



"The Spheres" by Australia's Strange Fruit, part of La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls 2015 Festival. (Photo by Daniel Norwood)

Beyond the Comfort Zone at the WoW and BOSSS Festivals

Site-specific theatre festivals from La Jolla Playhouse and En Garde Arts make audiences work for their theatre—and it's worth it.

By Diep Tran
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LA JOLLA, CALIF. and NEW YORK CITY: Rule No. 1 when going to an outdoor site-specific theatre festival: Check the weather. You never know when it might be 100 degrees outside and you'll need bottles and bottles of water. Or when it's a cloudy week and there's been a storm brewing in Florida, which will cause organizers to postpone the festival.

Just ask Anne Hamburger, the president/producer of En Garde Arts, whose first-ever biennial [BOSSS Festival](#) (which stands for "big outdoor site-specific stuff") had to be postponed in early October. The reason: It was scheduled to take place at Hudson River Park and Hurricane Joaquin was coming in that weekend. "We're just watching the weather report and all of a sudden it goes from drizzle on Friday, rain on Saturday, nice on Sunday, to it's got a name," she recalled, sitting in her midtown Manhattan office. "The minute a storm has a name, it's bad!"

Despite the setback, Hamburger was able to reschedule the festival for two weeks later, Oct. 23–25, without losing a single production out of the nine-play lineup. The works at BOSSS were each 30 minutes in length and custom-made for the festival. Full disclosure: I was able to catch only seven out of the nine shows. I missed the last one because the weather dropped from a sunny 60 degrees to 40 degrees, with frigid winds coming in from the Hudson River. Mental note: When seeing outdoor shows outside on a fall evening in New York City, pack gloves.

For [La Jolla Playhouse](#) artistic director Christopher Ashley, the exact opposite was true for the second biennial [Without Walls Festival](#), which ran Oct. 9–11. It was hotter than expected: 100 degrees, which prompted sunscreen instead of gloves. Twenty-two works were on the bill—some created for the festival, others imported—with run times ranging from 30 minutes to two hours.

“It’s very rare that you get rained out in San Diego,” Ashley said while sitting in his office, a baseball cap protecting his head from the intense California sun. “Except for when it’s 100 degrees, it’s usually very beautiful outside.”

I am going to come right out and admit it: I am the queen of theatre binging. And I have the numbers to prove it. Over the course of two days this fall, at WoW, I was in the audience for 12 shows, and the 13th show, which I hadn’t planned on seeing, I ran into twice, as it was taking place in the courtyard outside of La Jolla Playhouse and I had to walk by it to make other curtain times. Two weeks later at BOSSS, I witnessed seven works over six hours.

All of the shows at both events were billed as site-specific. In other words, they were, for the most part, in nontraditional theatre spaces—a car, a grove of trees, a carousel—and, if you’re a dedicated theatre binger like me, you had to walk from show to show. Some shows at the WoW Festival required you to go catch a shuttle because they were not within walking distance; or you could take inspiration from the stage managers at the BOSSS Festival and travel between shows on bicycle.

Which brings us to Rule No. 2 of attending site-specific theatre: Wear comfortable shoes, because you will be walking not just from show to show but *during* the show. Just take *OjO: The Next Generation of Travel*, from the Pittsburgh-based [Bricolage Production Company](#), which played at the WoW Festival. During the performance, audiences walked outside through mulch and grass. In fact, the e-mail sent to audiences before the show was clear to specify the wearing of “closed-toe/comfortable shoes.”

Of course, some people don’t read e-mails. “On Friday night, the board president came in six-inch heels,” said Bricolage artistic director Jeffrey Carpenter, who also acted in *OjO*. “And she actually was a trouper: She walked through the mulch. We had to peel her off at a certain point because she wasn’t going to make it through the grass.”



“OjO” by Bricolage Production Company, part of La Jolla Playhouse’s Without Walls 2015 Festival. (Photo by Daniel Norwood)

Seeing these works inspire the same exclamations the festival names denote (“wow” and “boss”). One such “wow” moment came during *The Car Plays: Interchange* from [Moving Arts](#) at WoW, during which I sat in a car with one other audience member and watched two actors physically fight inches away from us.

The piece was comprised of 15 different 10-minute plays, each of which took place in separate cars. The plays were grouped around a specific theme—murder, love, a traffic accident—with five plays in each group; pairs of audience members were assigned to one thematic group and watched five of the works. (You would need to come back to see all the plays.) The sequence I saw was a “C.S.I.”-esque murder mystery, where audience members slowly pieced together the details of the crime and those involved. The playwrights in the “murder row” included Bekah Brunstetter and Jeff Liu.

“What’s been so fun is watching the audience leave,” said director Paul Stein. “They’re leaving the stage and they’re actually talking, ‘Oh yeah, she’s the younger version of that character!’ They’re talking more about the show than about the event [of seeing a play in a car].”

A particular “boss” moment came during *Moms* by Sarah Delappe at BOSSS. A tribute to motherhood, the play had 20 men walk around Hudson River Park with pink strollers, chanting, “I am a mom.” At the piece’s climax, the men were lying on the concrete in labor, and their screams attracted casual parkgoers who stopped to take in the sight (and capture some photos and videos). Right in the middle of labor, a jogger (not a part of the show) ran through the scene. The audience burst into rapturous applause.

For director Lee Sunday Evans, whose piece *This Place* was about the fisheries and fisherman that used to operate on the Hudson River, giving the audience a little bit of unexpected theatre magic—and inspiring them to see city locations in a new light—was part of the fun of BOSSS. In fact, for artists creating work for the festival, the criteria that Hamburger gave were: “I want you to think big, I want you to think outdoors, and I want you to make work for strangers.”

Wonder can happen anywhere, and any place can be theatre—whether it’s the inside of a car or on a pier by the river. “The idea that someone would come and not have any context is essentially the thing that’s most exciting to me about this endeavor,” said Evans. “There’s a kind of wonder that can happen when someone gets a little nugget of a creative gift that shakes up their day or changes their perception of what that place could be.”

The works at BOSSS were completely free, while at WoW, the most expensive ticket was \$29, with a variety of free programming for those who couldn’t afford a ticket. And considering most of the works at the festivals were in outdoor communal areas, ticketing would have been a time- and-labor-intensive endeavor.

At WoW, the decision to make the work free or cheap has attracted that rare theatre audience: the young. “I would say the audience for this is younger, more ethnically and economically diverse than anything else that we do,” said Ashley. “There’s virtually no pricing obstacle for most people.”

Social media also helped attract new audiences. In a time when Patti LuPone grabbing an audience member's cell phone can make national headlines, BOSSS and WoW set themselves apart by not just allowing the performances to be Instagrammed and tweeted out but actively encouraging it. A show program at WoW read: "We welcome you to take video and photographs during the performances." And I did take some photos: of the late-night acrobatic show *The Spheres* from [Australia's Strange Fruit](#) and *Moms* at BOSSS (so did many other people using the hashtag [#WoWFestSD](#) and [#bosssfest](#)).

"In this kind of world, you're part of the experience, the rules are *way* more relaxed and everybody ends up posting it and communicating it to their circle of friends much more effortlessly and naturally," said Ashley.

The best show at WoW was one I didn't see. Instead, it was one that I smelled, listened to, and touched. In Bricolage's *OjO* ("eye" in Spanish), I was blindfolded and taken on a trip to Mumbai, where the sound of the street bustle hit my ears, where curry tingled my nose (and made my stomach growl), and a chicken ran past my bare leg, making me flinch. At one point, I was at a bass-heavy dance party and someone grabbed my hand and asked me to dance.

Hand-holding was a requirement in *OjO*, where blinded audience members needed guidance so they didn't fall over. During a brief moment where the 10 of us were allowed to see, performer Ann Lapidus, who was born with sight and then gradually became blind, asked an audience member to take her hand and lead her to the table in the center of the room. With no hesitation, a woman stepped up and took her hand. "We're dating now," Lapidus responded playfully.

"They've just been through that experience where their hand was held, so I think people want to be protective," Lapidus said when we talked after the performance. "They've just had that experience where they know that someone who can't see needs that little extra attention. They have a little more empathy for that situation and want to be more helpful."

Whether holding hands or making conversation with a complete stranger, BOSSS and WoW fostered a sense of community. It goes beyond putting people in a dark room, having them sit in a row of chairs, and then ushering them out at an appointed time. Site-specific work forces audience members to encounter both the work and the people around them.

During an 8:15 performance of *Night, Janitor, Carousel* by Julian Koster (of the band Neutral Milk Hotel) at the carousel in Hudson River Park, Koster invited half of the audience to come aboard the carousel. A toddler in a white puffy jacket jumped off her seat in excitement. The play was a dream-like journey into the minds of a janitor, played by Koster, who sang and told stories about his great grandfather.

Upon entering the carousel, each person was given a lantern with a piece of paper attached to it. Koster told the audience to write down a memory, and the pieces of paper were collected and placed in a fishbowl filled with water. He then swirled the mixture, dissolving the paper until it turned into one big bowl of collective memory.

As an audience member, it's rare that you're physically exerting yourself as much as the actors on the stage. But that visceral sense of forcing audiences to take a literal journey and reaching the other side with a new set of eyes (so to speak) is what informs site-specific and/or immersive work.

“There’s an interest in the reconfiguration of storytelling—of which site-specific work is a part, of which immersive work is a part, of which multimedia work is a part,” said Hamburger. “That’s really at the essence of all of this. And I’m really interested in that. Storytelling is very different now, and there’s a more rapid conveyance of information going on. And then it becomes, storytelling for who? And that’s where I’m at—storytelling for peers, storytelling for the general public, storytelling for other artists. Who and why are we telling these stories?”

Whether it’s dancing blindly, sitting in a car with a stranger, riding a dolphin on a carousel, or Instagramming a photo of 20 men with pink strollers, there’s a particular sense of *now* within the works at WoW and BOSS. The play is an event that can’t be replicated in the exact same way again. The afternoon light won’t look the same. It will be a different stranger’s hand that you’re holding, a different patch of grass that you’re sitting on, or a different vantage point from which you’re viewing the play.

What’s more, the setting where you saw the play won’t look the same after you see a site-specific performance there. The carousel will never just be the Hudson River Park carousel again, but the place where you and 60 other audience members made a memory in a fishbowl together.

When theatre is this memorable and fun, who needs air conditioning or gloves?

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