meaning,” these materials have a unique power when brought in such close proximity to audiences (McKinney 113). Looking at a chair is different than being able touch or sit in that chair. Experiencing scenography bodily, rather than just visually, gives it heightened meaning. At some moments, spectators might find themselves alone in a space; in these instances, the scenography of the room must tell the narrative of the story just as an actor would. Worthen describes this highly detailed space’s “vividly *designed* environment, one that recalls and perhaps reanimates the only apparently discarded aesthetic relations of the late-nineteenth century naturalism,” further connecting immersive theatre to the naturalist tradition (Worthen 305). Naturalist and immersive theatres share an obsession with detail and space; both attempt to capture audiences’ attention through engagement with believable, intricate scenery (though immersive space need not be realistic, it must be plausible within the world of the work).

At the other end of the design spectrum, site-specific immersive performances rely on little or no alteration of their host space to convey a story. Though Worthen claims that “[u]nlike site-specific performance, immersive theatre generally ignores the historical, cultural, and social significance of the location, redesigning it as a fully technologized venue in which all aspects of the production can be aesthetically governed,” immersive performances do not exclusively rely on environments and locations completely transformed by design (Worthen 303). Immersive theatre can occur in found spaces, or spaces simultaneously occupied by people and events

outside of the performance. These performances also treat their physical location and props as characters in the narrative, but in a different ways. Performances like *Wondermart* and *Etiquette* immerse the audience in the real world, with a new narrative laid over the pre-existing ones (those present in all lived spaces). Each of these works blurs the distinctions between the real and the performed; spectators exist in a liminal space between the imagined and the concrete. Often, the performance is laden with ambiguity: is that a performer or a unknowing passerby? Are those items placed there for the viewer or for an innocent third party? Additionally, these pieces often require the audience to perform themselves, whether this is simply the act of walking a set route, following audio instructions, or engaging (knowingly or not) with other participants. In these works, which often take place in found or unstructured environments, Pearson notes

[s]ite itself becomes an agency of performative meaning, rather than simply acting as a convenient, neutral space for spectacular exposition. It is not converted into a thermostatically controlled auditorium, and the prevailing environmental conditions of host and those manufactured within ghost impact upon performers and audience alike” (Pearson 295).

Every space is lush with meaning, but immersive theatrical spaces highlight and augment these meanings because of the spectator’s close relationship to the space itself.

Whether a site is highly designed/altered, left more or less in its normal state, or somewhere in between, immersive theatre relies on spectators’ bodily engagement to produce intimacy. Immersive theatre exists in the body. Though Machon is hesitant to assign a strict definition to immersive performance, she notes “[a]wakening and engaging the fullness and diversity of sensory awareness is a central feature of immersive practice” (Machon 75). Priority is taken away from the eyes and the ears and redistributed to the whole body. Sensory stimulus

becomes a method of performance by creating changes in the body. In *Becoming Shades*, an immersive adaptation of the Persephone myth, spectators squatted or sat on a damp, dusty floor, breathing in the smell of mold and fire, tasting the cool air, and feeling the warmth of the other spectators. Simply watching a depiction of the Underworld played out on a stage, I could have imagined the rough feeling of stone against my skin as I looked at the scenery. The way the actors behaved might imply a certain sense of chill or inspired a memory of the smell of fire. How different it is to actually be brought into a space where these images are not imagined but present, vivid in their immediacy.

Though all theatre has the potential to engage a wide range of audiences' senses, immersive theatre is especially situated to do so in its emphasis on bodily experience. Di Benedetto explains that "[t]he social function of live theatre necessitates contact between audience members and the performers, and taste, touch, and smell can all be significant triggers in our conscious perception and interpretation of the events transpiring in our proximity" (Di Benedetto 76). As a live art, theatre is always situated in the body to some extent; a performance is experienced as temporal event, for a set duration in a set location. Immersive theatre increases the potential for sensory engagement in its emphasis on physical closeness. Proprioception, perhaps an often-forgotten sense in daily life, is the awareness of one's body in space and is often engaged in immersive theatre. As spectators hold things, explore or are guided through different locations, and move around others, they bring the space into their bodies, into their muscles and bones. Exploratory works allow audiences to choose where they will go, which stimulates this sense of proprioception further. Placing audiences in a performances space increases their awareness of their setting.

Just as space is brought into audiences' body via traveling through it (and experiencing it physically), immersive theatre often asks its audience to bring the performance into their own bodies through consumption of food and drink: Adrian Howells feeds participants chocolate or strawberries in *Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding*, Third Rail's *Then She Fell* offers audiences truffles and oranges, Mercurari's *Etiquette* takes place over a meal. Each of these examples uses food in a radically different way, as a sign of care, as part of a narrative, or as a way of making participants more comfortable. Perhaps more importantly, the action of consumption brings part of the performance into the spectator, affecting their body. The action of digestion will likely last longer than the performance itself, extending the world of the play into the real body of the spectator. Alcohol in particular creates changes in the body, perhaps more noticeably than other food or drink. In *The Great Gatsby*, I was offered gin, a signifier of Gatsby's ill-gained wealth and a means of lowering inhibitions. *Sleep No More*'s McKittrick Hotel includes a bar that patrons frequent before, during, and after the show, gently encouraging the consumption of alcohol. In addition to easing the spectators' self-consciousness, the alcohol brings the piece literally into the audience, perhaps lingering even after the official performance is over. Alcohol consumed as a part of performance transforms the audience's blood, brain, and digestive system into a theatrical site.

Deeply related to the act of consumption and the sense of taste is the sense of smell. "Olfaction is the sense most directly related to memory recall and scents are the longest-lasting sensation stored in our memories. Therefore, any activation of the olfactory sense can evoke emotional associates for audiences, and most easily triggers our reptilian response in the natural world" (Di Benedetto 75). Smells have the power to conjure up memories; during a (non-immersive) performance in London, a fish was fried onstage and I was instantly distracted by

memories of catfish dinners with my grandfather. In addition to its role in taste and memory, smell can add to the perceived authenticity of a space. Schulze recalls his experience of Punchdrunk's *The Masque of Red Death*, describing how "the space becomes more real because it smells as it should smell" (Schulze 181). Smell adds to the narrative of the performance, supporting the action witness by the spectator. Beyond supporting the story, smell prompts changes in the audience's body. Salter describes interacting with smell in an installation piece, *The Smell of Fear/The Fear of Smell*, in which spectators could encounter the sweat of people in states of extreme fear as "the ultimate scenographic act" (Salter 176-177). Visitors were undoubtedly physically affected by the act of smelling the sweat, itself laden with meaning. As the molecules that compose a smell enter the body, the separation between performance object and other begins to erode.

Similarly, touch breaks down the barrier between performance and spectator. Being able to physically handle and touch props serves as "additional proof of an environment's authenticity" (Schulze 146). Much like naturalist theatre, immersive theatre demands highly detailed, accurate props (when props are included) in order to maintain the consistency of the performance's world. Painted backdrops will not suffice when audience members can physically interact with and inspect the scenery. Touch extends beyond interactions with the world of the play; often, performances include touch between actor and spectator, whether it be dancing together, a kiss, or a held hand. In Adrian Howells intimate work *Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding*, touch is one of the primary means of performance; the work is created in the body of the audience participant. Often touch is a marker of familiarity, producing a feeling of intimacy even when it does not exist. Touch requires physical proximity, a willingness to allow another to draw near, which requires a certain amount of trust. Importantly, not all audience

members will have the same experience of being touched (or indeed, experiencing anything sensorially). Schulze expands on this idea, explaining, “[a]n old, disabled, black, female spectator may have a different experience than the young, able-bodied white male, but nonetheless it will be a strong (syn)aesthetic response, which is equally valid” (Schulze 147). Different experiences of a sensation, different backgrounds, and different levels of comfort mean that every sensory stimuli will be received and understood differently by spectators. This difference does not negate the importance of the senses, only that immersive theatre makers must consider their audience as individuals rather than a collective.

In writing about embodied spectatorship, McKinney notes that “within an emergent, co-creative process of perception, scenography itself has agency” (McKinney 113). Our sensory experiences have the potential to create physical changes in our bodies, lending settings a distinctive power. After attending Punchdrunk’s *The Masque of Red Death*, Daniel Schulze’s performances notes describe how the evening left him “full of adrenaline and felt the entire exhaustion of that scene—physically” (Schulze 171) Immersive works are laden with moments of adrenaline: an empty darkened room, a performance suddenly appearing out of nowhere, the decision to chase a certain character. Though such moments could be experienced from a seated position, physically running through a long hallway is more likely to prompt a feeling of excitement and exhaustion than watching someone else run. Salter describes an art installation, arguably immersive, in which “a massive Plexiglas floor of white fluorescent fixtures stimulating the UV basis of the solar spectrum and specifically regulated room temperatures and chemical compositions (i.e., nitrogen/oxygen combinations were engineered to induce hormonal shifts in visitors” (Salter 176). In this installation, the scenography literally acted on the spectator’s body, making the body the site of the art work. Alone, the room is just a room with specific lights,

regulated temperature, and a perhaps unusual atmospheric composition. The moment a visitor enters the space and is affected, the performance begins.

Schulze notes that “the sensations gained from an immersive theatre experience are both semantic and somatic: intellect and visceral perception become inextricably linked for form a greater unit of meaning” (Schulze 142). Immersive performances use sensory stimuli, space, and spectator as means of making meaning. As audiences are brought in closer proximity to both theatrical space and performer, the boundaries between spectator and story begin to fade; this erosion is complicated by the sensory stimulus and physical engagement which bodily impact the spectator, making the body of the audience a part of the performance. As such, immersive scenography takes on a special importance within the work, serving alongside performers and spectators to support the collaborative effort that is immersive performance.

#### FACILITATING ENGAGEMENT: IMMERSIVE PRACTICALITIES

If space and sensory stimulus are key to fostering engagement, agency and intimacy, how does an artist make deliberate use of such elements? When does an interactive or site specific performance become an immersive one? While these questions can be written about and studied at length, theatre scholarship is meaningless without theatrical performance. This belief in scholarship as a means of creation guided me throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis; the result of (and perhaps response to) my research has been a series of immersive pieces, all located in Trinity University’s jogging trail. While I will primarily consider the first piece, *Beneath Icy Stars* (which occurred in February), two more pieces will occur in the spring 2019 semester, one in April and one in May. These performance range from exploratory to one-to-one, with an emphasis on the found space of the jogging trail. Each of these works is heavily

informed by my academic scholarship but also serve as a key part of my study as embodied research.

The first of the series, *Beneath Icy Stars*, was largely a collaborative effort between director, space, and performer. Themed around the experience of winter and cold, nine performers, four stage managers, two house managers, and myself created an immersive experience designed for an audience of five. The primary goal of this performance was twofold: first, I wanted the audience to experience what is like to be outside in the winter for an extended period of time. Second, I hoped to educate actors, crew, and audience members alike in the practice of immersive theatre. Since immersive performance is a fairly young convention, I hoped to use my experience with immersive work to expose our community to a form of theatre that they might not have heard of prior to the performance. While this performance was conceived as part of my research, the goal of the performance was not to augment my own study. I believe that all theatre, especially immersive works, should exist in relation to an audience; it was important that the goal of this piece be related to the spectator and not to my own scholarly work.

The performance began with the space. Though not all immersive theatre is site-specific, I am particularly drawn to work that uses found spaces and I knew where I wanted the performance to occur long before I had any conception of what the work might be. The jogging trail (see Appendix A) is located on the north end of Trinity University's campus, between the academic buildings and Hildebrand Avenue. Though the trail is well maintained, it is seldom used (save by the occasional band of frisbee golfers). A roundabout loop, the jogging path travels through patches of cedar, across an open field, over a narrow creek, and through a lovely grove of sycamore trees. During the day, the trail feels perfectly normal, a neatly enclosed and tamed

portion of nature attached to a busy university. After walking the trail at different times of day in different weather conditions, I decided that the space would be most interesting at night, when the familiar path was made strange by the moonlight. At night the trail takes on an interesting personality. Lit gently from all sides but with no lights of its own, the small park feels like a bubble of wilderness inside a city, a place that exists between nature and civilization.

Knowing that I wanted to create an immersive piece at night was one thing; accomplishing such a task was another thing entirely. I realized early on that it would be essential that this work be a collaboration. After recruiting a stage manager (Caroline Neelley) who had worked with me before on devised theatre, I proposed my show to Trinity's student theatre group, the Trinity University Players (TUPS). This proposal has been included as Appendix B, both to restate the goals of the work and to demonstrate how much the work changed from the proposal to the final product. Originally, the performance was intended to be either a promenade or exploratory work; we left this decision open so that we might accommodate differing cast sizes. Since the piece would be taking place at night, I did not feel that it would be safe to allow audiences to roam free without a large enough cast and crew to ensure their safety. Similarly, the audience size was left undecided (we proposed between one and ten spectators per show) until the cast was finalized. I felt a strong responsibility for the safety of our audience; while I wanted the spectators to occasionally feel uncertain or even in mild (very mild) peril, it was of utmost importance that the audience was safe and well cared for at all times. Additionally, I felt that the relationship between audience and performer should be a close one; in order to keep these interactions meaningful and intimate, I wanted the audience size to be slightly smaller than the size of the cast.

With the working title of *Winter Immersive Piece, Beneath Icy Stars* was approved for funding. After receiving organizational support, we began the casting process. Auditions were simple; an online form with eight questions (appendix C) served as an audition for cast and crew alike. One of the most important aspects of casting was that everyone who wanted to be a part of the show was welcomed with open arms. We chose to accept any and all for two reasons; first, I wanted this piece to be an opportunity for anyone interested to learn and to be challenged by the difficult (and enjoyable) process of devising a site-specific immersive work. Second, I wanted this piece to be as big in its attempted scope as possible. To do so, I hoped to fill the jogging trail with as many performers as were willing. The more performers, the more the audience would be able to safely explore and the more space we could occupy in the park. I entered the casting process with the idea that I would be as happy with one performer as I would be with a hundred; flexibility was the name of the game. Ultimately, fifteen people filled out the form (though three people decided to not participate before rehearsals began), with a wide variety of interests (see Appendix D).

Rehearsals began with several explorations of the space both as a group and individually. I found it very important that the actors feel comfortable in the trail, both to better collaborate with the performance space and to help ensure their safety they navigated it in the dark. I also believed (and believe) that a strong ensemble is essential to this type of work; much of our early work was focused on playing games that required an awareness of the actors' bodies in relation to the environment and each other. Through these rehearsals we developed rituals, some of which were later used in the performance itself. After these large rehearsals, I scheduled individual meetings with actors. In these meetings, rehearsals, we discussed specific spaces for their performances. I focused on their gut reactions to the site, doing my best to place them in

spots in which they felt strongly connected to their environment. From these sites, we developed rough ideas of what work they might do in their given space. Ultimately, I left the bulk of the creation of each actor's performance to them, giving guidance and shaping as necessary. The works they devised became their specific roles in the performance, and we developed characters from these proposals.

As the individual performances began to develop, I worked on crafting the overall shape of the performance. I decided to limit what parts of the trail would make up the bulk of the show; the performance area was reduced from the entirety of the jogging trail to a large clearing surrounded by a thin tree line, an area which we came to refer to as the Valley. The approximate path a spectator might follow traveled around the clearing, first along a gentle hill overlooking the rest of the park then slowly descending into the clear area. The trail wound around the central open space before crossing a narrow (often dry) creek spanned by two bridges. Across the bridge from the clearing, a group of sycamore trees' bare branches stretched up toward the sky. The trail wandered between their trunks before crossing the creek again at the second bridge. After traveling alongside a large parking lot, the trail headed off toward a large swath of cedar trees. The performances were placed within the valley in roughly a spiral shape, with the center of the spiral being the large clearing where the Valley's performance began and concluded (see Appendix E for a map of the performances and Appendix F for the script).

The biggest challenge was working to light the actors without fighting the space. I resisted lighting things in a theatrical way, which I felt might cut against the organic space. Without light, however, the performers were not visible enough to draw audiences toward them. After some experimentation, we selected battery operated string lights, flashlights, and electric candles. We did our best to weave the lighting into the landscape, dangling flashlights from trees

and winding string lights around performers' bodies. Perhaps unfortunately, rain and dewy ground made our lighting instruments damp, which sometimes resulted in lights going out or flickering slightly. The environment could not be ignored as it physically affected how the lights functioned. Sound was another challenge. Recorded sound felt forced and unnatural, but the environment seemed to demand a soundscape to augment the existing ambient noise. I was pleased to discover that the different performance components blended together to create a gentle but compelling soundscape on their own.

Rehearsals flew by; many nights spent outdoors, in the park despite all sorts of weather conditions, created a sense of familiarity with the space. The trail became part of our ensemble, and we grew familiar with it just as we grew to know each other. By the time that performances began, I felt that we had developed a real collaboration between space and actor; it was finally time to introduce our third collaborator—the spectator. Most of the performance required an audience to activate it, to bring our work to life. Almost all of the performers' work demanded some kind of interaction with another person, whether it was reading with them, speaking directly to them, or guiding them through a section of the trail. We had created a performance language, but we required an audience to speak it into being.

Though the bulk of the action occurred in the park, each performance began in the Ruth Taylor theatre building. Participants arrived, warned to dress warmly and leave their belongings at home, but told little about what to expect (see Appendix G). After being checked in by a house manager, spectators were given a glowing wristband (to help our stage managers distinguish spectator from stranger). At the appropriate time, the house managers guided the audience outside, into the cold and often damp air. Performers were circled around a sculpture called “Conversation with Magic Stones” (the Magic Stones), a grassy ring studded with bronze shapes

similar to the standing stones of the ancient British Isles. The stones are lit from the ground; at night, the installation has a mythic, otherworldly quality. As the audience arrived, the performers reached full volume in a musical improvisation. This game, an important part of our rehearsals, could be heard in snatches rather than as a complete whole. When the audience was led around the ring, they heard different pieces of the melody in snatches before being gently guided to their places in the circle. Once placed between performers, the audience was given only a moment or two to take in the scene before the performance began. The Magic Stones served as a space between the highly ordered university campus and the dark wildness of the trail. Surrounded by the bright lights, well-groomed gardens, and safe, ordered buildings, the performers created a border around the stones, separating it bodily and making the installation made temporarily part of their ritual. On rainy nights, the harsh light from the tall light posts guarding the paths transformed into a hazy glow that, combined with the chill and the wet, bounced mysteriously off the stones in an unsettling way.

The Cardinal Spirit (Aubrey Kehn) broke the ritual song by entering the circle. Dressed in all white with a bright red scarf wrapped around her shoulders, the Cardinal Spirit moved with avian grace through the stones. Her arrival sent the performers down toward the trail; the moment she broke the circle, the others stopped making music abruptly and left the ring (with the exception of the Tree Spirit, Mindy Tran, who remained to help guide participants safely to the performance). As the others left and with spectators standing in a large ring around her, the Cardinal Spirit introduced them to the work, to the juxtaposition between the world of people and the world of the spirits, between the host and ghost of the piece. She wove through the ring, occasionally moving into close contact with spectators. From the beginning, I felt it was essential to make sure that the audience felt seen by the performers. The Cardinal Spirit looked directly at

each audience member in turn, acknowledging them as fellow inhabitants of the performance, as live bodies rather than unseen ghostly viewers.

After her monologue (see Appendix F for the full script), the Cardinal Spirit guided the participants past the library and auditorium to the trail, followed closely by the Tree Spirit. The group traveled silently through trees and over hills, moving slowly as the audience adjusted to the dark and unfamiliar terrain (see Appendix H for a map of the route). When I served as a test spectator during rehearsals, I always found this a powerful introduction to the rest of the piece. Being quiet as I walked through the park at night, with a feeling of safety that accompanies being surrounded by a community, helped me to adjust to the space, and notice it for what it was rather than what I wanted it to be. Some nights it rained, making the grass slick and the thick mulch of the trail itself treacherous. On those nights, I felt an increased sense of danger; no matter how much we prepared, the space and weather still had agency. To attempt to erase the space would be foolish. Instead, we worked to collaborate with the trail and the rain, to accept what they offered with good grace.

After around three or four minutes of walking, the Cardinal Spirit stopped on a gentle hill overlooking the Valley. Below, visible through trees in the faint light, the rest of the performers frolicked, each taking a turn at being the leader while the others imitated them. They played with rhythm and sharp sounds that echoed off the hills and the trees in a pleasing way. They jumped and ran and tried to keep warm. Still watching the Valley, the Cardinal Spirit quickly reminded the spectators of the guidelines of the piece before shining a light toward the performers below and giving a birdlike shout. At soon as the performers heard this, they scattered from the clearing in the middle of the Valley, sprinting as fast as they could to their performance spaces. Gently,

the Cardinal Spirit guided the audience through the last section of trail, descending into the performance space (see Appendix I for performance photos).

As the group moved into the performance, they began to encounter the Wanderers. One of the most important parts of both rehearsals and performances was our team of stage managers: Caroline Neelley (production stage manager), Morgan Cartwright, Sam Gabelmann, and Scott Stegink. Their job extended far beyond a “normal” stage management gig. In addition to their regular duties, they were given a role to play during performances: the Wanderers. As the Wanderers walked around the Valley, they enforced the performance’s boundaries, checked on participant welfare and kept the area secure. While walking, they gently swung flashlights from side to side, an ominous (and practical) visual border around the piece. When spectators passed by the Wanderers, the stage managers gently hissed, a sound reminiscent of the wind in the trees. Though the stage managers were largely a practical choice rather than an aesthetic one, their presence added to the world of the show.

Once the spectators had entered the ring of trees surrounding the Valley, the Wind Spirit (Anthony Tresca) appeared quickly and selected an audience member to offer his company; he would reach out a hand, inviting the spectator to join him but never demanding their attention. There was always a choice. A sprightly, playful figure, the Wind Spirit communicated only in the whistling of wind, the rattling of chain frisbee golf goals, and the rustling of leaves. He would run quickly through the entirety of the valley, pausing only to tease other Spirits gently or offer spectators another path through the piece. After choosing his first spectator, he gamboled with them through the park, always offering them the choice to stay at a performance site or to keep running, jumping, and playing. In all instances, I felt it was essential to offer spectators a choice. I never wanted them to feel like they had to stay with a particular performance because

they were supposed to do so; rather, I wanted to give the audience as much agency as possible within the limits of the work. To ensure that spectators understood their agency, we tried to offer them choices as much as possible. Though there were limited possibilities for traveling with in the piece (spectators had a limited range of movement—no moving beyond the trees— and could only choose to view or ignore a limited number of performers), audience members could craft their performance experience as they saw fit. A spectator could choose to run with the Wind Spirit for the entire duration of the performance, or else decide to follow the Cardinal Spirit back to her tree, or try a little bit of everything. Though we did not have access to an enormous, multistory warehouse space as in *Sleep No More*, I wanted to offer the spectators as much of an exploratory feeling as possible.

While the Wind Spirit and his spectator moved away into the night, the other four spectators continued around the edge of the valley. About five or six feet from where the Wind Spirit gusted in and blew away with a spectator in tow, the Spirit of Winter Comfort (Nico Champion) descended from the hill overlooking the trail. Dressed warmly in a thick sweater and hat, he looked comfortable despite the chill and often damp. The Spirit of Winter Comfort would offer one of the remaining spectators his company; if they accepted, he would guide them to a large, flat rock just off the trail. The rock faced a tall apartment complex, laden with its own narratives as people came in and out of the building or turned lights on and off. Equipped with two blankets, two flashlights, and two books, the Spirit of Winter Comfort invited his guests to sit with him and read. Sometimes he would speak softly with them. Other times, he would sit in silence and watch the apartment building. In his stash of supplies, he carried small packets of cookies, which he shared with spectators. His performance was grounded and intimate, with an emphasis on two bodies sharing space and time together. The rock was only just long enough for

him and another person, fostering a physical proximity. In bleak winter weather, the Spirit of Winter Comfort served as an island of warmth and light, a resting spot for spectators as they grew tired and cold.

Between the Spirit of Winter Comfort's and the Tree Spirit's performance spaces, the Spirit of Memory (Lamonte Brooks) arrived from a stretch of bushes, hobbling along, supported by a staff with a light at the top. Once he reached the group, he would offer his companionship to one of the spectators. Should the spectator accept, the two would head off, down the hill and deeper into the Valley. Journeying with the Spirit of Memory was incredibly personal; he spoke in a low, soothing tone in a charmingly familiar way. He would recount stories of winter, often in fragments, to his companion as they slowly wandered past other performances. If the spectator chose to stay at one of the performances, the Spirit of Winter would journey on alone. Like the Wind Spirit, the Spirit of Memory's purpose (within the mechanics of the production) was to provide a way for nervous or unsure spectators to be guided through the space. Most spectators seemed happy to carve their own path through the Valley, setting out on their own when they wanted to, others seemed content to be led by one of the guiding spirits. The choice to include guides was primarily to provide extra care for spectators who might require some while not stifling the exploratory impulses of bolder souls.

As the Cardinal Spirit led the remaining two spectators onward, the Tree Spirit would pull away from the group and settle into her performance area. A small group of scraggly trees formed a "U" shape surrounding her as she performed with the trees and the wind. Her performance was lit by flashlights hung from the thin branches above her; as the branches bobbed in the wind, the lights danced gently with their movement. The Tree Spirit's slow, careful movements mimicked those of the trees as the wind gusted through them. When she

spoke, she would speak directly to those who watched her. There were no boundaries between her world and the world of the spectator. They existed in the same space and time, beneath the same soft winter sky. The trees were not an illusion, a trick of scenic painting designed to evoke some idea of a tree; they were trees, trees that had existed long before the performance was ever conceived. In the Tree Spirit's performance, the inherent character of the space became evident in the interplay between tree, performer, and witness.

Whether or not any audience members choose to follow her, the Cardinal Spirit traveled on, following a familiar trail towards her performance space. She moved past the Spirit of Sleeping Spring (Noelle Barrera), who reclined on a soft blanket near the edge of the large clearing. This spirit painted in bright watercolors and spoke freely with her guests. Spectators could choose to stay, talking and painting, as long as they chose. During one performance, I watched a spectator sit with her for almost the entire duration of the piece. Though she was low to the ground and often damp as a result of the winter rain, the Spirit of Sleeping Spring was a warm presence, a promise of friendlier days to come. In choosing to sit with her, spectators experienced an entirely different angle of the performance; brought closer to the grass and the dirt, they felt the ground beneath them more intimately than they did when they stood. There was a strong, green smell of earth surrounding this piece that evoked an ancient feeling, a memory of the inevitability of spring even in the coldest winter.

The Cardinal Spirit moved past the grove of sycamore trees stretching high into the night, glowing faintly in the gloom. Beneath them, a figure in white moved elegantly, singing a haunting tune. Her song echoed throughout the Valley so that every so often, snatches of music were audible as far away as the Spirit of Winter Comfort. Wrapped in tiny sparkling lights, this spectral figure was the Spirit of the Winter Dead (Sarah Bastos). Though much of *Beneath Icy*

*Stars* was centered around the rather positive (at least in my mind) experience of being outside in the cold and experiencing the beauty of the trail at night, the Spirit of the Winter Dead served as a reminder of the harsh side of winter. The freezing weather kills crops, generates icy storms, and in older times, marked a period of significant hardship and fear. With the modern convenience of grocery stores and central heating, winter has lost some of its bite. As a reminder of winter's ghastly power, the Spirit of the Winter Dead would tell her story to any who decided to cross the narrow bridge into her performance area. Only spectators could cross this bridge; performers were forbidden from entering the area beneath the tall trees. When an audience member crossed into her area, the Spirit of Winter Dead led them, rather frighteningly, towards the darkest part of the grove, an area thick with leaves and barricaded by a hill on one side.

Once the spectator and the spirit were at the darkest place, the Spirit of Survival (Alex Oliver), appeared at the second bridge, offering the audience member a choice: follow the Spirit of Survival back into the Valley or stay with the Spirit of Winter Dead, joining her melancholy song. If the spectator chose to stay, the Spirit of Winter Dead would lead them back, beyond the first bridge to a space beneath some short trees by a red brick wall. There she would offer them a golden coin and tell them of happier days spent in the winter. If the spectator wanted, the pair would join together in dance beneath the silvery sycamore branches. This hidden moment was not experienced by many spectators; I felt that it was important that there be opportunities in this work that people would miss. The potential for loss created heightened stakes—the possibility of missing out on certain moments made every spectator's choices more meaningful. I was wary of a performance that felt too safe, too curated by the crew and myself and hoped that having something to lose might make what the audience gained that much more valuable.

Meanwhile, the Cardinal Spirit pressed on, advancing through the Spirit of Time's path. The Spirit of Time (Kody Nace) marked the steady passage of the hour by traveling up and down a slight incline, from one tree to another. At the base of each tree, he performed a short ritual to mark that iteration and begin the next. Occasionally, he would shout in glee or fear or agony (it was always slightly ambiguous) as he ran. On the way down the hill, he sprinted at full tilt. Watching him from a distance was nearly as compelling as watching him up close, but the most interesting experience of all was to run with him. To run was to feel the sharp wind against your face, the damp air sucked into your lungs and panted out, the sting of uncertainty as you stumbled and then recovered. I loved watching the spectators run with the spirit, watching their movements transition from unsteady jogging into a smooth, confident sprint. In this moment, the audience's entire body was the performance and the sensations they experienced were the narrative. When the Spirit of Time reached the bottom of the hill, he again completed his ritual before moving slowly back up the incline. Spectators often chose to follow him up the hill, bringing the space into their muscles as they climbed, their lungs as they breathed, and their spines as they balanced on the uneven terrain.

And still the Cardinal Spirit moved forward, drawing near to the Spirit of Survival's rock at the very edge of the Valley. The Spirit of Survival sat on a large rock, surrounded by electric candles, and faced a brightly lit parking lot, often entirely empty. When she felt like it, she would stand and move around her rock, playing with leaves or adding to the Valley soundscape by dragging a stick over the metal legs of a sign. When the Spirit of the Winter Dead brought her spectator to the darkest part of the grove, the Spirit of Survival offered them the choice to cross the bridge or stay. If the audience member accepted the Spirit of Survival's proposal, the spirit guided them back to her rock and told them her story. Once she completed her monologue, she

would share some of her Oreos and sit with them, looking out at the parking lot. Her work existed in the liminal space between the performance and the real, an acknowledgment that our work merely overlaid reality (rather than replacing it entirely). She did not shy away from the truth that we were merely ghosting an existing site and that our work would soon disappear from the park altogether. At the same time, she did not deny the realness of the audiences' sensory experiences: the taste of an Oreo, the feeling of cold, the smell of the rain and grass.

Meanwhile, the Cardinal Spirit finally arrived at her nest and began weaving delicate string lights through the branches of her tree. Perched in the sprawling tree, the Cardinal Spirit watched the rest of the performers with a vigilant eye, chirping occasionally. She interacted with spectators carefully, answering any questions they might ask, but mostly she served a silent, protective presence. As she perched, the audience explored the work at their leisure, staying as long as they wanted with each performer. As they moved through the Valley, the environment acted on them in turn; they became cold, tired, damp, and likely covered in grass trimmings. They were asked questions of, fed cookies, offered paintings or blankets. Their bodies became sites of performance, where the lived experience of being cold was as important as the stories they were told about the winter.

The spectators explore the performance for around fifty minutes (sometimes less if the rain grew too heavy). Upon a signal from me, the Cardinal Spirit left her nest and strode into the center of the clearing. She called out to the performers, circling slowly with her flashlight in hand. Quickly, the performers moved toward her, appearing suddenly from their various locations. They were careful to guide any stray audience members to the center of the clearing. As each actor arrived, they added their voice to an improvised song, forming a loose circle of performers and spectators around the Cardinal Spirit while the Wanderers paced around the

circumference, flashlights resolutely illuminating the ground in front of them. After a few seconds of this, the Cardinal Spirit took each spectator by the hand and moved them into the circle. On dry nights, she handed them a chunk of firewood to carry. As soon as the spectators were inside the ring, the actors, almost instantly, began to run around the audience, clapping, stamping, and snapping to a rhythm all their own. The pace increased, faster and faster, until the Cardinal Spirit raised her arms. Everything stopped. Without a glance back, the Cardinal Spirit moved out of the circle with the other actors softly guiding the audience to follow her.

In a line, the five spectators left the Valley on the heels of the Cardinal Spirit. The performers followed until they reached the tree line, where they stopped and waved quietly to the spectators as they were led away. Once the audience was out of sight, the actors raced to a firepit on the other side of campus. The Cardinal Spirit and her followers took a more meandering route, so by the time the spectators arrive, the fire was already roaring. Everyone enjoyed s'mores, and then, whenever they were ready, each departed in turn. The spectators have traveled from warm homes to the freezing park, and were rewarded with fire, food, and friendship. Though the performance itself concluded in the park, the real end of *Beneath Icy Stars* is the feeling of cold skin in front of a fire, the sticky taste of a s'more, the sense of being surrounded by a welcoming community, and the sensation of feeling at rest after a long period of activity.

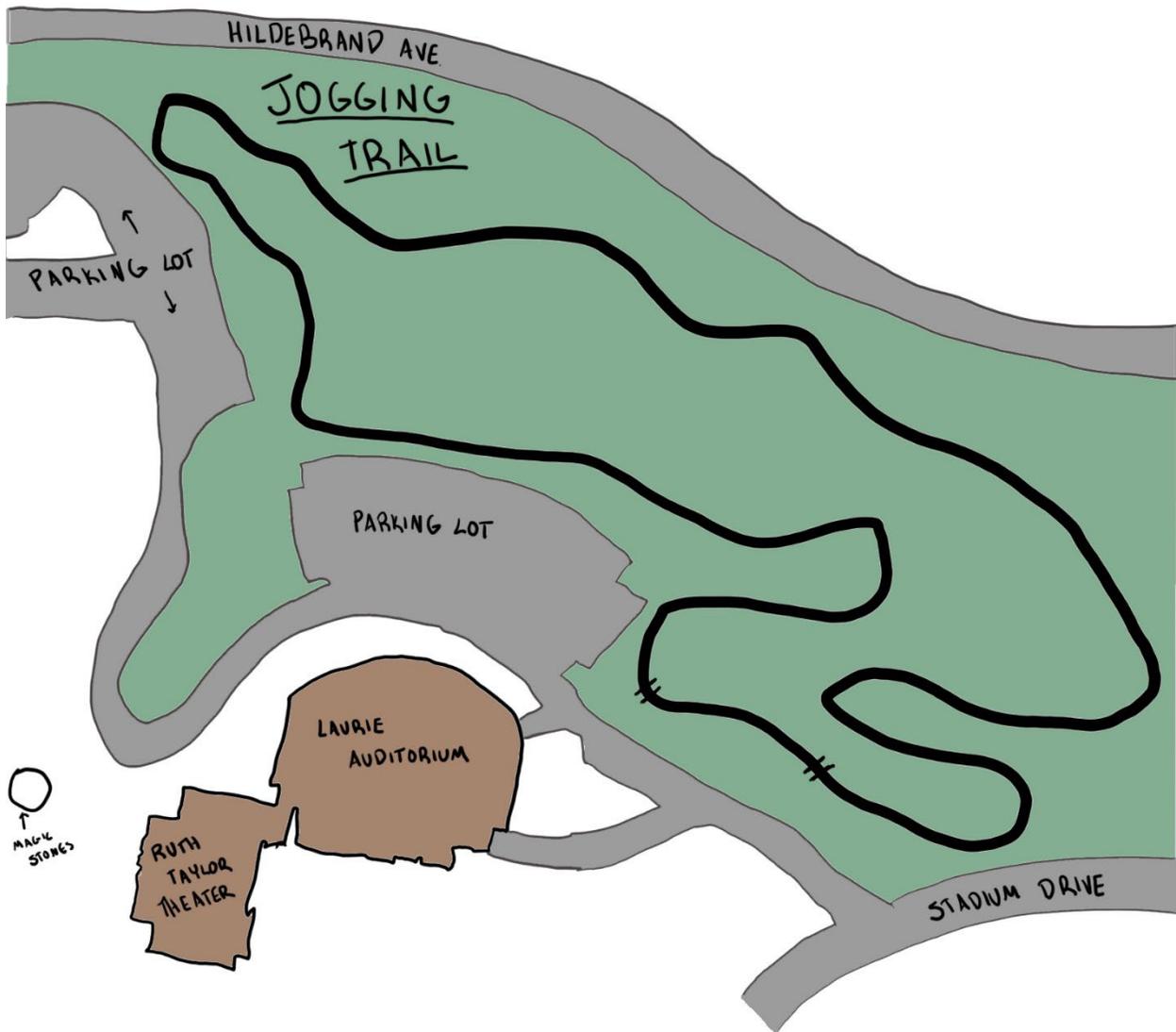
So ended the first of my series of immersive works. *Beneath Icy Stars* showed audiences the bodily impact of winter, reminding spectators of the beauty of cold (and the joy of feeling warm afterwards). The second piece in the series will be themed around spring and will also take place in the trail (see Appendix J for proposal). Titled *Good Morning*, it will run from April 8-12. Unlike *Beneath Icy Stars*, this work will be a one-to-one performance. I will meet a single spectator each morning; together we will care for the trail, picking up trash and sticks, before

enjoying a breakfast together. This piece will focus on the joys of spring: the smell of new plants, the work of caring for land, the simple companionship of a shared meal. The third piece will occur during the last few weeks of the semester. It will be a summer work, designed for as many participants as are interested. The content of the summer performance is still in development, though it will focus the wild passions of summer time with some sort of group ritual in the park.

*Beneath Icy Stars* and *Good Morning* both highlight the importance of space in immersive performance. Set in a purpose built theatre, neither piece would mean anything; set out of doors, where audiences have the potential to explore and engage with their environment, these immersive works become full of significance. Though the performer is an important part of both performances, the spectator's body is the primary vehicle of narrative as they engage sensorially with the space. Neither performance is about winter or spring, but rather how the seasons, the park, the smells and sounds affect audiences. These performances, like all immersive theatres, emphasize the importance of the body and the incredible potential of space.

APPENDIX A

Map of the jogging trail and surrounding areas



## APPENDIX B

## Proposal

For this season of TUPS shows, I am submitting a winter immersive piece. This performance will be a unique devised work created specifically for the jogging trail between Laurie Auditorium and City Vista. While I cannot be sure what the performance will be until I have worked with the cast, I have a general idea of how the production will go. Ideally, the performance will take around ten to fifteen audience members on an immersive journey themed around winter. As spectators are guided through the jogging trail by performers, they will be allowed to make choices that influence their individualized experience of the space. Striking visuals, one-on-one interactions, and moving group scenes will evoke feelings of winter, loss, and warmth.

I think that this devised performance is perfect for Trinity audiences because it exposes them to a new type of theatre. Many people are not sure what exactly immersive theatre is; while this performance is by no means the one and only example of an immersive performance, it will help audiences become aware of types of theatre beyond musicals and straight plays. Trinity Theatre is an academic setting. As such, our primary goal should be to educate artists and audiences alike. This performance will provide an opportunity for performers, designers, and crew people to grow as well. Immersive theatre is rewarding, labor intensive, and requires a great deal of planning. This performance will provide theatre students with new challenges unlike any they may have faced before. I personally connect to this production because of its promise of challenge and excitement; this performance will help me to grow as a director and theatremaker.

The production concept for this work is winter. I want spectators and performers alike to experience the harsh realities of the cold, the pagan ritual of the winter solstice, and the beauty of

the frozen season. To accomplish this, performers will devise storylines that ultimately come together to form a larger abstract narrative. I honestly cannot say for certain where this piece will go. Though I have a general shape of the performance in my mind (see the attached outline below), I fully recognize that this will likely change depending on the actors who are cast (all people who are available and interested are welcome in the production) and the challenges we face working in an outdoor performance space.

Anticipating challenges is difficult, but I hope to head off any major problems by reading a couple of different books on creating immersive performance. In terms of lighting, I plan to use battery powered lights, flashlights, candles (if allowed), and natural light. There is a remarkable amount of light spill from the parking lot and City Vista into the park; any additional light will be a means of drawing focus to certain performers or scenes. Safety will be another concern. I hope to have a team of stage managers (in costume) with flashlights constantly patrolling and making sure that everything is going smoothly. To also help with this issue, we will have a strict limit on the amount of audience people.

### Proposed Outline

1. Audience will meet outside the magic stones. A performer will deliver a monologue and lead the spectators to the trail. (a House Manager will collect/guard their possessions)
2. The spectators will follow the first performer, eventually being led off in other directions by other performers.
3. Spectators will move through different scenes. Some ideas:
  - a. Someone lighting matches and throwing them in a bowl of water. Kindling for a fire before them. A monologue about the cold.
  - b. People doing a Shakespeare scene
  - c. A person stationed on the bridge that spectators have to pass
  - d. Two performers singing to each other across the park (perhaps the spectators cannot see the performers)
  - e. A performers on the run from the stage manager crew (some sort of narrative about danger in the winter)
4. Spectators will be gathered in the center of the trail area for a final scene/song.
5. Spectators will be each given some wood and led around campus to the fire pit for s'mores. (the House Manager will be there with all their stuff)

### Budget

There are no royalties! Because this piece is devised, I cannot be sure what we will spend money on. That being said, I would like money for:

- Flashlights
- Matches

- First aid kits
- S'more materials
- Costumes from thrift store (non-essential but would be nice to be able to tear some clothes up)

If a more specific budget is required, please let me know and I will be happy to submit one.

APPENDIX C

Casting Form

(transcribed from online form. Blanks indicate a written response field, boxes indicate a selection response field)

WINTER IMMERSIVE PIECE FORM

*This form serves as your "audition" for this piece. You must be free the weekend of February 8-10 and be willing to be outside for the duration of the piece. Anyone willing to commit to this work is guaranteed a role! We are happy to have any and all. For more information, please come to the information sessions on Saturday, 01/19 at 4pm and Tuesday 01/22 at 10am; both meet in the theatre lobby. Feel free to email me for any questions or clarifications.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Pronouns: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Relevant Experience: \_\_\_\_\_

I am interested in:

*These are just some of the types of work we will be doing! I want to get a sense of people's general areas of interest. Select as many as you would like.*

- Crew (we will have around 5 people patrolling at all times for safety reasons!)
- Improvisation
- Devising
- Writing

- Performing written texts
- Singing
- Physical theatre
- Other (add your own option)

I am available for the show dates: Feb. 9 & 10 at night.

*Please keep the entirety of these nights open (if possible) for set up and take down of any props/lights*

- Yes
- No, but I still want to help out in some way

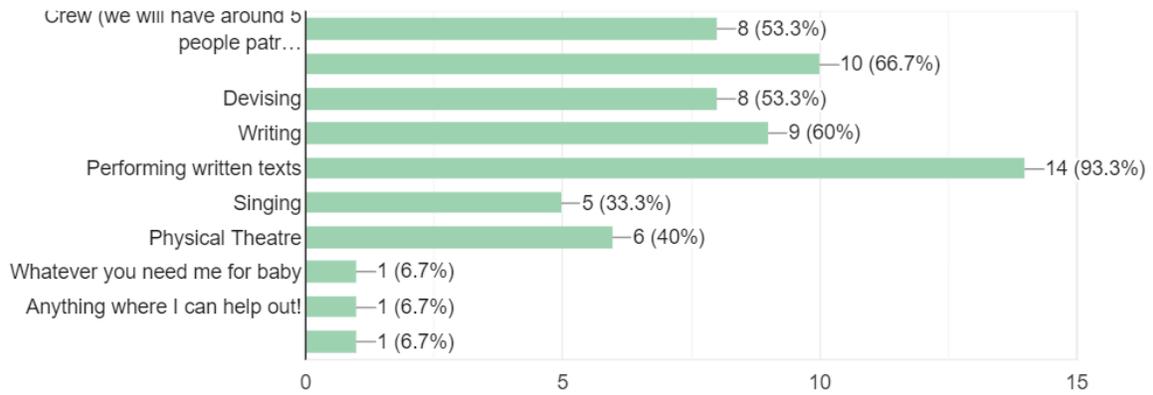
Anything else I need to know? \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### Cast Interests

I am interested in:

15 responses

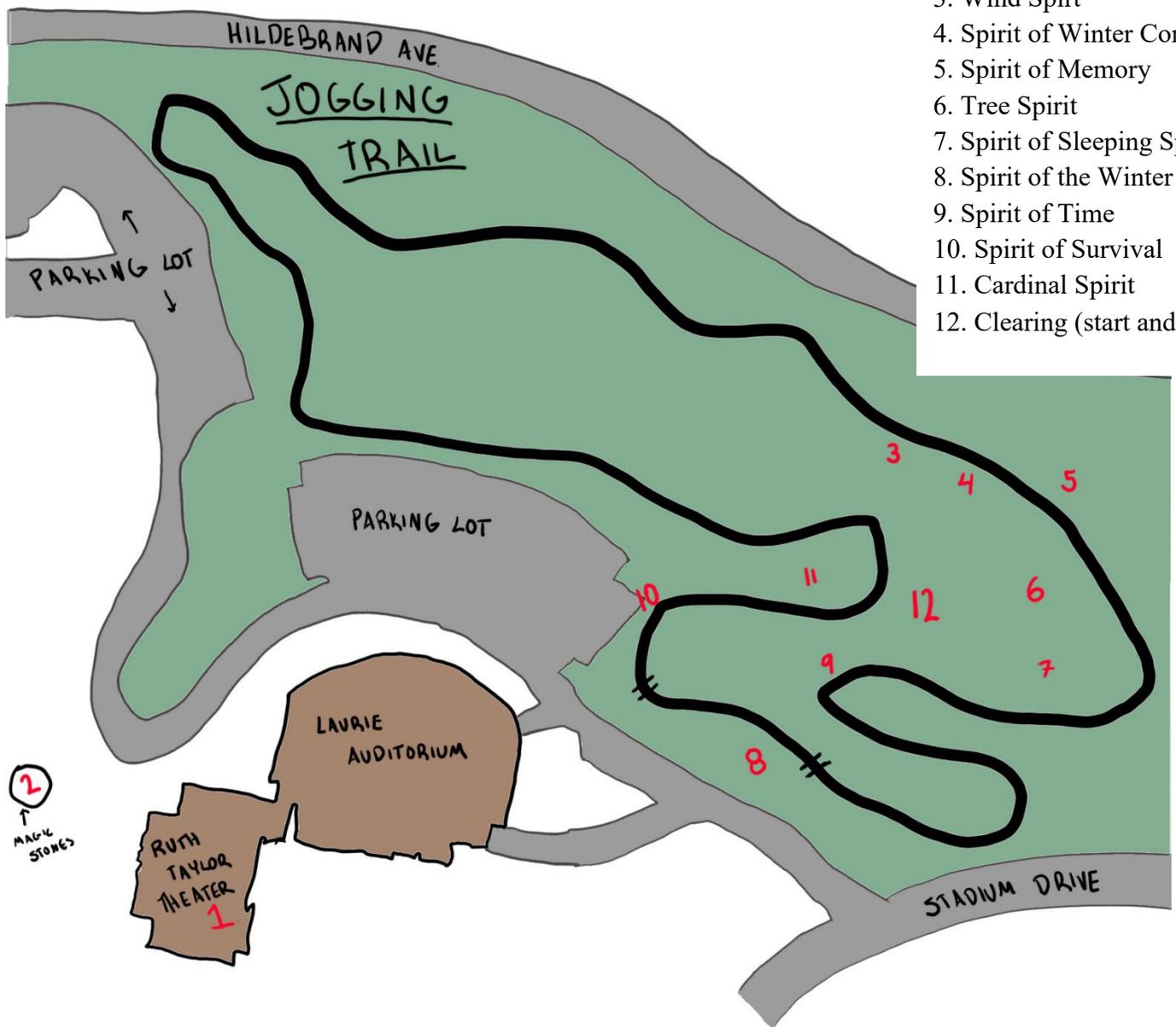


APPENDIX E

Map of Performer's Locations

Key

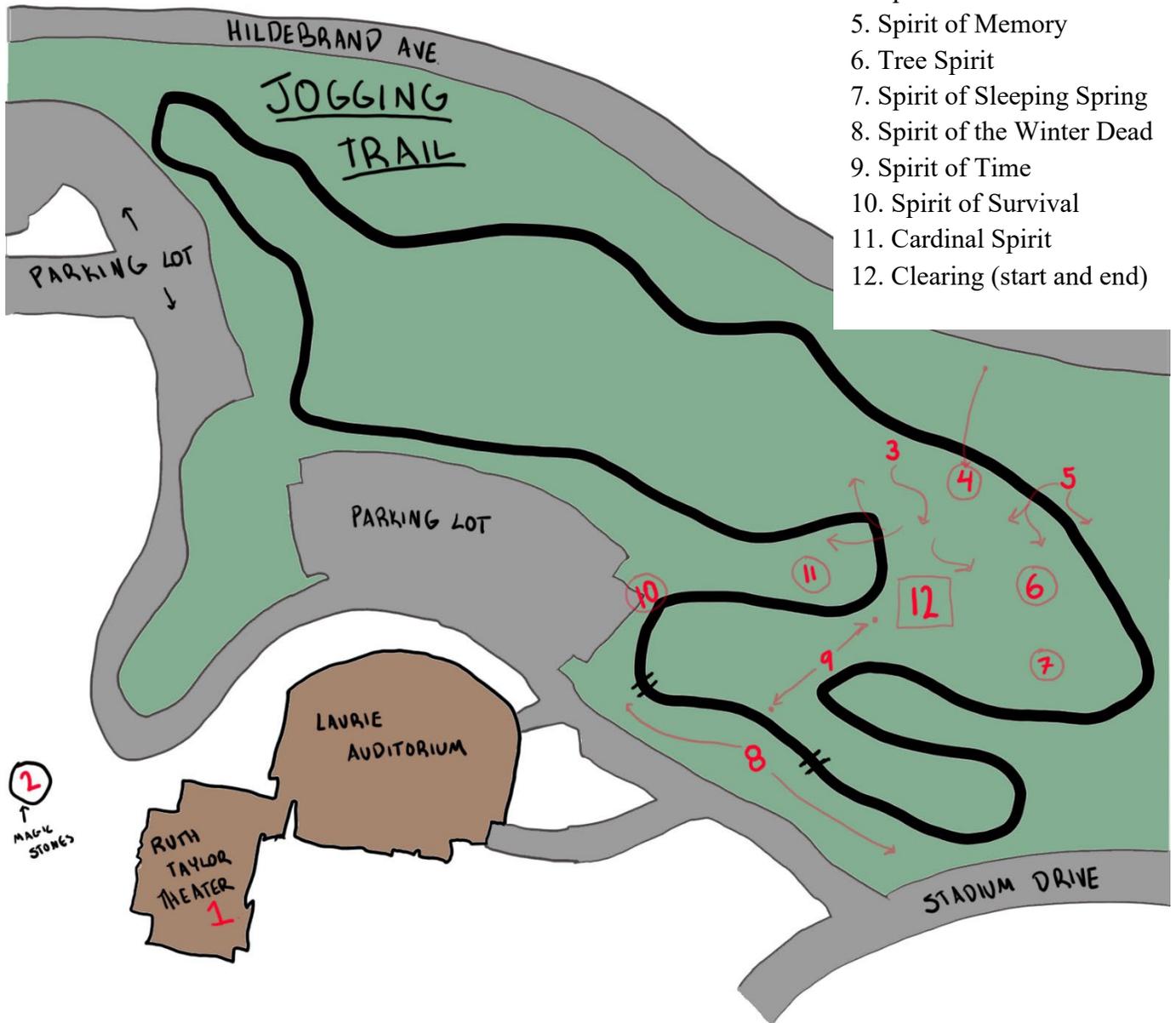
1. Performance Beginning
2. The Magic Stones
3. Wind Spirit
4. Spirit of Winter Comfort
5. Spirit of Memory
6. Tree Spirit
7. Spirit of Sleeping Spring
8. Spirit of the Winter Dead
9. Spirit of Time
10. Spirit of Survival
11. Cardinal Spirit
12. Clearing (start and end)



Map with performers' paths within the Valley

Key

1. Performance Beginning
2. The Magic Stones
3. Wind Spirit
4. Spirit of Winter Comfort
5. Spirit of Memory
6. Tree Spirit
7. Spirit of Sleeping Spring
8. Spirit of the Winter Dead
9. Spirit of Time
10. Spirit of Survival
11. Cardinal Spirit
12. Clearing (start and end)



APPENDIX F

The Script

**BENEATH ICY STARS**

**Cast**

Cardinal Spirit	Aubrey Kehn
Tree Spirit	Mindy Tran
Wind Spirit	Anthony Tresca
Spirit of Winter Comfort	Nico Champion
Spirit of Sleeping Spring	Noelle Barrera
Spirit of Memory	Lamonte Brooks
Spirit of Time	Kody Nace
Spirit of the Winter Dead	Sarah Bastos
Spirit of Survival	Alex Oliver
Wanderers	Caroline Neelley
	Morgan Cartwright
	Scott Stegink
	Sam Gabelmann
	Holly Gabelmann

**Preshow**

*The audience arrives at the Ruth Taylor Theater. There they may check their coats and other belongings with HOUSE MANAGERS. Each audience member must fill out a waiver*

*before receiving a glowing wristband. Five audience members, five colors. At the designated time, the audience is led out to the Magic Stones where the show will begin.*

### Beginning

*The cast is circled around the Magic Stones, facing in and singing/vocalizing/making rhythms for an improvised collective work. By the time the audience arrives, the improvised music is in full force. The audience walks all the way around the cast before being led by HOUSE MANAGERS to their designated spots. After about thirty seconds or so of music, the CARDINAL SPIRIT enters the ring. As the spirit enters, the rest of the cast (except for TREE SPIRIT) exit and move toward their next position (the clearing in the jogging trail).*

### CARDINAL SPIRIT

The winter bird sings a lonely song

To the barren ground

To the hidden leaves and hidden spring

You will find it where you least expect

The oldest season, the truest time

The days when plenty is forgotten

Welcome travelers. I see you and am seen by you.

You have come, from your homes and your chairs and your cars

From the warm dens of mankind

From the comforts you were born into

You have come, you humans

One foot in one world and one foot in another

One foot in the logical and one foot in the primal

One foot in warmth and the other in cold

You have felt divided for far too long

Split between the ways of the human and the ways of the animal

Fractured into equal parts wild and equal parts tame

No longer.

I cannot take you from the world of humans into the hidden second place

But I can show you a space in between.

Where spirits walk hand in hand with morals

And you breathe the cold air of winter and feel a new chill on your skin

If you would like, I will take you to my home

If you would like, I will introduce you to beings both familiar and strange

If you would like, I will remind you of things you've forgotten.

If you choose to come with me, there are certain traditions to be followed.

Please remember that a new path is an uneven one. In the dark, there are many hidden barriers and traps. It is best to walk slow when you are unsure.

The beings you meet along the way may be strange, but they will be kind to you if you are kind to them. Do not touch them unless they allow it, lest they disappear. They will watch over you and guide you. Follow the spirits where they go and they will show you the way.

The spirits may ask things of you. Answer if you like, but if you do not wish to respond, do not. Their invitations are open and freely given.

Should you have any trouble, ask the wandering lights. They are guardians to guide and protect you.

We will be together for a time and I will guide you home.

Now please, follow me, one by one into a world both familiar and new.

*The CARDINAL SPIRIT guides the audience down past Laurie Auditorium, down into the grassy area. The TREE SPIRIT follows. They pass through the gateway of trees and travel up to the path. They follow the path until they reach the hill overlooking “the valley”*

#### Between Beginning and Middle

*While the CARDINAL SPIRIT delivers the opening speech, the rest of the cast moves quickly and gracefully into their starting positions. At this moment, they begin to play the game TRIBES (they move as one chorus, following a given leader. The leader should change every few minutes or so,*

*this change is designated by a raised hand of a new leader). These movements should be accompanied by some sort of rhythm (clapping, stamping, shouts, etc).*

*The CARDINAL SPIRIT, TREE SPIRIT, and spectators arrive at the ridge. They look down into the “valley” where the cast is playing their games.*

### CARDINAL SPIRIT

There are my friends. They are here to show you their home. Their world exists in the space between the civilized and the ancient, today and a thousand years ago.

*After a minute or two of watching, the CARDINAL SPIRIT shines a flashlight down into the valley as a signal. At this, the cast spreads out into their designated locations and the middle of the work begins.*

### THE MIDDLE

*The CARDINAL SPIRIT guides the audience down into the valley. Around the first frisbee golf goal, WIND SPIRIT takes the audience member with green wristband.*

### WIND SPIRIT

The WIND SPIRIT does not speak. He rustles trees, jangles chains, whistles, whispers, howls, throws leaves, runs, jumps, creeps, crawls. He is curious, mischievous and mercurial. He takes his spectator wherever he pleases. Perhaps the bridge into the world of the dead. Perhaps to the SPIRIT OF SLEEPING SPRING. Perhaps he and the

audience explore together. He is careful to move slower when a spectator is with him. He leaves his companion at one performance and picks up another elsewhere. He watches to make sure that spectators are moving through the performances evenly. He always offers the option to stay. He is aware of everything at once.

*The CARDINAL SPIRIT continues to move forward. After a few paces, the SPIRIT OF WINTER COMFORT appears from the fence by City Vista and takes the audience member with the blue wristband.*

#### SPIRIT OF WINTER COMFORT

The SPIRIT OF WINTER COMFORT, wrapped in a thick sweater and warm blanket blinks sleepily at the audience. He offers them a blanket, a book, a snack, and if they accept, he sits with his spectator on a rock. Perhaps they speak of memories of winters past, of hearths and shared meals and safety from the howling wind. He perhaps observes other performances at a distance with his spectator, pointing out interesting things. Or else not. Perhaps he offers to guide his spectator on. WINTER COMFORT is a resting place in a wild world, the feeling of being by a fire or just warming up after a day in the snow.

*The CARDINAL SPIRIT moves onward. When the group arrives at the TREE SPIRIT's home, TREE SPIRIT departs the group. The group may pause here for a moment and the audience may choose to follow the TREE SPIRIT. Or else, they move forward.*

## TREE SPIRIT

The TREE SPIRIT sings a wintery song and moves just as her trees do. If a spectator draws near, the TREE SPIRIT offers to teach them her movements. This is almost like a meditation. She is ancient, strong, a promise that even without leaves, the trees do not forget. They are here even though they sleep. Perhaps the spirit has a story to tell, a memory of what it is like to be a tree asleep in the cold. Perhaps not.

*The CARDINAL SPIRIT moves around and behind the TREE SPIRIT. The SPIRIT OF MEMORY wanders aimlessly from above and takes an audience member or two. There is no controlling him*

## SPIRIT OF MEMORY

The SPIRIT OF MEMORY wanders the performance aimlessly, stopping as he stumbles or is reminded of something. He tells his stories or hum. He is impossibly old. He remembers everything, stories that are not his as well as those that are. He is our collective consciousness. He is unrelenting. He guides spectators to and from places, a conduit between performers. He may be nearly senile but he is watchful and protective of the audience.

## HIS MEMORIES

- I remember seeing snow for the first time. Real snow, that is. I was struck by how wet it was. I always thought that snow just sort of felt like cold dust. But really, it's very, very wet, and it makes you very damp if you fall

in it. I remember catching a snowflake on my tongue, just like in stories, and being fascinated by the feeling of it melting away into nothing.

- Once I stood on a bridge over a river in the driving snow. Everything was silent. The waters roared beneath me and I was terrified of slipping and falling in. The wind was relentless. I walked in the center of the bridge just in case. I felt like the world was disappearing, until it was just the water and the thin bridge and the wind and me.
- Once I got so cold that when I ran cold water over my fingers it felt hot.
- My mother slipped on ice on Christmas Eve when she was a kid and cracked her head open. She was upset because it hurt, but more upset that she had to shave part of her head to get stitches.
- When I was about 8 or 9, my family took a vacation to Chicago and ice skated on Frog Lake (real name). I remember being so proud that I could skate about as well as my mom (I used to rollerblade a lot, and they're very similar), and, more importantly, better than my dad and brother, who could be found clinging to the side of the rink or on their butts on the ice.
- Snow in South Texas is, obviously, pretty rare, but every time it happened (maybe twice or thrice in my childhood), my dad would make snow ice cream. Essentially, this was the purest snow we could find, in a bowl, with sugar and vanilla (real Mexican vanilla, not that extract shit). It's amazing, and involved all of my favorite food groups, and I miss it.

- Being so excited at my grandmama's [sic] house in Illinois that there was enough snow to make a snow angel in, then realizing how cold, wet, and messy making a snow angel is.
- Throughout most of my k-12 schooling that I can remember, my dad was superintendent of our school district. When people would ask me if it was weird to have him in that position while I was in the schools, I would always say the same thing: it's only bad in the winter. Basically, my dad made the final call on whether or not to cancel school on any given icy/snowy/exceptionally cold day; so, any time a snowflake or ice chip even breathed towards our school, my phone would immediately blow up with texts and messages asking me to ask my dad to cancel school. I never did, and he rarely would.
- One winter long ago, it snowed (it was not very much), and my brother and I went with some neighborhood kids to the biggest hill in the neighborhood (it was not very tall) with a large storage container lid (it was not very big) to sled. It did not go very well. After we returned, bastardized, my mom offered us some warm milk to get cozy. Warm milk is fucking gross
- My father grew up on a farm. Well, not exactly a farm, they only grew enough vegetables and fruit for my grandmother to occasionally make some sort of fresh berry pie or pickle a jar or two of beets. But they did raise chickens. He told me once about how these chickens were often turned into food during the winters, which could be long and brutal in the

foothills of the Catskills. He said that he can remember so clearly the bloom of red on the pure white snow, remember the tiny prints of the chickens foot as they hopped about for so long, so long after the deed was done. Tiny claw prints stepping in their own red and dragging it across the snow like some sort of abstract painter.

- Once, when I was much younger, the ice built up three inches deep along our road. Walking across it became a game of balance and driving on it was near unthinkable. Instead we stayed inside. For 4 days. I remember on the first day my mother and I went onto our trampoline, covered with a thick layer of ice and snow and we sunk our feet down into it. Then we slowly started to jump up and down. The more we moved, the more the ice began to break up. It split into these huge chunks that slid off the side of the trampoline and hit the ground in chunks. I remember my dog frantically running around trying to chase this new kind of foe. She loved it. When we went inside she would cuddle up right next to us at the fireplace warming herself to her tiny paw beans before sprinting to the door and waiting for another chance to bound around on the ice.

*The CARDINAL SPIRIT continues on the journey, perhaps with an audience member following, perhaps not. When the spirit arrives at the nest, the CARDINAL SPIRIT begins its performance.*

## THE SPIRIT OF SLEEPING SPRING

She sits beneath the stars and draws the heavens. She is a promise that spring will come again. When spectators come, she asks them a question and remembers the answer.

### THE SPIRIT OF TIME

The SPIRIT OF TIME runs from one tree to the other two. When he arrives, he does his ritual, then slowly moves back to the top. If a spectator joins him, he is careful to move slower.

### THE SPIRIT OF WINTER'S DEAD

She sings and moves gracefully beneath the ashen trees. The light strikes her from behind. If a spectator arrives at her bridge, the spectator's companion may not cross. The spectator has the choice to go on alone or to stay in the world of the living. If they join her, she will ask them their name. She will tell them her story:

I remember the cold and then the warm. Slipping away, slipping away like rain down a glass window. I felt brittle and then whole. If you decide to go into the winter, into the cold, never go alone. Never set out into the storm alone. If you set out alone, do not stop moving. If you stop moving, you'll slip, slip away. I had to rest. I couldn't move any further. Alone, so alone. The clock ticks. You don't have enough time. You feel the time slipping, slipping away. Do you remember? I can't. I used to. No longer. The memories slip away, slip away. Can you feel the sun on your face? The grass under your feet? The spring time coming? It is winter here. Always winter. My secret? I love the cold. I used to hate it. Now it is home. I slipped away, away, away. Now you have a choice. You can move on from here, to the land of the warm, or you can stay, stay, stay here with me?

At this moment she is in the shadows with her companion. The SPIRIT OF SURVIVAL will come to the other bridge and offer the spectator the chance to stay or leave.

If the spectator leaves, this is all.

If the spectator chooses to stay, she will take them to her nest where there are apples and a small gift. She may tell them of her memories of the winter, of songs she once knew and of the promise of seasons to come. When she is ready, she will lead them to another part of the performance.

#### THE SPIRIT OF SURVIVAL

She watches the land of the dead to offer salvation to those drawn into death's spell. She watches the parking lot and eats oreos. She sits on her rock, or she stands and speaks. She offers her spectator a leaf. If they stay, perhaps they sit together. If not, she leads them to the CARDINAL SPIRIT'S tree. When she wants, she says:

Winter in Texas is a choice. An option. Not the only one, though.

Some people choose not to accept it. Basketball shorts in January?

Some people can choose to go all in. Snow boots and parkas removed layer by layer because wishful thinking can't change the weather.

This parking lot, this dim orange glow doesn't magically disappear when you've decided this space is *different*. The cars don't stop speeding by, those flickering lights don't turn

off. Nothing about this space is something we can change out of a desire to make it more than what it is.

The only truth that this space, this season, offers is what you can physically feel. You can feel the cold air on the nose. You can see the dead leaves on the ground.

Winter doesn't have to be more than it is. It can be colder and get dark earlier. Those things don't have to mean anything.

Look, I'm not asking you to reject all you've seen so far. I'm not trying to make you deny the mystic in favor of the natural, I'm just asking you to remember you have a choice.

#### THE CARDINAL SPIRIT

The CARDINAL SPIRIT watches, always watches, from a tree.

#### END

*One of the WANDERERS signals to the CARDINAL SPIRIT, who goes to the clearing and signals (with a flashlight) that it is time to end. The CARDINAL SPIRIT begins a collective improvised song. The audience is guided by performers into a circle, where the music grows, and then slowly dies. Each spectator is given a piece of firewood, guided into a line, and lead out of the clearing up toward the path by CARDINAL SPIRIT. The cast follows, but must stop at the tree line. This is the border of their world.*

*The spectators and CARDINAL stop at the ridge and look down back to the valley.*

CARDINAL SPIRIT

They are glad to have met you, travelers. You have seen them and been seen. Join me, and I shall guide you back to your space and time.

*The CARDINAL SPIRIT guides the audience, perhaps humming or whistling, to the fire pit.*

*Meanwhile, the cast races to the fire pit by way of cardiac hill.*

*Everybody has s'mores together.*

*When it is time to leave, they leave.*

END

## APPENDIX G

*This email was composed and sent to spectators by Caroline Neelley*

Congratulations! You have secured a ticket for *Beneath Icy Stars* on Saturday, 2/9. Please arrive at the Ruth Taylor Theatre Building Lobby by 10 pm. There will be a house manager available to collect any belongings that you do not wish to carry with you during the performance.

Please read the following guidelines before arriving at the performance.

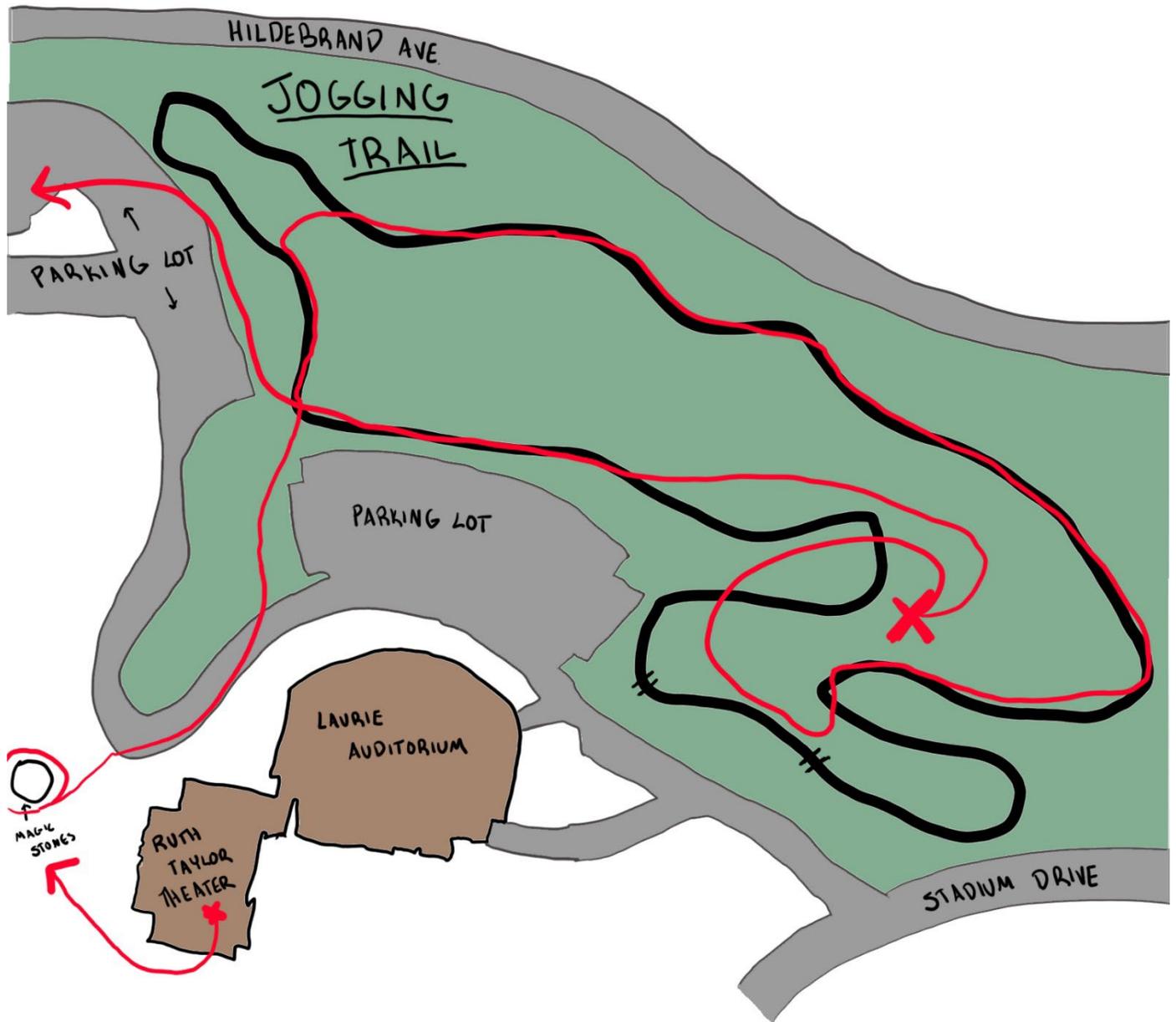
- Come dressed for movement. You will be outside moving for the duration of the performance; please dress accordingly. If you have any questions or concerns about standing and walking outside for the duration of the show, let us know.
- The piece will last from 1.5-2 hours.
- You will be required to sign a Trinity University waiver before participating in this piece.
- The piece will be an individual, interactive experience. Performers will engage with you in ways unlike other theatrical performances, so please be prepared to explore and try something new! Though you may arrive with a group, you will likely travel through most of the performance alone. If this is a problem or if you have any questions, let us know as soon as possible.
- If for any reason you are unable to attend your designated performance, let us know immediately. We have a limited amount of spaces, and if you cannot attend, we would like to offer your spot to someone else

- In the case of inclement weather, we will contact you to reschedule a time to attend the performance.
- We don't anticipate any injuries, however, there is a certain level of personal risk assumed by the audience in this piece. We will make every attempt to take as much care as possible to keep you safe.

We look forward to seeing you at *Beneath Icy Stars*. If you have any questions or concerns, let Holly or I know!

APPENDIX H

Map of the spectator's general route through the performance



APPENDIX I

*Selected Performance Photos (Photo Credit to Sam Gabelmann and Leah Woehr)*



*The Spirit of Winter Comfort*



*Tree Spirit*



*Spirit of Time*



*Spirit of Survival*



*Cardinal Spirit*

## APPENDIX J

## Spring Immersive Piece Proposal

This piece will be a sequel to the winter immersive piece *Beneath Icy Stars*. It will take place on the jogging trail in the mid-morning (between 6:00-8:00am), presenting an entirely different view of the area. Unlike *BIS*, the spring immersive piece will be performed for an audience of one. The entire production team will be two people: myself and Caroline Neelley. A limited cast size will allow this performance great flexibility.

I am proposing this piece to continue my exploration of immersive theatre, a wide label that can include many types of performance. Now that Trinity has been home to one type of immersive theatre, I would like to introduce another type: one-to-one performance. By doing so, I hope to further my education as well as that of the department. I hope that this piece will be a satisfying challenge for myself and an interesting experience for my spectators.

As mentioned previously, the performance will be a one-to-one. Essentially, this means that I will be performing for one audience member at a time, in a unique, personalized way. The spectator will be asked to meet me at the jogging trail in the morning. Together, we will take care of the area: moving sticks, raking, and possibly planting wildflowers. At the end, if possible, I would like to provide the spectator with a very basic breakfast (bread, butter, maybe an apple, or tea).

After directing *Beneath Icy Stars*, I feel very familiar with the jogging trail environment; this knowledge will hopefully head off any potential issues with the space. Additionally, I hope that the small size and simplicity of the performance will prevent any major problems. Ultimately, this show will require little in terms of resources, but will have a significant impact on its participants.

SCRIPT

Will be devised

BUDGET

Requirements:

- Bread
- Apples
- Butter (?)
- Tea (?)
- Water

## WORKS CITED

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