DRINKS WITH THE NEW YORKER

THE STRANGE EXPERIMENTAL-THEATRE EXPERIENCE GIVING NEW MEANING TO "SHOW, DON'T TELL"

The minds behind "You Me Bum Bum Train," which has sparked a ticket frenzy, discuss re-creating real-life scenarios, crafting a show that gives people "epiphanies," and why they ask participants to sign an N.D.A.

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Somewhere in London's theatre district—I can't say where—there's a nondescript office building with a neon sign in the lobby that reads, in blue cursive script, "You Me Bum Bum Train." The illuminated sign, and the handful of nervous-looking people that gather outside four evenings a week, are the only clues that there's something odd going on. "Bum Bum Train," as it's known, is an immersive theatrical experience, which invites one audience

member into its surrealist world at a time. It is also, for people who like that sort of thing, one of London's most coveted tickets. What happens during the hourlong show is a closely guarded secret: participants are required to sign a nondisclosure agreement, and the website reveals almost nothing. "For the show to have maximum effect, the less you know the better," it reads. "If you want tickets, do not research into you me bum bum train."

O.K., sure, *fine*. That's all well and good for the strapping extroverts, the clown-class veterans and the front-row-comedy sitters, but what about the rest of us? If you are not in the habit of blindly submitting to novel experiences—perhaps, like me, you were the person who wanted to know where the mushrooms came from—you might do a little recon. I did, and it gave me pause. "Bum Bum Train" turns the dynamics of theatre on its head. Instead of many audience members watching a smaller number of performers, a cast of hundreds faces an audience of just one. (About seventy-five people see the show on any given night, one after the other.) Participants, called "passengers," move on their own through a series of real-world scenes—a doctor's-office waiting room, for example, or a crowded train—in which they must quickly discern what is happening and respond. To add to the precarious nature of this enterprise, the cast is made up entirely of volunteers who could walk off the set at any point.

My first thought was: *Run!* It sounded like the nightmare in which you show up to class unprepared, and inexplicably naked, but over and over again. Nevertheless, "Bum Bum Train" has inspired rhapsodic praise and a ticket frenzy. (Tickets were offered via a lottery system, but have now sold out.) "In 60 minutes, I learned more about myself than I ever could in months of therapy," a reviewer for *Metro* wrote. A volunteer claimed that being in the show cured his depression. Responses tend to be "a bit like when people have done ayahuasca," Morgan Lloyd, one of the show's creators, told me. Celebrities also have weighed in; Neil Patrick Harris, in a recent Instagram video, called it "one of the greatest experiences you'll have in your entire life."

These accounts never mention what actually takes place during the show. (Critics, like passengers, are asked to sign an N.D.A.) When a version of the show ran in 2015, one reviewer wrote, cryptically, that the perfect passenger would be "a physically fit egotist of average height," familiar with improv and karaoke. Another early reviewer wrote that participants "need to come with a head for heights, a heart for adventure, and a penchant for performing," adding, "it is certainly the only show I've ever been to where I've been worried that the cast might drop me."

"I think it's quite anarchist in its model," Kate Bond, who created the show with Lloyd, told me. They were sitting together on a striped couch in the bar of the Soho Hotel. The decor was maximalist, with zany-aunt undertones: pink floral wallpaper, orange lampshades. We were sitting around a table made from a repurposed pinball machine. Bond is blond with wide blue eyes, and she was wearing a velvet sweatshirt; Lloyd had on a Frank Bruno T-shirt. The duo met at art school in Brighton, in the early two-thousands, where they bonded over a shared absurdist sense of humor. (Once, Lloyd recalled, he told Bond that he was thinking of getting a haircut, "She said 'Oh, is your mum gonna do it for you? Is she gonna use her tits? Snip Snip.' I was, like, Is she nuts?") They are not a couple, but often seem like one. When it came time to order, they each selected a Caesar salad and sparkling water. When the dishes arrived, Lloyd, who is a pescetarian, picked the bacon off of his and passed it to Bond. "I'm the family dog," she said, amiably.

We were meeting the day after I went to see the show. I didn't sign a nondisclosure agreement, but I did agree not to give away what happens in its scenes. Instead, in the spirit of O. J. Simpson's failed hypothetical confessional, "If I Did It," I'll tell you what *might* have happened. I might have arrived at the ordinary-looking office building at my allocated time. I might have been shown upstairs by a volunteer, and then sat awkwardly in a sterile waiting room for a few minutes. After relinquishing my phone and doing various safety and claustrophobia checks, I might suddenly have found

myself in the lobby of a run-down hotel. “Your passport?” the receptionist might’ve said. The details might have been immaculate: the luggage, the moth-eaten curtains, the revolving door, a couple on their honeymoon arguing in the corner. I might’ve been able to speak to anyone and have them reply.

After a minute or two, the bellhop might have offered to show me to my room, and instead I might’ve found myself being introduced as the next performer in a stand-up comedy show. Flustered, I might’ve told the dozens of eager listeners the first dad joke that came to mind, and quickly shuffled offstage, only to be handed a ticket and shown to a seat on an airplane. The man next to me—looking as if he’s travelling for business—might have nodded hello and then put on a pair of headphones. A few rows ahead of us, there might have been an altercation under way. A woman might have been yelling, and asking for help. I might have ignored her and opened the magazine in front of me, or I might have jumped up and offered assistance. Or I might have done something weirder, like somersaults in the aisle. Before I knew it, the steward might have shown me out through an emergency exit and into a bustling café, where I might have been expected to take orders from impatient customers. “Are they still doing eggs?” someone might have asked, annoyed.

The real scenes are much better—these are just stand-ins—and there are many, many more of them. Most capture mundane experiences, impressive in their hyperrealistic way, but some are sublime, or surreal, or place you in a morally challenging position. (Passengers can request a time-out, or ask to exit the show at any point.) Most interesting to me were the scenes in which I felt compelled to adopt an opinion or personality I might normally abhor. You might find yourself in a corporate boardroom passionately defending the sale of your customers’ private health data for financial gain and think, *What am I doing?* At the show’s bar afterward, where passengers are able to chat with one another, I spoke to participants who had surprised themselves with their reactions. One person said he had become aggressive and shouted at the

actors. Another admitted she had temporarily adopted a misogynist outlook. "Better than sex!" someone told me, ecstatic. "More memorable."

"It really interests me whether people decide to be themselves, or whether they decide to adopt a character," Bond said. People have told her and Lloyd that the show made them realize that they hated certain things about themselves; others have emerged with a profound sense of self-love. Some people try to "win" the scene, berating themselves for not doing more with it, as if they are being graded or assessed. "If someone's being really silly, a lot of the time people are doing that because they're uncomfortable, and they want to find the boundaries so they can be reassured. So that's a massive compliment, because they're trying to say, 'This isn't real, is it? This isn't real,' " Lloyd said. I asked the pair how they wanted people to feel after the show. "Free, with lots of epiphanies and realizations about themselves and life," Bond said. (For my part, I went through the show mostly as the politest—if not the bravest—version of myself, as if afraid to upset the performers.) "You don't know what you're repressing half the time," Bond said. "Hopefully it unleashes your shadow self to a degree."

"Bum Bum Train" encourages participants to adopt many different viewpoints—like an empathy exercise—but Morgan and Lloyd have long been committed to a singular vision. After university, Morgan moved to London to work in production while Bond stayed in Brighton, and she watched as many of her creative friends took jobs in the corporate world or the service industry. "Kate was thinking, All these amazing people who used to make things, you're all going to disappear, and why don't we come back and make something?" Lloyd said. Bond added, "I just felt like making art was quite lonely in a way, and I wanted to make something with other people—like, collaborate on a big scale." When a family friend passed away, Bond inherited twenty thousand pounds, and put it into the first few versions of "Bum Bum Train."

The very first iteration, which played in an office basement in Brighton, in

2004, was “awful,” Bond said. “Alcohol everywhere. It was debauched.” Lloyd added, “It would just turn into a big party at the end.” They handed out flyers to recruit audience members and had friends and relatives of their friends make up the cast. Passengers went through the show in a wheelchair, and the scenes were mostly played for laughs. “In the early days, it was way more surreal and comedy-based,” Lloyd said. Eventually, they realized that the most realistic scenes were having the strongest impact. They became obsessive about re-creating authentic scenarios, down to the smells and the dust on the floor, and they created different scenes every year, each with more detail. The 2015 version, which they opened in London, drew praise from the likes of Stephen Fry. “We were really driven to make realities more and more convincing,” Lloyd said. “The lengths that we were prepared to go to were way further than anyone else, so it just became Kate and me.”

For many years, Bond and Lloyd didn’t make much money from “Bum Bum Train.” They supported themselves through odd jobs and state benefits for more than a decade, they told me. They now take a wage, as do about twenty members of the production team, and additional funding for the show comes from private nights for wealthy patrons. Bond calls the show a “lifeboat” for her mental health, explaining that she has been institutionalized five times. In 2022, a period of psychosis made her believe that she needed to embarrass herself to save the human race. Lloyd took her to the hospital, and Bond became convinced that she was participating in a rehearsal for the show. The whole experience was “terrifying,” Bond said, “like being hijacked into hell.” It reminded her of something a passenger had told her recently. “You just go though ‘Bum Bum Train’ and you realize we’re all dealt different cards in life, and the person next to you could easily be you,” she said. “It’s the lottery of the universe that dictates your whole life experience.”

We had nearly finished. The glass-topped side table to my left, I noticed suddenly, was filled with toy cars, like some errant detail in an A.I.-generated image. Was the secrecy around the show really necessary? I asked. “Super necessary,” Lloyd said. Not knowing what’s going to happen ahead of time

leads to more authentic reactions, he explained. “I think ‘Bum Bum Train’ reminds people that life is just a ride,” he said. “And look at all the *detail*. It puts people into the mode of, like, Wow, it’d be so hard to create this. It’s all completely *real*. The dust, the dirt, the colors, it’s all just so perfectly done.” He scanned the restaurant. “If you’re going through a really hard time, think of it as a ‘Bum Bum Train’ scene,” he said. “You could be in a really hot, stuffy tube and think, Oh, this is awful.” But imagine if you’d *built* that scene. “The casting is bang on.” ♦

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