

Immersive Brunch

a dialogue between Convergence Theatre's Julie Tepperman & Aaron Willis

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*The power couple behind the smash hit *The Unending* have a chat about creating intimacy with their audiences.*

*For the last ten years, we've be staging shows in unexpected locations, including cars, the Gladstone Hotel, Withrow Park, Eastminster United Church, Union Station... We even tricked some people into believing Theatre Passe Muraille was an old synagogue. In the lead up to the remount of our latest show, *The Unending* (which takes place at Aunties & Uncles Restaurant + two secret locations), we sat down one Sunday afternoon for brunch and talked immersive theatre.*

JULIE: Two minutes. Favourite immersive theatre stories. GO!

AARON: The time someone called the police after they saw a “bellhop” punch a “patron” outside the Gladstone Hotel.

JULIE: The time the bride in *The Tearful Bride* was on the fourth floor of the Gladstone lamenting the whereabouts of her groom, when an *actual* groom from the wedding downstairs exited the elevator and walked through the scene into his hotel room—for a split second, everyone thought he was part of the play.

AARON: The time the whole audience ganged up on the guy in the back alley when he accused people of getting too close to his parked SUV and kept setting his alarm off on purpose. Twenty people shouted, “*Dude! Stop being an a-hole and let us finish the play!*”

JULIE: Remember the man who stood up with tears in his eyes and shouted “Mazel Tov!” from the audience after the bride and groom in *YICHUD (Seclusion)* broke the glass at the end of the wedding ceremony?

AARON: That was amazing! People shouting out from the audience is not a new phenomenon, but the feeling we created in the pre-show wedding celebration, where people walked into the “synagogue” and were invited to partake as wedding guests, meant they were incredibly invested in the characters and what happened to them once the play-proper began.

JULIE: Several times the show started late because people wouldn't take their seats until they got a special blessing from the bride (me)! Some people would improvise with me in character as my “long-lost aunt who travelled hours to make it to my wedding,” others asked me for blessings for serious things and whispered intimate secrets and sorrows in my ear. Even though we all knew the world was fiction, I felt a huge responsibility towards people.

AARON: Working in this way, we continue to see that people, maybe now more than ever, crave communal activities and connections with other people.

JULIE: When we spend so much time in a day communicating with each other via technology, being physically immersed in a story with other people, disappearing into a world, even being invited to role play can be incredibly appealing.

AARON: For me, exciting immersive theatre creates an environment that the audience is dropped into, a carefully chosen and designed space that pushes the boundaries of intimacy between the audience and the performers, and challenges traditional notions of how theatre can and should unfold. That could mean there are no seats, that the audience and performers are put in close proximity with each other, or maybe the performer breaks the fourth wall and engages directly with the audience. Often the audience is granted a certain degree of autonomy or agency to move around, to define and create their own experience. You've taken to calling it "audience voyeurism." Immersive experiences often take place in site-specific venues, but perhaps even more often they unfold in non-traditional venues that have been transformed into a fictional space conducive to creating heightened levels of engagement.

JULIE: For me, exciting immersive theatre *demand*s engagement. It invites the audience to be an integral and active part of their theatre-going experience.

AARON: How do you go about making the audience "active"? Is audience participation an essential component?

JULIE: I shudder at the thought of being called up on stage to participate. I can't even bring myself to shout out suggestions at improv shows, I get so shy! But immersive theatre *can* successfully invite the audience to participate, to be an *active spectator* without making people feel put on the spot. Whether by choosing-your-own adventure, or chasing characters or stories around a space, or simply by deciding the vantage point from which you witness something. Then there's the next level up from this fly-on-the-wall brand of spectatorship, which is an active, task-oriented participation. The audience might be invited to help a character do something, solve a puzzle, discover an "easter egg," make decisions that impact the story—"adventure theatre." And I haven't even mentioned my personal favourite form of audience engagement: the "one-on-one."

AARON: There are few things more immediate, more ephemeral, more intense than a one-on-one encounter.

JULIE: Totally! When a character breaks the fourth wall, looks you in the eye, offers you their hand, takes you into a secret space, and reveals something private... *It's as if you are holding their heart in your hands.* It's a curated form of intimacy. And if the actor is a good improviser, if they are a good listener, a good *empathizer*, they might just create an unforgettable experience for that one person. Being an actor, intimacy, and the hunt for intimacy, drives so many of my interactions. But intimacy on that level isn't necessarily an everyday occurrence for everyone. So when a stranger, within the safety and rules of the fictionalized world of the play invites you in, it can feel incredibly special. You feel *chosen*. And for me it doesn't feel gimmicky so long as its purpose is to further something, or teach me something I didn't know, and the performer is good at taking care of me. Basically, whether I'm experiencing a one-on-one or sitting in a five-hundred-seat theatre watching a play on a stage, I want to feel like my presence is valued, is essential. And sometimes an intimate space is more conducive to creating that feeling.

AARON: A charismatic performer can make the Air Canada Centre feel like an intimate space, if they have the skill and stagecraft. But I agree, the dynamic between the performers and a small audience creates a particular kind of intimacy that dissipates the larger the crowd gets. I think it has to do with that hunt, the search for intimacy you're describing. In a smaller group, it becomes possible to evoke the feeling that an audience member is part of something special, something not many people will ever know or see. It's taking the principle behind the one-on-one encounter and expanding its reach.

JULIE: You raise a good point about audience capacity. Often the space itself will dictate the number of audience, based on how many people can comfortably fit. I frequently hear people complain that they feel too "packed in" at immersive experiences, and that "the bottom \$\$\$ line" seemed to compromise or take precedence over the intimacy. Certainly when you're building a piece where stories and characters collide, timing is an essential part of the success of its execution, so sometimes padding the audience can actually be detrimental by throwing off that timing.

AARON: There's a fine line between producerial decisions impacting creative choices, and vice versa. In this land of indie theatre, the artists are also often the producers, so it's all mixed into a larger conversation. I think it comes down to having a clear intention and determining how you measure success from project to project. We always do our best to let the needs of the play and the kind of experience we want to create for an audience guide that decision-making.

JULIE: Also, the choice of space should never feel like a gimmick. A term I've heard people use that I like much better than "site-specific" is "site-engaging." I like that because it combines the idea of space and activation... The site, the venue, the audience's presence in it, all of it becomes integral to the storytelling. How does the space serve the piece? How does the space enhance the audience's experience of the play? At the end of the day, if you feel that the best place for that play is on a stage in a theatre, then do it on a stage in a theatre!

AARON: There are definitely unique challenges of doing plays in non-traditional venues. And it's not always cheaper than renting a theatre!

JULIE: It's one thing when you're renting a theatre that is set up to function as a theatre, but venues that aren't necessarily built for or used for live performance can prove challenging, especially when the venue is operating as a business at the same time you are using it.

Case in point: no matter how clear we were, no matter how many meetings, and e-mails, and notices we sent, there was always a surprise waiting for us at the Gladstone Hotel. Like the time we showed up and they had just re-painted the doors where a significant scene in one of the plays unfolded, and they were like, "Uh, can't you just do that scene somewhere else tonight?"

AARON: Which reminds me: I have to call Aunties & Uncles to confirm when our tech/dress is! I'm gonna ask for the bill.

JULIE: One more quick story! Do you remember during *The Gladstone Variations*, this woman, a blogger who we didn't know, requested a media comp and also asked for two extra comps for her friends?

AARON: Love that!

JULIE: She started to lag behind the crowd towards the end of one of the plays... the one I wrote, actually. The fact that I wrote it, plus that she had asked for *three* comps, made me extra sensitive to her inattention, and it took all of my willpower not to run up to her and say, "Stop looking at the art on the wall, you're missing the end of my play!"

Later that night she sent me an e-mail saying how moved she was by the piece, and that she found it very hard to watch because it was about dementia, and her father had quite recently passed away after battling Alzheimer's. She admitted that it was extra hard for her to endure being there with two friends; because the experience took place in full light she couldn't hide her tears from them. Oh wow, did that ever school me! Until that moment it hadn't occurred to me how vulnerable it could be to ask an audience who is used to seeing theatre in the dark to remain visible. It's also such a healthy reminder that we cannot control the emotional lens through which people experience a play... But of course that's true for all art, not just immersive, site-specific theatre.

AARON: ... Annnddd, as if on cue, the bill has arrived. Debit?

JULIE: VISA.

AARON: Our debt... it is... Unending.

Julie Tepperman



Julie is a Dora Award-winning actor, published playwright, and arts educator. Together with Aaron Willis, she is co-artistic director of Convergence Theatre, thrice voted by NOW Magazine readers as "Best Site Specific Theatre Company in Toronto." Julie is a proud recipient of a 2016 Harold Award.

Aaron Willis



Aaron is a director, actor, and co-founding artistic director of Convergence Theatre with Julie Tepperman. If he could spend most of his time doing one thing, it would be making plays. Both on the ice and off.