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# Beyond Spectacle

## Inadvertent and intentional use of the mundane in immersive theatres

TERI HOWSON - GRIFFITHS

### INTRODUCTION

It is now some quarter of a century since the term 'immersive theatres' emerged to describe performances where audiences, given degrees of agency, experience a performative narrative through sensory interactions with performers and/or a performance site.<sup>1</sup> Whether in post-industrial warehouses, studios, pubs or parks, sensorially imaginative theatrical worlds incorporate touch, taste and smell, alongside the more familiar dramatic apparatus of sight and sound, to create close-up performance encounters (Machon 2013). Immersive threads can be traced from the earliest imaginings of theatre through uses of interaction and the senses (*ibid.*). The prevalent use of site-specificity during the 1990s (see Kaye 2000) was a key influence in what became known as immersive theatre in the early 2000s (see Mooney 2019; Howson-Griffiths 2020).

Immersive theatres remain popular as an established theatrical form, despite what some critics have identified as tedious immersive tropes, such as blindfolding audiences (see Higgins 2009) and concerns for the term being over or ill-used (see Gardner 2014; Lopes Ramos *et al.* 2020). There remains, however, much to still interrogate about this wide-ranging, rich and varied form, through considerations of its intersections with one-to-one, intimate, confessional and other theatrical practices and cultural philosophies. Through a post-COVID-19 lens, it feels timely to remind ourselves of immersive theatres' potential as a mode of performance that seems to call for perspicacity through experience.

I begin with the concept of spectacle, one frequently attached to immersive performance, before contrasting with the implications of the mundane. I then examine the mundane in immersive theatres through a cross-section

of work varying in scale and design utilizing the immersive companies Darkfield, all things considered, Punchdrunk and Secret Cinema as examples. I illustrate notions of the mundane that are achieved both intentionally and inadvertently. This, I argue, has implications for audience experience, value and labour within immersive performances.

### SPECTACLE AND THE MUNDANE

The spectacular and the mundane hold antonymic connotations. Spectacle implies opulence, magnificence and grandeur through sheer scale and volume and is defined as: 'A specially prepared or arranged display of a more or less public nature (esp. one on a large scale), forming an impressive or interesting show or entertainment for those viewing it' (*OED* online 2022a). Guy Debord's well-known critical view of spectacle inferred that spectacle was all for show, offering surface without substance (1994 [1967]). Debord argued that spectacle was intentionally deployed to overawe the audience. Yet when evaluated critically Debord believed the spectacle would reveal its lack of materiality and lose its initial appeal.

The mundane has developed negative connotations away from its original fifteenth-century definition of 'belonging to the earthly world, as contrasted with heaven; worldly, earthly' (*OED* online 2022b). Its later nineteenth-century usage resonates with its current employment: 'in [a] weakened sense: ordinary, commonplace. Hence: prosaic, dull, humdrum; lacking interest or excitement' (*ibid.*). This sense of dreariness, monotony and a state to be avoided implies that deriving pleasure in the commonplace is, in some way, objectionable and to be avoided. Yet mundanity is the very thing several contemporary practices strive to place satisfaction in. For instance, it has been

<sup>1</sup> Please see Howson-Griffiths' (2020) article where she traced the etymology of the term 'immersive' to Baz Kershaw's (1999) monograph on *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* and the work of Enrique Vargas.

covertly celebrated through an emphasis on the everyday present moment found in mindfulness practice, where observing simple acts can gratify ordinary experience (Kabat-Zinn 2004). Such actions often hold a sensory experience at their core in observing the five senses, designed to connect and root us with everyday being. With this constructive view, we might take the mundane as not always wholly unwelcome. It is from this perspective that the remainder of this article addresses the concept of mundanity in immersive theatres, considering both its deliberate and inadvertent usage, and as distinct from and connected to related terms including 'boredom', the 'everyday', or 'familiar'.

#### INTENTIONAL MUNDANITY AND PROFOUND ORDINARY ACTS IN IMMERSIVE THEATRES

I first considered the presence of mundanity in immersive theatres during the creation of *When Autumn Passed Me By* (2014)<sup>2</sup>. An individually experienced contemplation on the autumn season, audience members arrived at a theatre space in small groups of four to six. Removing their shoes and then blindfolded, they were led by a guide behind a stage curtain that hid several sensory installations, each connected to the theme of autumn. Experienced at a perambulatory pace, the performance resonated deeply with many in the audience:

To allow yourself to be taken somewhere else and experience a world of sensations, rather than sight, and just to awaken that a little bit, and also to connect with someone in the darkness, and establish a bond of trust really. So, I think that they are quite powerful things that I can take away from this. (*When Autumn Passed Me By*, audience participant)

During rehearsals I observed that the performance space looked unlike what is usually expected when we attend theatre: fabric held together by pins and tape, a temporary greenhouse containing several scents to avoid their infiltrating the rest of the space and a large step ladder and watering can... the materials were not only incredibly ordinary, but collectively junk-like. This was unseen by the audience, who were invited to imagine and assemble the experience internally for themselves. I perceived that mundanity within immersive performance might relate to or enact upon the audience *despite, instead of, or alongside* the spectacular aspects that often operate within this practice – supposing that ordinariness and the commonplace could also offer insight and feeling within the immersive encounter.

Theatre company all things considered (hereafter atc) addresses 'social issues and need for change' through

<sup>2</sup> This performance formed part of my practice-led PhD thesis which included the creation of two immersive performances and from which I collated audience responses to explore each experience.

## PRESENCE / 14

The most mundane times of the day are those when routine is interrupted but only by further routines or when the routineness of it all requires attention. I used the last of the detergent and now need to get more.

## PRESENCE / 15

Is this mundane the first time, or the second time, or the third time over...?

## PRESENCE / 16

I am waking up but not awake. I have no clear thoughts.

## RITUALIZED / 01

Eyes slowly open. Lights fill in. Maybe consciousness is gradually stirred? Or was it time for your subconscious to do something else? Did the noise from outside wake you or was it your stomach? Were you jolted by a night terror? Or kicked by a cat you forgot to feed? Some are gently roused by chirping birds or by the warm sunlight softly caressing their skin. Am I bored already? I remember a snippet of Walter Benjamin: 'boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience' (1968: 91). I read somewhere of automated lights programmed to wake you gently - do they really produce good moods? Wait, was that my alarm clock I hear from beyond? My to-do list creeps into the back of my head. I smell coffee brewing and fried eggs. I live alone so that can't be mine. I love how my legs slide along these plush sheets. Is that drool I feel on my cheeks? When was the last time I washed my bed sheets? Did I forget to brush my teeth? Need to drag my body off this bed. Legs first or hands? Every day, we wake. But to what? Do we wake the same? Never mind, by now, the other side of the world sleeps. And then we have to do this again the next day.

Someone asked me the other day what do you want to do with your time? What is your ideal day? I have my list: dance, move, meditate, walk, drink my coffee. Read. Write. Cook. Play. How do you want to feel? Like that one time by the ocean in the middle of the night in that one country? Would you want to do that every day? Maybe I'd want to travel again instead of being here, living the same day over and over again. But really, what was it that I loved so much about travelling? Being so lost that I am forced to change something I am doing in order to keep going. I mean I loved the food and the views and the blah blah blah too, but that's what it really was. Being lost, moving to the bottom of my repetition. I'm doing that here too - walking around with a baby and dog wondering if I'll make it back alive. Always the same fear to get over. Who am I to fill this walk with drama? It's a baby crying, it's a dog pulling on a leash and shitting in the woods. It's been done over and over and over and over and over, by someone else and now by me.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2311022> : EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME, 3:42

‘human connections and creating meaningful and authentic participation’ (Hogarth 2018: n.p). The company have used immersive and verbatim methodologies to engage audiences in familiar experiences from first dates (*Rose & Geoff*, 2014), teenage sleepovers (*Sleepover*, 2022), to socially current issues such as male suicide (*Most Things are Quiet*, 2017). Analysing their use of commonplace environments and objects, I will discuss the potential for the planned and intentional use of the mundane in immersive performance.<sup>3</sup>

Following in-depth interviews with parents capturing experiences from conception through to the first year of parenthood, *Pram Talks* articulated the highs and lows of a range of voices from: ‘Stay at home dads, working mums, parents with twins, [and] same-sex couples’ (Hogarth interviewed in *The Guide Liverpool 2021*: n.p.). The performance offered a celebration of parenting as well as less spoken-about aspects: ‘the person who is bored, or lonely, or finding it difficult’ (ibid.).<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of *Pram Talks*, the audience – in pairs – were provided headphones and a changing bag containing items such as a feeding bottle. The familiarity of the park provided a space where parental presence is routine and expected, while removing a potential barrier to attending, as parents could bring their children with them. In their pairs, the audience walked through the park, distantly accompanied by a stage manager listening to the same audio, hearing an array of voices and conversations fortifying parenthood as both a collective and deeply individual experience.

The everyday environment had the capacity to enrich the performance beyond the audio with moments of potential incongruity or confirmation, background chatter, shrieks of laughter, cries or screams from children and other activities common to the park and those engaged in child-rearing. This meant that the location and performance could reinforce each other in placing parenting alongside listening to audio conversations discussing parenthood experiences. Prompted by the audio the audience duo would interact with items from the changing bag, priming them to reflect on and inject their own personal accounts and share with one

another. Thus, the performance intentionally enhanced familiar space and objects with greater significance beyond their usual utility.

The potential of sensory apparatus for sensory potency has been emphasized by sensory theatre practitioners (see Vargas 2003) and, as I argue, can allow for the seemingly mundane to become spectacular. In one moment of *Pram Talks*, mundane sensory apparatus was particularly effective. The audience were directed to sit on a park bench, which corresponded with them hearing several different birthing stories where, for many, their first hot food and drink post-birth was tea and toast. For many of the interviewees this ‘was the best tasting tea and toast they had ever had’ (Hogarth 2018: n.p). On hearing these stories on the audio, the stage manager would pass actual tea and toast to the audience. The actions of drinking tea and tasting toast added another layer to the storytelling and for many provided a strong recall of their own ‘tea and toast’ moment post-birth. While seemingly innocuous, the intended semiosis of this in the performance created an instance where something ordinary – tea and toast – was instilled with greater significance through connection to a specific memory.

Immersive theatres can enact upon memory, bringing recollections into the present in powerful ways through intentional use of sensory apparatus in the performance, including the use of mundane objects. The senses are impacted by *how* mechanisms are delivered, which can evoke a particular mood or ambience. Objects received by the audience can provoke personal memory by complementing the auditory with the visual, physical and sensory experience happening on and through the audience’s body (see Banes 2001; Drobnik 2006). Pairing physical relatable acts alongside the corresponding audio narrative stirred the audience’s senses. In *Pram Talks*, the tea and toast activated deep personal resonance and intra-reflection.

The mundane can be seen operating in distinct and specific ways to amplify a performance in other examples of work by atc as well as that of other immersive companies.<sup>5</sup> In 2020, Darkfield (known for delivering heightened scenario experiences in repurposed shipping

<sup>3</sup> With thanks to Sarah Hogarth of all things considered theatre company for her generous sharing of this work at several talks and events, and through our previous co-teaching on immersive theatres from which I have had the benefit of her wisdom, experience and sharing of atc’s methodology.

<sup>4</sup> *Pram Talks* was re-released as an audio download in 2021, as an outdoor socially distanced work easily accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic, by downloading the audio to a personal device. This version did not include stage managers delivering some of the sensory aspects of the original.

<sup>5</sup> For other examples from atc see *Rose & Geoff* (2013), set and experienced in a working pub and, as the audience learned through the audio received via headset, was the actual pub where Rose and Geoff first met. The audience of two received different narrative instructions through headphones, experiencing the first date of Rose and Geoff through one of their perspectives. The narrative was supported by objects related to the story; one audience member received a handbag to wear that contained a specific perfume that Rose wore around the time she met Geoff. Two drinks were placed on the table to match Rose and Geoff’s orders, giving a sense of congruence to the encounter. These sensory details furnished the story and gave a visceral element to accompany the dialogue. The mundane environment was intentionally heightened through parallelism between sensory objects and narrative, enhancing the scenario and encounter.



## RITUALIZED / 02

We were weaving in and out of one another's rhythms - an email here and there, a reminder, a Zoom link, a writing schedule, a debate, a disagreement, a Google Doc comment alert...

Most people, of course, do not have much leisure time. They pursue a livelihood on which they expend all their energies, simply to earn enough for the bare necessities. To make this tiresome obligation more tolerable, they have invented a work ethic that provides a moral veil for their occupation and at least affords them a certain moral satisfaction. It would be exaggerated to claim that the pride in considering oneself an ethical being dispels every type of boredom. Yet the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery is not actually what is at issue here, since it neither kills people nor awakens them to new life, but merely expresses a dissatisfaction that would immediately disappear if an occupation more pleasant than the morally sanctioned one became available. (Kracauer 1995 [1924]: 331)

... an alarm clock, a meeting notification, a close reading, a meeting, a discussion, a set of action items, a task list, a word count, a pleasant exchange.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2311025>  
EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME, 3:42

containers) established their Darkfield Radio tranche. They created a trilogy (Season One) of 20-minute performances to be experienced individually or in pairs, using a mobile phone app to deliver experiences to audiences' homes at a time when movements were restricted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Using binaural sound and headphones, the storytelling was conveyed to familiar home spaces through largely accessible means.<sup>6</sup> Each performance set up an ominous atmosphere of foreboding and tension, leaving a feeling of unease and uncertainty about what would happen.

*Double* made everyday sounds feel sinister, like the opening of a refrigerator and the ticking of a wall clock, as the protagonist tries to determine whether their partner has been substituted for a potentially harmful replica (known as the Capgras delusion). Listening to the performance on separate devices, at times it was difficult to determine what was 'real' or recorded - at one moment hearing a glass break, I thought that my partner had risen from their seat across the table and had broken an actual glass, and wondered whether this was accidental or instructed as part of the performance. Afterwards, I realized it was a fictional sound and remarked on its convincingness. We discussed how sound had intersected with aspects in our kitchen for each of us, impacted by our differing orientations with the room. The making strange of familiar sound through the storytelling, combined with a real-world everyday space, was purposefully exploited to facilitate the tension and atmosphere of the narrative, alongside an intentional troubling of fictional and real through mundane objects.

In both *Pram Talks* and the Darkfield Radio trilogy, the key tenet is the imaginative ways in which mundane environments and objects are *intentionally* utilized in the performance. They imbue mundane items or places with new or shifted meaning through immersive

<sup>6</sup> *Double* was designed for two people sitting at a kitchen table, *Visitors* began with two people sitting on two chairs in their living room and *Eternal* was experienced alone lying on a bed. This made the performances readily accessible based on items commonly found in a typical home.

theatrical devices and processes. It is the deliberate reworking of the mundane in these scenarios that brings about feelings of potential transformation for the audience, reconsidering their self and surroundings in relation to the performance material. This can evoke audience agency where, rather than merely experiencing participation (see Heddon *et al.* 2012), there is a deep shift or personal change in perception in response to the encounter. The mundane, therefore, may play a key role in stimulating confessional modes of communication through familiar objects and foster profound effects on the audience, identified as critical aspects in immersive theatres' transformative potential (see Zerihan 2009; Heddon and Howells 2011).

#### UNINTENTIONAL MUNDANITY WITHIN THE SPECTACLE

Beyond the transformation of everyday objects into moments of profundity, the mundane also seeps into immersive experiences through juxtaposition with spectacle that might be considered an unintentional intercession, or a natural consequence of the experience, though no less significant for its impact.

Extensive performance sites have often been identified as vital to the sense of spectacle within immersive theatres. Previous analyses of large-scale immersive theatres have discussed aspects at opposite lengths of the *mise-en-scène* spectrum from the extreme detail and intricacies found within props and set design to vast performative 'worlds' where audiences roam and discover the story (see Papaioannou 2014). Punchdrunk are reputed for creating large-scale immersive experiences that infuse expansive theatrical texts with new meaning, using old and existing buildings re-purposed as theatrical worlds.

*The Burnt City* (2022–3) was a theatrical retelling connecting two narratives of *Agamemnon* and *Hecuba*, set in the realms of Greece and Troy. Complex and epic, it required the audience to relax their compulsion for sensemaking as it was experienced in segmented, elusive fragments, typical of Punchdrunk theatrical experiences: 'In a Punchdrunk production, it is the audience's own

actions and their tactile engagement with the set that dictates their version of a production's narrative and its meaning' (Cole 2022: 19). The design and structure necessitate that the audience make decisions on how they will pursue the threads of the story.

My experience of the mundane came about through frustrations to uncover the full world of *The Burnt City*. Attending in August 2022, initially, the performance world seemed relatively contained compared with my previous experiences of their work. I knew I was missing something; on entrance the cast (some thirty-plus performers), divided into the families of Troy, Greece and the Gods, were displayed for the audience to see. Having determined my whereabouts, I found myself becoming used to the Grecian world within the story and wondering if I might happen to stumble upon the remainder. A creeping sense of tedium and frustration arose within a space that had initially seemed stimulating and full of opportunity; the initial awe had now waned: the spectacular was now feeling mundane.

Having seen the same scenes repeated from different standpoints, I was ready to move on, but seemingly stuck for how to do so. Some two hours into the allotted three-hour stage time, I noticed an innocuous door I had inadvertently bypassed twice, mistaking it for a painted surface, through which to enter the world of Troy. Littered with narrow alleyways and a series of small, interconnected rooms, the world of Troy was in stark contrast to the large, uncluttered space found in the realm of Greece. I walked straight into a moment of high drama – several cast members gathered, stalking the stage space of a square or courtyard area, and within minutes, witnessed one character's death. It was on entering Troy that the feelings of mundanity abated, though frustration remained at the rapidity with which I would need to attempt to discover something of this portion of the performance.

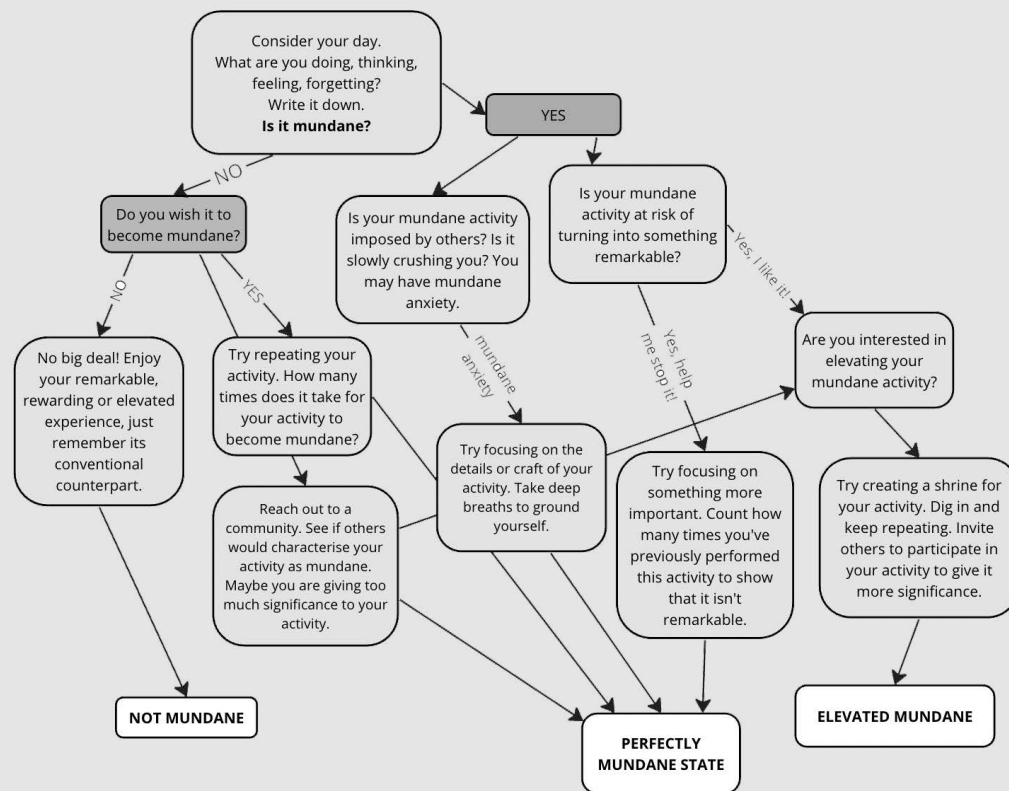
A stasis in feeling is unlikely in theatre, especially in a style where its name impresses a sense of a temporary condition from which one is placed and then withdrawn. 'To immerse' Machon states, is 'to dip or submerge in a liquid' whereas to 'immerse oneself' or 'be



immersed' means to involve oneself deeply in a particular activity or interest (2013: 21). Continuing this liquid metaphor, immersion itself can be seen as wave-like; the audience become temporarily plunged within the story in a given instance before the mind interjects asking questions: 'Which way should I go?', 'What should I say?' and so on, ascending once more back to the surface of reality, outside the narrative. In the same way, the impact of spectacular production elements will similarly ebb and flow, waning towards mundanity, and returning through moments of surprise, shock or wonder. A 'wave-like' immersion can also be identified within attention in non-immersive theatre, where mundanity or boredom might prevent audiences' consistent, full attention to

the action. This similarity to non-immersive theatre offers reassurance as to the import of natural ebbs and flows of attention in attending immersive performances. The mundane can be intentionally and incidentally experienced, explored and played with. Here, I am reminded of Pilkington and Nachbar (2012) who discussed how the ways in which we arrive at the theatre (physically, emotionally and mentally) can intercede into how we experience a performance. In this way, the import of liveness manifests not only for those making immersive theatre, but on those experiencing it. Shifts between the spectacular and mundane are therefore not only probable in immersive performance but, in some cases, integral to the audience's experience and meaning making.

## RITUALIZED / 03



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The desire to explore as much of the world as possible is a strong attraction in Punchdrunk's work, knowing simultaneously that it is an impossible task to see everything within one viewing and yet wanting to maximize the experience to feel suitably versed in the world. It is, as Holly O'Mahony writes, an impression that can 'leave you feeling like there's a wider meaning hidden in a drawer somewhere or dangling just out of reach' (2022: n.p.). The space of *The Burning City* was impressive in detail and volume, threatening to over-awe the story itself; one could simply spend time looking at the various minutiae on tables, counters and behind curtains, ignoring entirely the enactments of the hardworking cast. It is characteristic of other Punchdrunk work, where repeated visits would be necessary to even attempt to see the performance in its entirety, leaving a sense of being both dazzled and unfulfilled by its sheer scale. This is the very crux on which many large-scale immersive performances centre. Adam Alston addressed notions of value and labour in his use of the term the 'experience machine' (2016: 2), which he derives from philosopher Robert Nozick and applies to immersive theatres. It conjures tenets of capitalism and neoliberalism where the gains are the extractions of performance content by the audience, and it is their individual ability to do so that brings rewards. This is taken up by Lopes Ramos, Dunne-Howrie and Maravala and their concerns for immersive performance motivated by an overly market-driven focus that may miss the 'empathy between audiences and actors who experiment with experiences of intimacy, care and tenderness in performance' (2020: 200). The scale and variety of immersive performances emphasize the varied latent potential and possibilities of the experience.

In my experience of Secret Cinema's *Dirty Dancing* (2022) it was the mundane that brought pleasure to a large-scale festival-like immersive encounter. The UK-based company 'create large-scale, interactive, promenade-style performance(s)' (Bayley 2020: 63) that integrate film with live theatre to enact and re-enact the story.<sup>7</sup> Audiences are effectively cast within a role in the universe of the film and encouraged to arrive in costume, supporting

and enhancing the *mise-en-scène*. For *Dirty Dancing*, the audience selected a 'family' to belong to, each with specific traits and colours intended for speedy identification and belonging when present at the performance. For many, this process offers delight in becoming part of the production values. It is telling of its financial success for the company that they have reproduced *Dirty Dancing* three times in the last decade (2013, 2016 and a 2020 production delayed until 2022 due to COVID-19).

Attending the 2022 production and duly arriving in costume, the weather unassumingly cultivated the heat and intensity of the summer-long vacation in the Catskills by Baby (the film's protagonist) and her family. The main cast were supported by a team of 'activity leaders' positioned as part of the resort staff, furnishing the experience for a large capacity audience. One of the central appeals of Secret Cinema is the desire to assimilate as close a relationship to the source material as possible. As Bayley notes, 'We story the world into matter through the desire to touch, to impact, to make contact, to be' (2020: 67). Key sets from the film were recreated: the staff quarters, the gazebo and the playhouse, all easily recognizable markers from the film. Left to freely roam the site, audience members could join in a host of field games including a three-legged race and croquet, alongside live art drawing, all designed to provide a sense of the supposed light-hearted and fun atmosphere of Kellerman's resort. The sheer audience size of Secret Cinema, often numbering a few thousand per evening, can make it difficult to keep pace with and observe the actors. One of the most visible characters was 'bungalow bunny' Vivian Pressman (*Dirty Dancing*, 1987), hosting the bar and stage area in the Mountain House. The actor conversed with the audience to engage them with the activities on stage. Aside from Pressman, I found it difficult to find principal cast to interact with or observe. Occasionally, I would catch sight of one or two swiftly walking across the field. As a result, the experience was missing some of the anticipated lustre in feeling 'within' the world of the film.<sup>8</sup> It was afterwards on social media forums that I learned that some audience members did indeed get the opportunity to 'carry a watermelon', often

<sup>7</sup> In the company's early years audiences would not know which film they would be watching. Arriving at a meeting point, audiences were transported to a secret location and brought into the world of the film with live-action performances accompanying the on-screen film. Since then, their process has evolved; the film is no longer secret and teaser trailers build up to the reveal of their next production.

<sup>8</sup> In the days before I attended, one social media fan forum group noted that there had been some instances of the cast being harassed during the event. It is therefore possible that in the days following that a heightened concern for cast safety may have rightly and understandably impacted their visibility and contact with the audience, resulting in less potential for main character interaction.

identified as a central epithet from the film. This aspect of physical contact

dramaturgically, and phenomenologically ... offers a sense-specific frame for considering the quality of performance experience and the embodied and perceptual ways in which an audience member and actor encounter each other – and themselves – during a performance event. (Esling 2021: 88)

These moments of contact are often seen as the high point of attending. Returning to the earlier wave metaphor on immersion, it is therefore inevitable that the audience may find breaks between waves of immersive activity. In this instance, the promise of the spectacular, of being ‘in’ the film world, in and of itself can become mundane if the anticipated experience does not materialize.

It was, in my experience, the mundane activities beyond the filmic that held my attention and made up for failing to participate in key reimaginings from the film. The main enjoyment came from interacting with the wider cast and crew. Several dance stations provided entertainment for those willing to step up and be guided in a series of simple moves and routines. In another area, easels and a sofa provided a set up for attempts at portraiture that fostered feelings of good humour, interaction and appreciation with fellow audience members. In lieu of engaging with the main cast, it was the role of the more readily available activities and entertainment to fill the gap in anticipated storytelling and experience. Kate Hutchinson’s review of the 2016 Secret Cinema *Dirty Dancing* production echoes arguments levelled at some of the challenges of the individual nature of the experience:

The cynic sits on their picnic blanket waiting for the film to start, eyeballing the goings on with disdain and increasing resentment at what they’ve paid for the privilege. The enthusiast is hoping for a little frisson in the staff quarters with a dirty dancer. (Hutchinson 2016: n.p.)

In the work of both Secret Cinema and Punchdrunk, the responsibility is placed on the audience who are obligated for the success or failure of their own experience, despite the fact they have little control and knowledge (unless repeat visitors or seeking spoilers before attending) of where best to go and be within

the world to seemingly gain the most from the experience. As Heddon, Iball and Zerihan state, ‘we must be careful not to confuse action and activity, or participation, with agency’ (2012: 130). The over-stating of audience agency can ‘produce a disjunctive effect between the real and the simulated’ especially when we consider ‘how’ and ‘who’ the experience is for and the ‘by’ and ‘why’ behind its intent and design (Lopes Ramos *et al.* 2020: 196). Though we tend to discuss the audience collectively, there are likely differences in knowledge and experience with immersive forms of theatre, as well as personal preferences around interaction and participation and the degrees to which the audience wish to become involved. Furthermore, we might also account for the preparational, accidental and intentional factors that might influence our arrival/ experience (see Pilkington and Nachbar 2012). *Dirty Dancing* did offer a range of experiences; for those eager and able to pursue the characters from the film and get deeply involved in the reimaginings, or, to partake in the fringe activities or sit on a blanket before the stage watching the band, eating food and drink themed to the occasion, absorbing the atmosphere. The satisfaction in these latter elements resolves on finding and taking pleasure in the mundane and being satisfied with the general atmosphere for experience, rather than directly encountering specific filmic moments. The enjoyment is therefore tied into personal expectations and inclinations related to the notional ‘value’ of the experience, linked to financial, pragmatic and individual indicators, preferences and materialities, some of which immersive performance can intentionally lean into, and others that may be unforeseeable or accidentally encountered.

#### CONCLUSION

Across the range of immersive encounters and the scales of performance discussed here the mundane is present, both by deliberate intention and accidental intercession. Familiar settings, objects and props can both support the narrative and provoke meaningful interactions. Such mundane aspects can therefore be the source and catalyst for profound change or transformed

thinking for the audience and may become spectacular through their profundity within the theatrical instance in which they reside. In other occurrences, the mundane allows for amplification of the spectacular through the contrast of feeling, or it can be in and of itself enough to take pleasure and partake in mundane activities that are ordinary, familiar and commonplace. In appraising the mundane within immersive theatres, I offer new ways of thinking about and considering immersive theatres, principally concerning the audience, with implications for their value and labour within the performative frame. This provides a new conceptual focus for ways of approaching, thinking about and expanding immersive performance, through considerations of mundanity.

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Waiting for coffee to finish brewing. I am debating pouring a cup before the whole pot finishes. It is not a vigorous debate, but a not unserious negotiation with myself. The sort of thing I might have spent a lot of effort on in an acting class a long time ago. With an audience, I might be in the Nature Theater of Oklahoma's *Poetics: A ballet brut* as written about by Jacob Gallagher-Ross, sans ballet of course, but I'm readily embracing 'the pedestrian business of drinking a cup of take-out coffee or shifting listlessly in an office chair' (2018: 160). My office chair is just in the other room. Waiting for me. Once I have my coffee. The radio is telling me about a winter storm. I blink. I pour some coffee. Just half a cup. I'll come back when the pot finishes brewing.

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EVERYWHERE, ALL THE TIME, 3:42

## RITUALIZED / 05

There is a menu in front of me. I'm sitting in my car. I'm trying to decide between a four for four dollars deal or a five dollar, five item menu. I just told the voice from the box that I needed more time. They don't sound impatient. No one is behind me. Nirvana's Smells Like Teen Spirit has started playing on the radio.

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## RITUALIZED / 06

I'm looking at the dregs of coffee in my mug. I am thinking of the anonymous labour gone into the growing, processing, shipping, packaging, selling, making of my coffee. Is the work of the people in this supply chain mundane, or do they have the time (off) to 'enjoy' the mundane? Does a white, wealthy, straight, Western man ever experience the mundane?

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