

Eight years after *Sleep No More* hit New York, theatre is still immersed in the site-specific trend

By [CARLY MAGA](#) Theatre Critic.

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We're barely into the final year of the 2010s, a decade of fundamental change in theatre in North America, from leadership to groundbreaking improvements to representation onstage (hello *Hamilton*). But it's clear the biggest trend in the last 10 years has been immersive theatre.

Since the British company Punchdrunk partnered with American producers Emursive to unveil *Sleep No More* in March 2011, in which masked audience members packed into the McKittrick Hotel in Chelsea and followed performers at will, "immersive theatre" has become the buzz word for plays that break the traditional theatregoing mould.

Last year saw the trend literally breaking boundaries: Talk is Free Theatre produced *The Curious Voyage*, a three-day-long immersive [production](#) that sent audience members from Barrie, Ont., to London, England. **And last week, the Toronto Fringe's Next Stage Festival presented its first immersive, site-specific production with *Athabasca*, created by Toronto's Convergence Theatre. Audience members gather at an office building in the west end where they overhear a heated argument between an oil company PR rep and an environmental activist.**

"There is something subversive about not doing this in a theatre. It cracks open the possibilities," says director and Convergence co-founder Aaron Willis. "That isn't to say the old contract of sitting in a chair and watching something isn't still valid, but there are possibilities to enrich it."

Willis has possibly the simplest definition of what immersive theatre is. "Your body, as an audience member, becomes important. Where you're sitting, who you are; you're not just sitting back and watching," he says.

His first immersive production, along with his wife, Convergence co-founder Julie Tepperman, was 2006's *AutoShow*, seven short plays in or around a real car. At that time, the term "site-specific theatre" commonly described plays that took place outside a traditional theatre, usually meaning the location was directly related to the subject matter.

"I never really thought about it as a genre. We started working in it mostly out of expediency: it was cheap when there was no venue. But we discovered that people enjoyed that kind of theatre experience and that we enjoyed creating them," said Tepperman.

Today, Convergence is one of the most well-known immersive theatre companies in Toronto. In 2015, Tepperman co-created one of the most successful immersive

projects in the GTA — Sheridan College’s sprawling, sold-out **musical *Brantwood*** — with director Mitchell Cushman of Outside the March Theatre, another of Toronto’s top immersive companies.

“I try to approach work stripping away as many preconceptions of what a theatre experience is as possible. I think that’s what’s really exciting about a lot of immersive work,” says Cushman.

He and Outside the March broke onto the Toronto scene in 2011 with Noah Haidle’s *Mr. Marmalade*, a quirky and darkly funny **play** about a young girl and her adult male imaginary friend that Cushman set in a real-life kindergarten classroom, enhancing the story with the audience’s childhood memories of such a room. Cushman has since incorporated immersive elements into more traditional settings, including *Treasure Island* at the **Stratford Festival** and *Jerusalem* at the **Streetcar Crowsnest**.

Cushman recognizes that a major part of the rise of immersive theatre has to do with audiences’ desire to shake up the traditional sequence of: arrive, sit down, watch, clap, leave. That’s a viewpoint shared by Daniele Bartolini, founder of DLT, which specializes in productions created for extremely small audiences, often single spectators who travel from scene to scene outdoors or in large buildings. Both Cushman and Bartolini created works featured in *The Curious Voyage*.

“The feedback that I receive most is, ‘I want to be scared.’ The feeling of not knowing what’s going on, people really enjoy that part and I’m hearing that more and more,” Bartolini says.

But as we near 10 years of *Sleep No More* in New York City, Willis, Tepperman, Cushman and Bartolini worry about the buzziness of the word “immersive,” now generously applied to dining, travel and visual art projects, and even some big-budget theatre productions that adhere quite strictly to the status quo. A news release for the Canadian Opera Company’s *Hadrian* this past fall described it as “immersive,” without demonstrating any of the trappings that mark an immersive production.

“It’s a great word to sell an experience with. But the range of what that experience is is so vast ... it feels so general now. It might as well be replaced with ‘cool,’” says Willis.

Bartolini agrees. He feels the word is often used to get attention. Tepperman hesitates to use it in conversation.

“If it’s going to be site-specific, there needs to be something purposeful about where you’ve chosen to present that story and you’re actively looking for ways to engage with that space ... The danger is that immersive theatre becomes a shellac over top of something, and it doesn’t offer as meaningful or deep an experience as I think it has the potential to,” Cushman says.

“I’ve definitely seen some projects where if you stripped away all of the immersive elements, there would be little left at its core. And that’s the work that makes me a little

frustrated as an immersive theatre artist because I feel like we are just scraping the surface of what's possible and I don't want it to be a fad."

With *Athabasca* onstage until Jan. 20 and the *Sleep No More*-like dance/theatre hybrid *Eve of St. George* at the Great Hall on Jan. 17, the first month of 2019 would suggest immersive theatre is not slowing as a trend in Toronto. But the question that remains is: how will immersive theatre companies resist the temptation to simply one-up each other, creating bigger and more elaborate concepts that risk artistic integrity and turn immersion into a gimmick?

"Maybe it's a question of investigating: if the play can be done on a stage do it on a stage. *Athabasca* could exist on a stage and the arguments are still there; it's still a play of the here and now. But this environment, we hope, will heighten the level of engagement," says Tepperman.

Cushman, on the other hand, is thinking about expanding the definition of theatre in general, as well as "immersive theatre," with a production coming to Toronto this summer that involves escape rooms (another skyrocketing experiential trend within the last decade).

"I think that ideally it will remain a little bit fluid and open to interpretation, that people will claim it in different ways. I just think that when people are claiming it, they at least should have an understanding of what it means to them," he says. "If not, then I think that the word is in danger of losing meaning."

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