

# The ins and outs of site-specific theatre

Two of Toronto's most experienced creators of immersive theatre discuss everything from finding a space, negotiating a price and making sure you don't get sued – or have your fake prop guns stolen.

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*With Outside the March's site-specific show [TomorrowLove™](#) currently enjoying packed houses and the recent sold out remount of Convergence Theatre's hit [The Unending](#), I thought I'd ask Mitchell Cushman and [Julie Tepperman](#) about the logistics of making theatre in non-traditional spaces.*

## What comes first: the script or the venue?

*Mitchell Cushman:* Script. I always want to make sure we're leading with story. If you start with a building, the work won't often have the same substance because you're trying to make something fit. For TomorrowLove™, we knew we were looking for a space that had a certain aura, a sense of ritual about it, and that it needed lots of smaller sectioned off playing areas.

Overall, I'd say the scripts haven't changed much in response to the buildings we've put them in. But seeing, for instance, the chapel here gave us a very specific vision of what the dance section of the show could be.

## How do you go about finding locations?

*Cushman:* For TomorrowLove™, we were talking to a developer about a different building, and that didn't work out. They asked what we were looking for. And it turned out they had this old funeral home two blocks from where I grew up that was going to be torn down. I used to walk by here all the time but never thought I'd be doing a show here. It's funny. You walk around the city and see so many buildings on their way out. It got me thinking about our company's purpose. Maybe one of our goals can be to shepherd these buildings into the afterlife in an interesting way. It feels like a practical way that our company can have a connection to the city and that is one of the plus sides of old buildings being torn down. In a way, a building can have one last showing before it disappears.

*Julie Tepperman:* For The Unending, one of the spaces we used was my sister's garage. I always wanted to do a play there. Whenever I walked there through this alley to get there it felt like an interesting journey. And we often frequented Aunties and Uncles.

## How do you negotiate a price to rent a venue?

*Tepperman:* We put together a package for the owner of Aunties and Uncles and told him about our intentions and our history of doing this kind of theatre. He told us to come by. He was super cool and said he wanted to do more live stuff in his place. The restaurant closes at 3 pm and it's cleaned up and everyone's gone by 5. So the timing worked out for evening performances. We asked him what we could pay him and he said, "Pick a price." So we settled on the Fringe entry fee. We signed a contract and he gave us the keys... but keep in mind that there was a lot of trust involved. There was always the fear that he could say no later on. And what would we do: sue him? People have to be onboard about it. We always invite the people involved to the show. They should be invested in it. When we did [The Gladstone Variations](#), we invited all the Gladstone staff and they saw the show and some would follow along.

*Cushman:* There's an art to finding a middle ground between a small not-for-profit and what is a large commercial organization. This building was just sitting here, and ultimately they will tear it down. What that means is that we could do whatever we wanted with it. But on the other hand, it hadn't been active in a year and a half, so basically a lot of the money we're paying went into getting the building up and running in terms of heating and water.

## So it's cheaper than renting a traditional theatre space?

*Tepperman:* Not always! A few years ago, renting the Church for [Passion Play](#) for three weeks cost just over \$11,000 (not including utilities for extra power we needed for our lighting) and to get a park permit from the City for three weeks was roughly \$3,000. To compare, renting a "backspace" for a week is roughly \$3,000. And also remember that most theatre rentals comes with basics like a working lighting grid and lights, sound speakers, a board, a technician to run the board, and front-of-house staff – all things we need to pay for in addition to the rental fee when doing a play in a found space.

## How much do you tell the neighbours about what's going on?

*Tepperman:* For The Unending, we went through the owners of the house we were using, and in one case we got the email of one of the neighbours. We always extend an invitation to them to see the show, because they can become great ambassadors. But we've had bad experiences. For The Gladstone Variations, one of the scenes took place in an alley next to the Gladstone, and a pawn shop owner kept his giant SUV there with a motion detector that would always go off.

*Cushman:* With TomorrowLove™, the building is pretty sequestered and it's not a residential area, so we didn't have to do much. With [Vitals](#) [in the west end], we had a person involved with community engagement. With [Brantwood](#), we also needed to get neighbours onboard because we were driving these big school buses through their area. At one point during rehearsals, we didn't have running water, so we had to use the bathroom of the curling club across the street.

You want to get ahead of things and make people excited about what's going on. Arts and culture is a pretty easy sell. But if they don't know what you're doing it can feel intrusive. So: get in touch with them and frame it as good, exciting news. "Guess what is happening in your own backyard!"

### **Inevitably, something will go wrong. What then?**

*Cushman:* With **Mr. Burns** [performed in an old movie theatre in the east end], some guys who lived next door to the building broke through their wall and into our space and stole some prop guns an hour before stage time. They also stole a laptop. Our stage manager had to get the district attorney to extradite a search warrant, because we could see the guns in the guys' house but weren't allowed to go in. The actors rechoreographed a light sabre fight with umbrellas. The owner of our building ended up covering the expenses.

*Tepperman:* During *The Gladstone Variations*, people complained about one scene in which a "bellhop" beat up a "patron." The police even came once. And the owner of that SUV kept saying audience members were intentionally setting off the car alarm.

### **So insurance is a must?**

*Tepperman:* Yes, always ALWAYS buy it! Even if your venue is insured for patrons, you want to cover all your bases and get insurance that will cover patrons and artists specific to your activities. Sometimes theatres will even request that rental customers get their own additional insurance. Obviously we need to go above and beyond to keep patrons and artists safe when renting any kind of space, but accidents do happen, and insurance is affordable and so so worth it – we are all too poor to get sued! FYI: A good broker that a lot of indie theatres use is **Front Row Insurance**.

### **Are you constantly looking around you for interesting spaces to use?**

*Cushman:* Pretty much all the time. I think because I wear both director and producer hats, I now look at a space and think about the creative possibilities, but also the overhead. I keep a little list in my head of interesting spaces either we were going to use for something and didn't or still might. I've learned so much about the city and have been pushed to parts I normally wouldn't find myself in.

*Tepperman:* Doing this totally changes the way you experience space. Our eyes become the camera. I know "site-specific" and "immersive" are current buzzwords. You always have to ask yourself: "Is the space going to enhance the audience's experience of a play?" It can't just be a gimmick.

<https://nowtoronto.com/stage/theatre/the-ins-and-outs-of-site-specific-theatre/>

