

Becoming Invisible

"Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." So goes the old adage whether it refers to heads-of-state, nursery school teachers, or fictional madmen. This principle was on display in full-force when Synaesthetic Theatre presented *Shadow of the Invisible Man* in November of 2001.



The play, which was a multimedia adaptation of H.G. Wells's classic science-horror novel, *The Invisible Man*, explored the theme of "absolute power" as the audience followed one man's descent into madness when he discovers a formula for turning himself invisible. Things go horribly wrong when he discovers there is no antidote for the effects of the potion and he is forced to wander the winter countryside as a drifter, finding no solace or relief.

Synaesthetic Theatre used the production as an opportunity to play with classic horror imagery, particularly the black and white movies of the 1930's and 40's.

Drawing the production's visual vocabulary from such films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Dracula*, Fritz Lang's *M*, and the 1933 version of *The Invisible Man* (featuring Claude Rains), the directors and design team created a foreboding atmosphere that gradually built towards the final startling moment when the invisible man was revealed, bloody, naked, and beaten.

Kristi Leigh Herman's soundscape and score lent an ominous tone to the piece, accenting both suspense and comedy. The set, designed by Paul Hudson, was filled to the hilt with inventive invisible effects. Doors opened and closed by themselves, props levitated and chairs slid across the

stage. Seth Trucks's fight choreography, combined with Hudson's live illusions, enabled the audience to follow the path of an invisible antagonist onstage as his psychosis intensified and violence erupted. Resident costume designer David Crittenden worked with set designer Hudson to realize a life size puppet, that enabled Dr. Kemp to converse onstage with an empty (but animated) dressing gown.

To complement (and contradict) the fantastical imagery of the horror genre, video/film designer John DesRoches focused on the form of "documentary" when designing the multimedia aspect of

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Coming Soon: The Icon Project



Synaesthetic is currently developing concepts for a new multimedia piece with the working title *The American Icon Project*, which will be produced in October and November 2002. Company members involved in this early process are Quonta Shanell Beasley, David Crittenden, John DesRoches, Aubrey Hardwick, Beth Krafchik, Joy Leonard, Chris Nichols and Tina West Chavous.

To give our audience members insight into our process, we decided to show some of the source material we are working with as we conceive this new original work.

Icon 1. An image, figure, or representation. 2. A representation of some sacred personage, in painting, bas-relief, or mosaic, itself regarded as sacred, and honored with a relative worship or adoration.

— Oxford English Dictionary

The Scientific Method is designed to separate the truth from lies and delusion.

Step 1: Observe some aspect of the universe.

Our American datasphere is littered with deities and demi-gods – individuals whose images have been replicated, re-construct-

ed and re-iterated until they comprise a neo-Olympian pantheon of Fame.

Popular culture is the new Babylon, into which so much art and intellect now flow. It is our imperial sex theater, supreme temple of the western eye. We live in the age of idols. The pagan past, never dead, flames again in our mystic hierarchies of stardom.

— Camille Paglia

Step 2: Invent a theory that is consistent with what you have observed.

Icons have become the new unit of com-

munication in a mediaspace characterized by deconstruction. Wary of stories, slogans, and other emotional traps, young people in particular have been drawn to icons as a way of expressing who they are and what they believe in.

— Douglas Rushkoff

We are a nation TV-dreaming, addicted to seeming.

Step 3. Use the theory to make predictions.

A semi-schizophrenic generation raised by

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Politics, Pasties and Punks

In November of 2000, during one of the most turbulent elections in recent years, Synaesthetic Theatre presented *Ubu 2000*, a multimedia burlesque on the modern political landscape.

The play was a deconstruction of Alfred Jarry's revolutionary absurdist work, *Ubu Roi*, taking Jarry's objective of offending and incriminating audiences and modernizing the context..."tipping the sacred cows of race, gender, sexuality, politics, power and money" (Alexis Soloski, Village Voice).

Through a series of short sketches that incorporated the structure and highly stylized characters of early 20th Century Burlesque, *Ubu 2000* followed Candidate Ubu's persuasion of the public and eventual rise to power as King and Dictator of New York City. Ubu became New York's last great reformer, arresting the city, publicly rejecting immorality while privately indulging, banishing the poor and sucking the rich dry.

The play, conceived and directed by Aubrey Hardwick and Chris Nichols, was

performed at NADA Show World, a former strip club in New York City's infamous Times Square. The unique space fueled one of the directors' central concepts.

"We wanted to look at the implications of ignoring the grotesque," mused Hardwick. "The politically incorrect impulses in our culture and in ourselves."

"It was the outstanding power and impact of Ubu Roi which first captivated us," added Nichols. "In the traditions of Burlesque, Circus Freakshows and New York City Punk, we found close connections, similarities in controversy, extravagance and loyal followings."

"All of these movements or phenomena drew a definitive line between audience and 'performer'," continued Hardwick. "[They] worked to create temporary yet powerful countercultures. All utilized grotesque characters and aggressive

actions to confront onlookers with questions about art as a whole ... What is art? Is this art? Was this art destroying society or spotlighting the darkness behind the shining puritan veil?"

Ubu 2000 opened in late October and ran for five weeks (including previews) and it still didn't manage to outlast the election which it mocked. The play was well received critically, garnering an extensive write-up in Entertainment Design Magazine and praise on "The Fulani Show," a local television program about New York politics. Alexis Soloski of The Village Voice had the following to say about the production: "Synaesthetic Theatre takes *Ubu Roi* and makes it Ubu Raw, adapting Alfred Jarry's puppet play into a live-action sacrilege of what present-day America holds dear." 

Opening a New Realm

One of Synaesthetic Theatre's most ambitious and unique projects to date has been "openthebox.net," an online web-extension of their 1999 multimedia play, *Tamatebako {the box}*. The project has extended Synaesthetic's commitment to exploring different media into a whole new realm. *Synaesthetic Viewpoint* recently sat down with James Ford and Chris Nichols, the two lead programmers of the project, to learn more about this ever-expanding realm and a little something called "cyber-theater."

Synaesthetic Viewpoint: So, tell us a little bit about why you decided to turn a live stage show into an online web site.

James Ford: I think it began because we were developing tons and tons of back-story material about the characters and the world for that show. A lot of it never really made it in the actual piece.

Chris Nichols: Joy Leonard (co-director) and I had several discussions about how the people who most enjoyed the production were *Otaku* of some form or another (the Japanese word for "hacker" or "peo-



ple who are obsessed"). Like Frankenstein in the laboratory, Prometheus on the rock, or the hacker in front of the computer, through your obsession your perception of the world changes. You relate to people through the code you are currently obsessed with.

James Ford: And by turning aspects of the show into an interactive web site we

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Greetings and Farewells

Synaesthetic is pleased to announce that in January 2002 we inducted two new members into our fold. Paula A. Marchiel and Tina West Chavous are now members of Synaesthetic Theatre's Company of Artists. Both have worked

with the company extensively before and we are extremely excited about the valuable skills and energy they bring to our process. We look forward to working with them as the year progresses.

After several years of collaborating with

Synaesthetic in many capacities (including co-founding the company in 1997), Kristi Leigh Herman has left the company to pursue other interests. We will miss her, and wish her the very best in all endeavors! 

Ensemble for a Day

On an unseasonably warm Saturday in February at Squid, a dance studio in lower Manhattan, a group of people gathered to create a brief but poignant ensemble. This gathering was facilitated by Synaesthetic Theatre as part of our ongoing exploration of the Viewpoints.

The 30 participants were both company members and other people who are interested in learning and exploring the Viewpoints in their own work. This workshop, one of many hosted by Synaesthetic over the years, was created both as an opportunity for us to meet and work with new artists and for us to share our knowledge of this technique which we utilize so extensively as a company.

The Viewpoints, originated by dancer/choreographer Mary Overlie, provide a simple and profound vocabulary with which performers, choreographers and directors can communicate, an experiential, physical and visual language that does not depend on psychology, method or material. Overlie originally introduced six elements, each given as much weight as the others: space, time, shape, movement, logic, and emotion. Synaesthetic Theatre uses the Viewpoints during the rehearsal

process, for ensemble-building, character exploration, and the development of themes, relationships and staging.

Synaesthetic begins with the basics in every workshop, enabling newcomers to work with experienced Viewpointers. To quote one workshop participant, "I never get tired of doing this work! Thanks for the opportunity, and let me know about the next workshop!" (Meyung Kim, ETW Alumnus)

At our February workshop Joy Leonard and Chris Nichols, two of the Executive Producers of Synaesthetic, led the group through a series of exercises, each introducing a viewpoint. These exercises were designed to activate the individual's awareness of each element, heightening perception of internal and external impulses. We worked as a whole group and then in smaller numbers, feeling how each of the elements (especially space, time and

shape) is altered radically depending on the number of bodies involved.

After exploring each Viewpoint

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Icon continued from page 1

the flickering blue light of TVs, learning expectation and expression at the altar of the Tube. The walls of Plato's cave are padded. The shadows that dance here compel our attention and adoration, but we can't grasp the real – only 2 dimensions. We move about, and cast our own flat aspects on the walls for others to see and believe in, and we call these apparitions our SELVES ...

No one knows into what images he himself will be transmuted by the future.

— Jorge Luis Borges

Step 4: Test those predictions by experiments or further observations.

Click. The patient receives an injection of celluloid. Click. They are trying to tell us

something. Click. Patterns emerge from the click static surf. We watch, therefore we click ...

It's the movies that have really been running things in America ever since they were invented. They show you what to do, how to do it, when to do it, how to feel about it, and how to look at how you feel about it. Everybody has their own America, and then they have the pieces of a fantasy America that they think is out there but they can't see.

— Andy Warhol

Step 5: Modify the theory in the light of your results.

The Icon Project is an attempt to deconstruct the icon down to its basic elements. Icons are made up of social

symbols which pass unconsciously through our perceptual filters and strike a nerve of some kind. But who creates them? Do we choose our icons or do they choose us? If we enshrine media-generated personas and product symbols in our hearts and on our bodies, whose agenda is served?

Who writes this subconscious image language that we all speak?

Step 6: Go to Step 3.

Coming to a New York City theatre in October 2002. Visit www.synaesthetic-theatre.com/icon for more information. 

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the show. For every melodramatic scream on stage, there was an extremely naturalistic interview with a character in the video. For every cliché "village mob" there was "raw footage" of local officials trying to control the rioting villagers.

"Our research into the horror genre provided detail for design, suggested recurrent images, and drew our attention to the large roles that time and the revelation

of information play in suspense," said co-director Joy Leonard. "How many false scares does it take to (un)prepare you for the real one? What is the relationship and where is the balance between the humorous, the bizarre and the horrific? And most of all, which of these lessons apply to live theatre?"

Many thanks and much recognition goes out to the 22 members of *Shadow's*

cast and crew, whose commitment, talent and generosity brought to life a highly ambitious project, a host of hysterical characters and a truly frightening villain!

Shadow of the Invisible Man ran through the month of November 2001. Videos of the show (complete with film "outtakes") are available by contacting Synaesthetic Theatre or visiting us at www.synaesthetic-theatre.com/invisible. 

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allow the audience member to build the story of the piece for him or herself.

SV: *You're calling openthebox.net "cyber-theater"... What does that mean?*

JF: That's one of the things Tamatebako was about in the first place. Taking this new form of media (the web) and transmitting its data through the timeless art form that is live theater.

CN: And with openthebox.net we get to turn that dialog back into itself... By taking all the material that we developed that was theatrical and putting it back into the media

from which it was extracted.

SV: *Openthebox.net is called an ever-growing, ever-changing environment, what does that mean? Where do you see it eventually going?*

CN: We do have an outline of a "story" already developed but I'm not sure we'll ever reach the "conclusion." The idea of keeping it an ever-evolving project means that, unlike a theatre piece, we can implement changes whenever we want ... there are no official opening and closing dates.

JF: In a way, we've liberated the piece from being a "time dependent" work of art. With theater, it happens every night at 8pm... Whether you're ready for it to or not. But, of course, what the web form does lose is people...

CN: Creating and experiencing art like this is an arguably solitary experience. Like so much of our work, *openthebox.net* is very much about community and collaboration... whether it be finding a temporary community for two hours in a darkened room or connecting over thousands of miles through the datastream. 

Ensemble *continued from page 3*

separately, we integrated it with the others in short, small group improvisations. Once we had all six viewpoints at our disposal, we were able to engage in a whole-group 15 minute improvisation, which we call "The Jam." We liken this to a jam session between jazz musicians, each person with their own instrument or at least their own unique way of playing it, all juggling the

same elements and feeling how they fit together, how they clash and the multitude of interesting places in between.

Participants rose to the challenge of working within a group of unknown personalities and impulses, forging emotional and physical connections and learning to "let go". As one participant stated, "The atmosphere of Synaesthetic's

workshop enabled me to let go of self-doubt and just play."

Synaesthetic's next workshop will be in September of 2002. For additional information on our viewpoints workshops, including upcoming sessions, please visit <http://www.synaesthetic-theatre.com/viewpoints>. 

Synaesthetic Theatre 

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syn-aes-thet-ic, *adj.* characterizes a work of art which produces harmony out of different or opposing impulses.

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recently redesigned
website at
www.synaesthetic-theatre.com