

# Touching the Spectator: Intimacy, Immersion, and the Theater of the Velvet Rope

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## Abstract

Immersive media is a hot topic, especially in the United States. The novelty value of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, which became New York's hottest ticket in 2011 and 2012, has positioned the British company's trademark brand of "immersive theater" at the front of debate about new media and the future of storytelling. This work is supposed to "shatter" the fourth wall of traditional non-immersive theater, and spectators describe the experience as "mind-blowing." For audiences, the ability to interact physically with objects and the actors' bodies is the core of this hardcore theater experience. But it can be argued that Punchdrunk does very little to engage the fourth wall and that its commodification of the one-on-one encounter bypasses an opportunity to break down the distinction between audience and performer, the radical boundary crossing that immersive media is supposed to achieve. Both media pundits and performance scholars have been remiss in praising this sexy new theater. Comparing scope for theatrically significant audience-actor interaction here and in théâtre érotique, I propose that sex shows, while acknowledging their foundation in sex and voyeurism, may in fact produce a theater less compromised by voyeurism and audience neediness than Punchdrunk's theater of intimacy. The argument is not that *SNM* isn't serious theater because it's too much like a skin show, but that the skin show might do more as theater.

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## I. Club Rules

For all the discourse of immediacy and uniqueness in the immersive experience of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* — the freshness of the individual encounter that the greater part of the essays in this volume do well to describe — the immersed spectator is still a theatergoer, bringing an archive of seen performance and performance expectations to the experience. For myself, the incomparable event called to mind several comparisons.

As I have spent the greater part of the last decade immersed in London theater, Punchdrunk's North American flagship reminded me immediately of other work by the company: *Faust* (2006)

and especially *Masque of the Red Death* (2007). Indeed, it was the strange familiarity of this show's mise en scène that struck me most forcibly. *SNM*'s vaguely 1940s Hitchcock-noir looks and feels remarkably like the company's 1840s-styled adventures with Poe.<sup>1</sup> The faded gothic aesthetic that has led the press to describe the "painstakingly detailed" McKittrick Hotel variously as a 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s establishment strongly recalled for me the period style mashups of London's retro clubbing scene, which emerged in the mainstream around the same time and which has followed a similar trajectory (from underground happenings to partnership with major drinks sponsors).<sup>2</sup> The two scenes merged visibly in 2007, when *Masque*, designed to culminate in a masquerade ball, offered a separate sale of weekend tickets for the show's "afterparty," attracting crowds of London's casual weekend revellers and theatrical costume partiers. In the Manhattan warehouse, the more socially atomized and goal-oriented audience, aggressively rifling through drawers and papers, recalled rather more the solitary activities of computer gamers playing alone in the dark.<sup>3</sup> And yet, the spectacle of these especially game gamers suggested some kinship with ongoing work at London South Bank's "sandpit," where resident company Hide&Seek creates "social games" and "playful experiences," with an emphasis on liveness, experimentation, and social improvisation.<sup>4</sup> At other moments, *SNM*'s large performance set pieces, in contrast to the ethos of environmental exploration and play, triggered memories of formal dance theater. The slow motion choreography of *SNM*'s banquet scene invited a (rather weak) comparison with Jirí Kylián and Michael Schumacher's breathtaking gestural ballet *Last Touch First*, or with the searing slow motion work of New York based performers Eiko and Komo, whose *Naked* premiered in Manhattan around the time of *SNM*'s New York opening. A particular and personal archive frames my response to *SNM*'s transatlantic iteration, though it seems striking how little has been made of any of these contiguous contexts in critical writing about the show.

Academics have been particularly slow, or unwilling, to qualify the theatrical effects of Punchdrunk's "sexy" brand of "immersive theatre" with reference to those effects achieved in "erotic theatre"<sup>5</sup> — although the large and growing record of audience commentary frames the "mind-blowing," "mindfucking" experience of *SNM* in terms that point insistently and overwhelmingly to the physical as an index of value. These accounts highlight the "sexiness" of scenes and scenarios, the desirability of performers, and especially the "one-on-ones" — prized moments of privileged access to performers, voyeuristically simulated in discussion, where levels of intimacy (and "hotness") are evaluated and assigned value according to the spectators' sense of privilege.<sup>6</sup>

For some, this produces dissonance. In an email to W. B. Worthen, Todd Barnes describes his epiphany at *SNM*, where a moment's association suddenly bridged two performance worlds: "I've never been to a 'gentleman's club,' but I suddenly became aware of the rules that govern that space: be touched but do not touch" (Worthen 2012, 97). Of course, in a traditional gentlemen's club, the rules, at least the most important rules, are not laid down. The point is to alienate and exclude those men who do not already know the rules of the club, and thereby confirm that they are not "gentlemen" (the gentlemen decide who are ladies). By contrast, in "gentlemen's clubs," aka strip clubs (the ambiguity implying a democratizing euphemism), things are made much easier for visitors. These spaces of titillation and voyeurism are policed aggressively, and in almost every case the rules are made as explicit as the performances. Barnes's sudden realization of the rule-bound nature of *SNM*'s performance space is suggestive and deserves closer examination, particularly given the prominence of audience policing in this production (see Gordon 2012).

It should be noted that Barnes does not say that *SNM* is like a strip club. To my knowledge, no one has claimed this. In making the connection, he displays, if anything, a certain confidence regarding the clear boundary between theater and erotic performance — what lies on either side of the divide (despite having "never been in a 'gentleman's club'"). On one side is the barren transactive experience: insignificant, non-immersive, consumerist, quickly grasped (and dismissed) in a single rule of thumb. On the other side is the "game-changing" immersive theater experience that must be *seen* (and, apparently, seen over and over again), to be appreciated.<sup>7</sup> Barnes's professed ignorance of the "gentlemen's club" displays a certain knowingness, a knowledge of theater and of what is *not* theater (the spectacle of a striptease, or the "one-on-one" of a private dancer). This stands to be questioned. I would not aim to argue that *SNM* isn't real theater because it is (merely) erotic spectacle — far from it. Instead, I intend to examine both sides and to consider the possibility that "sex shows," while acknowledging their foundation in sex and voyeurism, may in fact produce theater *less* compromised by voyeurism and audience neediness.

Entering Théâtre Érotique Chochotte, 34, rue Saint-André-des-Arts, Paris, where patrons are welcome to enter any time after noon and may stay until midnight — allowing for twelve hours of uninterrupted immersion in the space — no one tells you the rules that govern your stay. This makes a strong contrast with entry into Punchdrunk's New York show, where a vampish club hostess with a camp S&M manner straight out of *Rocky Horror* pushes into the waiting area and warms up the crowd by reading them the rules: no taking off your mask, no talking, no cell phones [chuckles], no holding hands [giggles]. Along with the show's finale, this induction marks a signal difference between *SNM* and *Masque* (which otherwise show overlap in their mechanics,

aesthetics, and major setpieces). In *SNM*, the collective wait at the bar and the reading of the rules replaces *Masque's* properly Macbethian encounter with a guide who beckons, lays a finger on her choppy lips, and then vanishes. There, the gesture, inviting imitation, is enough. To play along with the performers (not simply to stay in the space), it says, you will need to be silent. In *SNM*, this framing disappears. Where the inclusive gesture of *Masque's* induction establishes a connection between audience and performer (as well as the powerful disorientation of *Macbeth's* opening), the reading of the rules in *SNM* implies rights in the space. Audience members duly proceed as if issued with a search warrant.<sup>8</sup>

In Chochotte, certain audience behaviors are observed, without being prescribed. There is no talking, during or between the performances; here, as in the induction to *Masque*, the spectators follow the performers (you don't speak, not being spoken to). However, only a few minutes are needed to understand that the rule Barnes cites — "be touched, but do not touch" — does not hold here. The performers move into the audience, where they may spend variable amounts of time, and may be touched, very intimately. On a regular day, any number of norms might be inferred (members of the audience will touch but not be touched, touch but not kiss, remain in the audience), but none of these appears to hold *as a rule*.

If any rule exists here, it is that no one moves from their seat to make contact with the performers (unless invited), though when the performance moves from dance to sex acts, voyeurs unable to see the action may shift to get a better view, hanging over the performer much as *SNM's* masked spectators hover over Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's moment of intimacy in the bathtub. What enforces this unspoken contract among Chochotte's audience, the promise to remain immobile and apparently passive in a given scene, is presumably the same thing that regulates the level of contact: the risk of the performers' withdrawal. Acutely aware of being seen (and felt), constrained spectators work to engage the Chochotte performers without approaching them, through their body language. The atmosphere is charged. *SNM* audiences do the same, though perhaps more mechanically: Punchdrunk aficionados claim to have discovered a formula of "positive body language" to unlock one-on-ones and encourage selection: stand close, lean in, plant the feet squarely, cock the head curiously.<sup>9</sup> Now, on any night of the show, one can see masks tilting furiously in an effort to attract the performers. Such behavior, of course, lacks the charge, and the responsiveness, that comes with being highly visible, where any exchange with the performers is open to view, where the spectator is thus always on stage.

To say that there are no rules in Chochotte is not to say that there are no limits. When a performer takes one's hand and whispers "you can do anything you want," this brings up a series of

questions that audiences at *SNM* will never have to face. No doubt, as in *Sleep No More*, everything that happens in Chochotte has been rehearsed, which is as much as to say it's all been seen before. The difference is the sense of uncertainty that is essential to Chochotte's théâtre érotique. When or how audience members may make contact with the dancers is a question that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. On any given night, there *are* rules, but they are forged in a unique encounter between audience and performer.

## II. The Fourth Wall, the Sixth Floor, and a Velvet Rope

The parallels drawn here rest mainly on audience behavior and expectations, not on performance style. *The New York Times* paints a sympathetic portrait of the vulnerable Punchdrunk performer, a description that at once evokes and defuses sexual allure, here attributed to a specific, Shakespearean role:

As Lady Macbeth, Ms. Sparks [Tori Sparks] invests her performance with a rawness that is by turns volatile, sexual and, ultimately, vulnerable. It's the kind of role that has also attracted undesirable elements: while women in the audience have been known to touch her inappropriately, some men have done worse. (Kourlas 2011)

While Punchdrunk's performers deplore and distance themselves from the inappropriate behavior of ogling, groping audiences, it seems salient that the company keeps staging work in which modes of contact and relation drift inevitably towards the sexual. *SNM*'s dance idiom ("language" is an exaggeration) works in an oppositional mode, as described by choreographer Maxine Doyle — an Aristotelian physics of attraction and repulsion for which the confrontation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth offers the perfect model, but which I found at work in multiple scenes of seduction around the hotel. Doyle's exploration of coupling and uncoupling — as much a cliché in modern dance as in duet-oriented classical ballet — ensures that at times the whole cast appears to be doing a version of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Whenever three or more are gathered together an orgy seems to be the likely outcome, indeed the promise for the audiences that gather to watch. The different banquets in *Masque of the Red Death* and *SNM* both end in sexual choreography. The bloody ghost of Banquo arrives to trouble *SNM*'s feast, but, like much else, is quickly absorbed in the orgy. This has been a perennial feature of Punchdrunk productions: *Masque*, *SNM*, and *Faust*. In *SNM*, the witches' second meeting with Macbeth takes the form of an orgiastic dance under strobe lights, with maximal (male) nudity and simulated sex. The bloody baby, the armed head, the tree of their prophecies, the ghost of Banquo at Macbeth's table — all make their appearance. But among fans and hopefuls seeking out the experience, the sequence is identified as "the orgy."

Audiences trying to play along with the actors might emulate their ostentatious performance of polymorphous perversity and indulge in a general spirit of self-absorbed erotomania: here, to be recognized is to be desired, *to exist is to be loved*. It may also be that they reach out to touch in good earnest. Punchdrunk invites its audience to break the fourth wall (a term thoroughly mangled in media coverage and interviews) by crossing into the performance space and moving freely inside it; the company congratulates audiences on their daring in opening doors, drawers, and seeking the most intimate contact possible with objects and performers. By issuing masks to spectators, the company introduces, as it understands, a fourth wall stand-in.<sup>10</sup> Really, the mask is a fetish of the fourth wall that invests its wearer with magical invisibility and anonymity within the performance and promises, if removed by a performer in the situation of a one-on-one, privileged access beyond the limitations of the (fetishized) fourth wall — contact that also typically exceeds the bounds of permissible contact outside of the theater's walls.

The mask may in any case be a red herring. I would venture to suggest that Punchdrunk has effectively reinstalled the fourth wall, the invisible wall, with *SNM*'s sixth floor, a conspicuous, locked door barring audiences from its performance space. Barrett's masks represent the fourth wall as something that can be donned and doffed for a plunge into full immersion (surely wishful thinking). But with the sixth floor, the structure of the proscenium is preserved (revealed) essentially intact — except that the sixth floor show, inside its closed sixth floor box, is for others to watch. As in the ostentatiously performed privacy of the one-on-ones, where the withdrawal behind closed doors is a key element, what is concealed matters as much as what is shown. The special visibility of the sixth floor's open secret creates a new kind of *visible* invisible wall, the theater of the velvet rope.<sup>11</sup>

Audiences and media seem equally confused by Punchdrunk's treatment of the fourth wall, a meaningful construct in the context of proscenium theater that becomes in the discourse of immersive theater a moving boundary line that we are never really sure we've crossed, a line immersive theater is supposed somehow to "shatter" (the line, perhaps, between theater and reality?).<sup>12</sup> Spectators' behavior and their framing of the experience in online discussion strongly suggest that, having crossed onto the stage, they perceive the space between their own bodies and the actors' as the next boundary that immersive theater invites or challenges them to cross, the one-on-one being the privileged platform for this.

Although it is the removal of the mask (Barrett's "fourth wall") that sets the one-on-one apart, every one-on-one encounter appears to involve, and highlight, touch.<sup>13</sup> Whether gentle or rough, sexual or simply intimate, the contact is evidently sexualized in its reception by the

audience. Audience accounts cited in this issue describe a "stroke" or a "caress," where they cannot claim a kiss. Another example, a report of "getting tucked in and closely examined" by the nurse, might evoke the complex intimacy of Zecora Ura's *Hotel Medea*, simultaneously reassuring and disturbing, in which each member of the audience, framed as Medea's children, is individually tucked in and read a bedtime story.<sup>14</sup> But the meeting with the nurse is framed as the first of several erotic encounters: "getting tucked in and examined closely . . . I was so stoked." Even when the contact is not manifestly erotic, the response *is*. The same spectator describes supporting Hecate as she ate and concludes, "She retreated with a new love, so I moved on."<sup>15</sup> The manifest erotomania (who loves whom here?) is palpable and becomes the normal tone in these discussions.

The specific details of *SNM*'s abundant one-on-ones — the "dirty details" traded by spectators — are really less interesting than the essential *sameness* of these patented encounters, nicely broken down by Tom Cartelli's essay in this cluster. The immersive theater company's use of one-to-one dynamics appears strangely limited. One-on-one situations in the theater have a special capacity to dismantle, or trouble, the distinction between audience and performer by making the audience aware of the actor as observer. Although, as Robert Shaughnessy notes, the rhetoric of "active participation" may be as much overextended in the service of original practices as in immersive theater, one can observe this in what the actor playing the Porter does (what any comedian can do) when he looks down from the thrust stage and singles out a face in the audience (Shaughnessy 2012). There is little of interest that can be said about my experiences of one-on-ones in *Sleep No More*. The encounters follow a typical format: a character takes you by the hand, leads you into a room, takes off your mask, and tells you a story. This formula combines the adrenal thrill of touch with the thrill of personalized narrative, but does little to engage, let alone "shatter," the "fourth wall."

This brings to mind another Punchdrunk production in which a one-on-one actor-audience encounter occurred outside the formula of the one-on-one. In *Masque* in 2007, pursuit of an escaping murderer found me at some point alone with the actor in a dark, narrow walkway. Crossing the walkway, the actor stopped and wheeled around, stood frozen for a moment, staring wildly, then lurched forward, scything his arms through the air just in front of me. Startled, then puzzled as I watched him groping in the darkness in front of me, I realized what was happening: the performance contract — my privileged invisibility — was in this moment being renegotiated. The murderer could not see me (the actor was saying); but perhaps he could hear me, perhaps he could feel me . . . I crouched and hid — in full view. In that moment, alone in the dark, the actor was able to make me feel *his* fear — his vulnerability as well as my own — making it possible to question and shift

our relationship. The actor's response might have been programmed, a distinct possibility given the company's dependence on timed precision. But certainly the effect achieved was distinct from anything audiences find in Punchdrunk's programmatic "one-on-ones."

A second moment of solo actor-audience contact in *Masque* seemed to hold out equal promise. Squeezing through a "secret passageway," I encountered a woman muttering madly to herself, in whose distracted speech, "frantic mad with ever more unrest," I recognized the shape of sonnet 147. This performer was vulnerable in a different way. The use of familiar lines from the Shakespearean canon, or any known script, instantiates (and reveals) the standard actor audience contract of traditional theater that requires its silent spectator to listen as through the actor were speaking, not reciting (it is bad manners, at a play or a film, to talk along with the actors). But while the actor's reading off a known script exposed cracks in the immersive fiction, what I sensed here was an opening to transform that disavowed audience knowledge that separates actor-character and spectator and turn it into something that might support the actor and join both in performance. First with words, then phrases, I added my voice — blending with hers, bending, but not quite breaking, the rule of silence. Confirming the liveness of her speech, this voice said not "I know what you're quoting," but "I know what you're *thinking*," a supernatural sympathy that could be embraced within the diegesis of the show.<sup>16</sup> This scene ended with a kiss.

Unfortunately, there are many stories of kisses in *SNM*, and few of radical encounters between audience and actor that do not involve kissing or touching. The intimacy of Punchdrunk's carefully timed and controlled signature one-on-ones is designed to feed the audience's desire for touch and recognition, the *desire* being fed regardless of whether you are the one on the inside or the hundreds on the outside (the logic of the exclusive sixth floor). It is unsurprising that audiences exhorted to be adventurous in a theater environment where "anything can happen" lean in for the kiss (the sign of privileged access in *SNM* as at the Paris brothel), still less surprising when the performers seem to engage each other primarily through sexualized contact, or a choreography premised on attraction — in short, where the banquet table is always set for an orgy. While *SNM* drifts predictably toward intimate contact with the actors — the kissing and touching that is highlighted in the "one-on-ones," but visible throughout the performance, and a favored technique of the company — and while physical contact with performers' bodies surely represents the weakest form of breaking down the barrier between audience and actor after the "fourth wall" has been removed, it is not audience voyeurism nor the desire for physical contact that makes this uninteresting theater. Rather, it is the loss of an apparently open and fluid negotiation of rules that could make Punchdrunk's earlier work powerful and challenging. In a *game*, both sides are playing.



## Notes

1. *SNM* cannot sustain the complex interplay between nineteenth- and twentieth-century styles achieved by its Hitchcockian source, *Vertigo*, in which the blurring of period even in crudest form (the portrait of Midge as Carlotta) is a function of (feminine) performance, and the film a sustained meditation on this problem.
2. Victor Wynd and Suzanne Field's events are sponsored by Hendrick's Gin; Barrett and Doyle's company has partnered to create promotional immersive events for Stella Artois.
3. The reference to Infogrames' first-person, 3D adventure game series of the 1990s, the H. P. Lovecraft-inspired *Alone in the Dark*, is anachronistic; but so are the fundamental elements of Punchdrunk's work. I argue that the company is indebted to, and still shares much with, the limited logic of these early video game experiments in first person immersion. Thanks to Liam Kruger for this and other timely observations.
4. In his essay for this cluster, Tom Cartelli puts his thumb on the basic "logic of role-playing scenarios derived from established texts" that *SNM* shares with alternate reality games (ARGs). With Arts Council funding for Digital Humanities, Punchdrunk is partnering with MIT media to "merge theater and gaming into an online platform, that will partner live audiences with online participants," game logic thus linking onsite and online experience (which uses as its platform a text based ARG). But it is significant that the classic adventure/quest games that are the closest model for Punchdrunk's immersive environments are typically *not* played as networked multiple player games. The behavior of other players in these frameworks is distracting and incongruous (unlike in first person shoot 'em ups) precisely because, unless the game is simulating a search-and-ransack, the behavior of players (trying every door and drawer) clearly denies immersion. Modeled on this type of game, Punchdrunk's website reinforces an immersion in task, rather than environment. Its experiments in virtual reality do the same. See <http://digitalcapacity.artscouncil.org.uk/digital-rd-projects/> and <http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/>.
5. Michael Coveney reminds us of the happenings of the 1960s and the performances of the Living Theater of America, in which actors and audience copulated on stage together (Coveney 2010).
6. One spectator joins this discussion offering to reproduce the experience of charged, exclusive intimacy: "I'm not going to go into EXTREME detail about the events of the 1 on 1s but if you want to know the dirty details message me . . ."; <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/sleep-no-more?before=1340371565> [accessed 20 December 2012; page no longer available].

7. "Since 2000, UK theater company Punchdrunk has been pioneering a game-changing form of immersive theater in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds" (<http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk>).
8. "You could say that this show is absolutely made for the New York audience . . . In *Sleep No More*, there are secrets in every single room and audiences here seem to make it a mission to solve the riddle of the show, to leave no stone unturned" ("Director Felix Barrett" 2011).
9. "*Sleep No More* Tips and Tricks" (<http://ask.metafilter.com/211607/Sleep-No-More-tips-and-tricks>); "We Can Never Go Back" (<http://tomanderleyagain.tumblr.com/post/28340750608/how-to-connect-with-the-performers-a-study-of-body>).
10. "[H]anding out the masks is like assigning seats in an auditorium. It establishes each individual as part of an audience, and creates a boundary between them and the action. The masks create a sense of anonymity; they make the rest of the audience dissolve into generic, ghostly presences, so that each person can explore the space alone" (Souvenir Program 2011, 24).
11. The mask may yet evolve into the show's sixth floor through digital "enrichment." For a *New York Times* journalist trying the pilot, real active immersion becomes the exclusive property of the wearer: "on a given night there are already several story lines to be witnessed en masse. But I was supposed to be getting a narrative that was new and unique and, above all, exclusive to me. I was the 1 percent" (Itzoff 2012).
12. "Punchdrunk takes the fourth wall and shatters it to pieces" (<http://www.thebubble.org.uk/drama/fortune-favours-the-bold-punchdrunk/3>"); "The 4th Wall No More, A Review of *Sleep No More* in New York City," 19 July 2012 (<http://laughingsquid.com/the-4th-wall-no-more-a-review-of-sleep-no-more-in-new-york-city/>).
13. This is the case for all those I have read, and all those cited in this volume.
14. *Hotel Medea*, directed by Jorge Lopes Ramos & Persis-Jade Maravala for Zecora Ura, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 2011.
15. Before this, the spectator describes dancing with Hecate to gain entry to her one-on-one, then being sent out on an errand with "a kiss on the mask (\*squeal\*)" (<http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/punchdrunk?before=1340764221> [link no longer functional]).
16. Punchdrunk's masked player differs significantly from Augusto Boal's "spect-actor."

### Permissions

Figure 1. Photo credit "dmoldovan." <http://bloodwillhavebloodtheysay.tumblr.com/>.

Figure 2. Sophie Bortolussi as Lady Macbeth and Nicholas Bruder as Macbeth in this site-specific show on West 27th Street. In the masks are audience members. Photo credit Sara Krulwich/The

New York Times (see <http://theater.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/theater/reviews/sleep-no-more-is-a-macbeth-in-a-hotel-review.html>).

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