

IMMERSING OURSELVES IN BEACHTOWN

BY DANIELLE WARD

Origins of immersive theatre go back to the 19th century. Immersive, or interactive theatre, is one that creates participatory experiences. Each audience member is invited to enter into the story in a proscenium-free environment designed to transform the audience into a new world and blur the lines between performance and reality.

This style of theatre has made a comeback over the past two decades. As Michael Schulman of *The New Yorker* noted, “Perhaps it’s our desire to be more than spectators—to be sucked headlong into alternative worlds—that has fueled the recent boom in immersive theatre, which trades the fourth wall for winding hallways and dance floors, in the hope of giving audiences not a show, but an ‘experience.’” Broadway theatres are now using the “immersion” label as a major selling point.

In 2000, Punchdrunk—a well-known UK-based theatre company founded by Felix Barrett—lead the resurgence of immersive theatre when their 1930’s film noir adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, entitled *Sleep No More*, took New York by storm. Audience members could walk freely through the intricately designed space while wearing white masks, instructed only to keep them on and stay silent no matter what.



At the top of *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*, actors gaze into the eyes of audience members announcing, “Who wants a dumpling?” They then toss individually boxed warm Samovar pirogues all around the theatre. (photo: American Repertory Theatre)

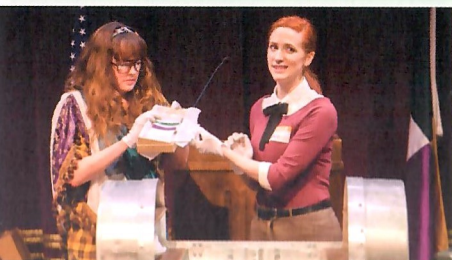
the Great Comet of 1812—a techno-rock musical adaptation of a chunk of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*—which was nominated for a Tony Award.

Since then, countless immersive productions have been produced including: Third Rail Project’s *Then She Fell* (a surreal adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* set in a mental hospital), David Byrne and Fatboy Silm’s musical *Here Lies Love*, Simon McBurney’s *The Encounter*, and Ars Nova’s *Natasha, Pierre, and*

It is clear that experiential theatre is resonating with audiences in ways traditional theatrical cannot.

“When an audience goes into a regular theater, they know what they’re getting...and as a result they slump, switching off three quarters of their brains. I wanted to create productions where the audience is physically present, so that they are driven by a base, gut feeling and making instinctive decisions. That sort of show leaves a far larger imprint on you than just watching something.”

– Felix Barrett, Punchdrunk



A presentation of artifacts from the time capsule in one of dog & pony dc's *Beertown* performances.

The artistic team at San Diego Repertory Theatre had been looking for a way to enter this immersive realm with a project that felt authentic to our mission of nourishing progressive political and social values and celebrating the multiple voices of our community. When Rachel Grossman, Ensemble Director of dog & pony dc—the Washington, DC-based devised theatre company and a national

leader in audience engagement—approached us with their show *Beertown*, it was kismet. We then brought Herbert Siguenza, our then new Playwright-in-Residence, into the conversation and *Beachtown* was born.

dog & pony dc's *Beertown* was the first ensemble-devised show to receive a Helen Hayes Award nomination for Outstanding New Play (2011). Following successful runs at the Off-Broadway 59E59 Theater and the Lincoln Center Theater Director's Lab, dog & pony dc took their critically acclaimed production of *Beertown* on tour to communities in Nebraska, Ohio, and North Carolina. With each production, the play was re-shaped to fit each theatre and its community. *Beertown* evolved from a show exploring an imaginary world to a show about exploring reality within the context of an imaginary world. Which is where we joined in the experiment.

Our MISSION is to inspire self-discovery, forge new relationships, and champion social change. We embrace the audience's presence and participation, and, in doing so, exploit the serendipity potential of live theatre. – dog & pony dc

Beertown offered a strong framework for building *Beachtown*. We shifted some of the setting, features, and characters to fit the San Diego region, but used *Beertown*'s established structure. From there, we walked the line between fiction and reality, turning much of the early interviews of San Diego native and research on San Diego County into a town that mirrored our region, while still crafting a fictional space for people to play in. Additionally, we curated the time capsule artifacts to illicit topical conversations and encourage

debate about our role as citizens in the bi-national region we call home.

The leaders at dog & pony dc collaborated on *Beachtown* every step of the way, teaching us about what they coined “audience integration.” The goal was to interweave the audience into a performance, thereby inviting them to explore topics that are important to their lives. They helped us see the tremendous value of their process of “creating interactions that connect people in unexpected ways to each other, art, and the wider world. This allows all of us to see what we hadn't previously and stretches our understanding of what we know, making us stronger artists and citizens.”



dog & pony dc's *Beertown*

“Play the play you are in, not the play you rehearsed,” Rachel Grossman often reminded in rehearsal. For actors in immersive theatre, it is important to be playful and present, to read the audience and react off them, and to be a really good listener. Multiple workshops and early audience in rehearsals offered the actors crucial practice in creating a safe space for lively conversations.

Even with all of this expertise to draw from, *Beachtown* was an ambitious and challenging piece of experimental work for San Diego REP. *Beachtown* pushed us to think about theatre and place in a new way. Immersive theatre seeks to envelope the audience with sensual experiences to help them enter a new world, offering the audience opportunities to touch, taste, and smell as well as see and hear. For *Beachtown*, we thoughtfully designed the lobby and the pre-show party offerings to be as interactive as possible: a potluck, selfie picture, Q&A offerings, and a community coloring page. We built many songs and sing-alongs into the show. We also added a five-minute section at the top of Act Two to highlight the variety of local performing artists, further exploring the idea of community. All with the goal of creating a welcoming culture for the audience to feel safe enough to leave their traditional theatre seats and step into the heart of the action, equipped with identity and purpose.

Through this two-year long creative process, we have learned the deep impact immersive theatre can make. We are excited to offer you an increasingly authentic experience. We hope that *Beachtown* helps bring a new energy to your theatrical experience and helps foster connections within your community.

Thank you for coming to play and explore with us! And we'd love to see you come back again and again.

Sources included: <https://space.org.uk/2014/08/04/what-is-immersive-theatre/>
<https://contemporaryperformance.com/2017/12/09/immersive-theater/>
<http://www.playbill.com/article/why-immersive-theatre-isnt-just-a-fad>