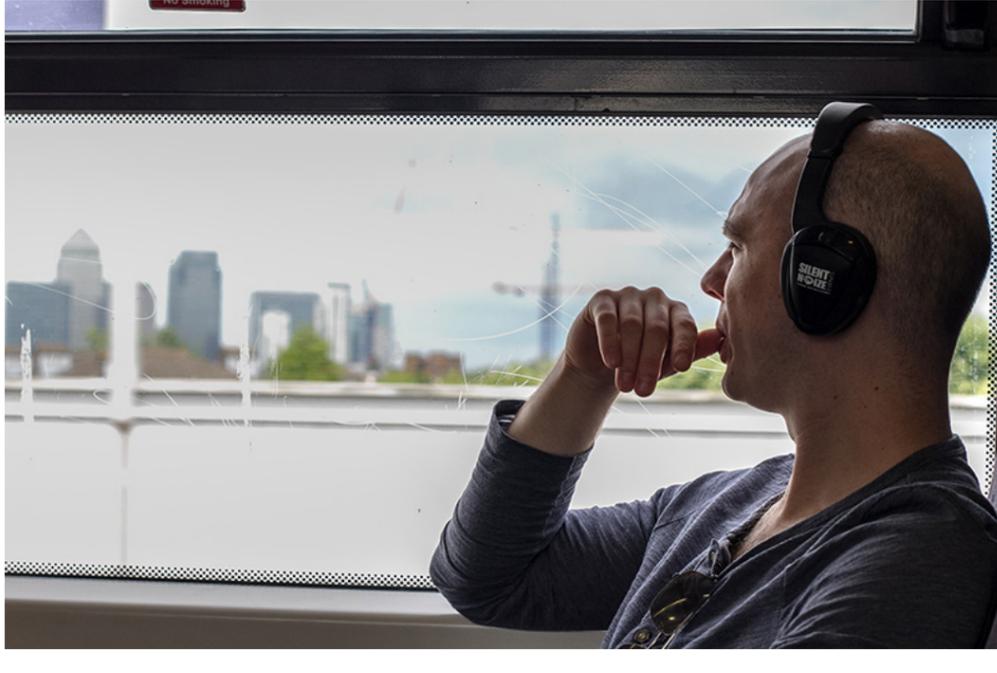


TURN ON ART

GLOBAL ART OFF THE RADAR



By Lucie Beauvert

The theatre company 11:18, based in London, is introducing an innovative form of performance on the UK scene. This group of dancers, actors and performers had the peculiar idea to stage their shows in trains. Going along a landscape or a cityscape, the audience-passenger is taken on a journey where the audio narrative melts into the visual storytelling of train travels. One of the founding members, Simone Waller, is showing us the way.

Where does the concept of the company come from?

I met Charlotte Hodgkinson, Vala Omarsdottir and Bii Orprasert during our Masters in Performance Making at Goldsmith University and the project of the company came from the final piece we presented together there. The original brief stipulated that the work would be a site-specific piece and based on the theme of The City. The piece was called This Now or Never Land, set on the overground journey from Queen's Road Peckham to London Victoria, which takes in the most wonderful views of the city skyline, and the idea was to play with audio along this trajectory through the City, using the train window as a frame for the action, highlighting the lives that you pass through while travelling and reconnecting with the magical time children have in the Never Land. A few months later, we were officially commissioned to produce a second piece and suddenly the publicity department asked for a name, we chose spontaneously the time of the first train journey we ever performed together, that is how 11:18 was born.

You call the audience "passengers"; they are sitting still but carried along a train journey with an audio narrative plugged on individual headphones. Can you explain the extreme contrast between the speed of the train and the passive motion of the audience?

There is a definite umbrella sense throughout all our pieces of what it means to be sitting still and to be carried. It is not explained in concrete terms in the narrative, it is not a focus but it has certainly to do with the sense of the experience as a whole for the audience. The train is supposed to be a safe place. You have to trust whomever, whatever is carrying you, most people do. I personally love train travel. Because once I sit and the train starts moving I can let everything go, it gives me permission for that period of time to forget everything. I am not someone who works or reads on the train, I am someone who looks out of the window; I think a lot of people are like that. The speed of the train is not something we can grasp; we can only rely on it. Then the physical stillness allows your imagination to move and travel with the train. That is what we are trying to harness to then be able to stimulate the imagination in certain directions with the narratives that we use.

Is there a critical approach of the train as an implementation of speed?

In relation to the nature of society? Probably. I was travelling on the overground line from Peckham the other day and I was trying to understand what I find disconcerting about the way the seats are in those trains. I noticed it is just that you cannot look out of the window. The train was full and every single person was on a device. It is interesting, how we are placed in those moving environments; by offering a plug for your computer the system prevents you from having an enjoyable moment. I think this is unhealthy and train travel could be almost a meditation time, a moment to get away from a life that is so consuming.

The term "passenger" reminds us that the history of the place is rolling beyond the audience's passage; there is something very intimate and ephemeral in the happening of your performances, despite the distances you cover and the time it takes to cover them. Where do you get this intimacy from?

There are two levels to it. There is a very personal experience happening between each passenger and the performance, you are isolated by the fact that you have headphones, and a lot of our audio is addressed to you as an individual, you become a protagonist. At the same time you are surrounded by people who are also having a personal experience, so it turns into a collective experience. For a matter of safety, emotional safety, it is psychologically reassuring for people while having a very intimate experience, to know that other people are possibly having the same feelings. There is a real dichotomy between what happens and how it is experienced.

Similar to a long cinema traveling, the form of your performance overlaps an auditive narrative and a visual narrative but often it creates a distance between the two. How does that gap release some space for the interpretation and the appropriation of the environment you deliver to your audience?

It is a very fine balance. We have learned that people cannot watch and listen to different narratives at the same time. If we give people disconnected visuals and audio, it is very hard for them to take more than 50% of what we provide, unless we tie one sense away. So we work very carefully on that balance, measuring how visually heavy things are, how frequent the text is in the audio track, in order to avoid a potential conflict between the visuals and the audio. Usually we use the audio to relax the body, then to stimulate the mind, it connects to the visual scenery afterwards, and the levels get balanced. The space between the two is primordial, in that sense we use the soundscape a lot.

Lately we have worked with a composer Ben McAuley who is also a sound engineer and a production artist, he can spread music and adjust the textures of it around the text to allow people to absorb what is happening and digest it properly.

Does it trigger the imagination of the passengers?

The two narratives often refer to each other implicitly. It takes people away from what they are seeing directly and encourages them to look beyond.

In the end, the audio is our main media and we do not need many visuals because it is all there in the landscape: the senses, the stillness, the movements, everything lends itself to an imaginative process. It only needs the most delicate hand in terms of stimulation. I guess our responsibility is to make sure that the quality of the work is such that it can trigger unexpected connections. That is the nature of experiments in theatre, it drives our work.

In the score, either audio or visual, in which proportions do you compose with the samples of reality and the fictional elements?

It is never prescriptive; we do not have a recipe. It is a learning curve. The fictional elements that we plan to appear are completely over-taken by the unpredictable coincidences occurring along the journey. The audience never knows if it may or may not be part of the score, we are blurring the lines to have the audience walking away carrying those fantasies, out of a real journey.

How do you proceed to harvest the sounds and the stories?

We always walk the route first, except in the case of 'The Farmer & The Fisherman' in Northern Ireland which was impossible to walk because it was so rural, and we usually take our writers and composers with us. As we are walking, we knock on doors; we observe buildings in terms of architecture or in terms of practicality. We record things, people, thoughts. We record audio but also take photographs and write notes; we work a lot from maps as well. We stay as close to the train track as possible. When we meet people, there is a real face to face approach because they are the first ones who re-connect the history to the linearity of the train journey. We are just trying to address the stories that come up and the people that these stories come from.

Often in the narratives, we encounter the themes of nomadism, territory, distances, memory, time; beyond the stories told on the train, which questionings of the collective have influenced such choices?

We have been surprised how these themes repeat themselves. We never intentionally set out to repeat them but I think they become recurrent because the nature of travel facilitates those ideas to come up. Each project has explored them in greater depths and through various aspects. We refused for a long time to produce work for tours because it seemed to compromise our approach to the environments until we met Glen Neath and started to work specifically around the concept of train-travel itself, regardless of the environment. For LOST, the piece we are working on with Glen which will be presented in spring 2016 on the London Overground and on a second route in Nottingham, we are going away from these themes for the first time; it is still about distances and time but completely detached from a specific land. The site-specificity remains in the train itself.

Simone, you have a background in contemporary Dance, you have grasped the values of time and space to a certain level through the movement of your own body on a theatre stage. How do you inform the process of 11:18 with your personal experience around the notions of temporality and distances?

I suppose as a dancer, I do not tell stories literally, I tell stories in an abstract way. I worked for many years as a dancer and as an actor for 'Commercial Theatre', I have told many stories with my body. Maybe that is why I love travelling so much, because it is about movement; in-between being a dancer, I have always been a traveler, and train has always been my favorite form of travel. I have never thought about that being linked to my love of movement and to my creativity but it definitely lends itself to it!