

Tuesday, May 28 and beyond

Immersive Spectatorship

Welcome *back* to London. This last week we expect that everyone will be taking off into a variety of directions, but we also wanted to pull you back together for some experiences in immersive spectatorship.

But isn't spectatorship already immersive? Isn't that what we've been talking about? Yes! And we wanted to make sure we acknowledged a recent shift in popular entertainment toward performance experiences that engage the "participatory visitor" in a more fully sensory experience. "Immersive theatre," writes Josephine Machon "attracts an alternative audience; those who would not necessarily consider themselves theatregoers," partly because that are "removed from the 'usual' set of rules and conventions expected from 'traditional' theatrical performances." Productions like *ABBA Voyage* and the *Murder Express* have emerged from a genuine desire for an authentic connection, or a "need to feel sensually and imaginatively alive in the way that one does after a revitalizing walk, experiencing a fairground ride, [or] engaging in extreme sports." Immersive Theatre invites spectators to become part of a performance; or to quote Gareth White, it makes audiences part of the "artistic medium" of the performance.

Think back to *ABBA Voyage*.

- How did the space of performance train your body to engage in behaviors distinct from those you exhibit when watching a play from an auditorium?
- How did the various technologies that created the performance also shape your immersive spectatorship?
- How did you become part of the performance?



The Making of Harry Potter Studio Tour

We'll start first with an immersive museum.

The Making of Harry Potter is a tour of the Warner Bros. Studio lot where many of the scenes from the Harry Potter films were shot between 2001 and 2011, especially those requiring recurring interior settings and special effects. So, to begin, it's a curious location. Is it historic? Only if you include the making of these eight films as a significant event in Britain's history. It's sort of like the stages on the West End; a place where fiction is made, where stories and characters reign supreme.

The tour, as a result, is an exhibition of theatricality, a showcase of things used to create a fictional world. You will be shown artifacts from the making of the films, but they are props,

things made to look like other things. The Marauder's Map may look ancient but that's merely the result of a skilled prop artisan's distressing technique.

Often, you will be immersed in this fiction world, invited into a path into the Forbidden Forest or onto the Hogwarts Express. Perhaps most immersive are the gift shops, where suddenly the items offered for display are also available to take home for an exorbitant price! (Honestly, they make it almost impossible not to buy *something*.) For adults who grew up reading the books and watching the movies, the tour evokes a kind of childlike



excitement, both an opportunity to get closer to familiar characters and discover the technologies of film making that made the stories come to life on screen. The model of Howarts towards the end of the tour is breathtaking in its detail. It feels incredibly real because it stands in front of you, the product of many hours of skills labor, and also incredibly familiar because it verifies what you've seen on film. It IS Howarts. But also, it isn't a castle. It isn't a real place,

and the model makes that fact patently clear. Am I awed? Excited? Heartbroken? It can be a complicated moment for someone thinking deeply about questions of spectatorship.

#UKinMay assignment:

- Post an image(s) with caption that expresses your insights into the immersive museum or your personal experience with the fictional world of Harry Potter.

The Murder Express

Dinner theatre as a terrible reputation. Think retirement age Floridians crumbling saltines into their soup while watching second-rate performers singing "Shapoopie" from *The Music Man*. Dreadful.



But in the new age of immersive theatre, we have an experience like *The Murder Express*, an intimate boutique performance offering an elevated menu while actors run around trying to find a murderer. It's not Shakespeare, but it's a fun night out!

The period is 1930s, and the show promises to “transport us back in time” (assuming we don't feel out of place in our 2024 clothing). The murder mystery is a staple of British storytelling, but the plot here turns more toward comedic satire.

A trademark of immersive performance is the use of multiple senses beyond watching and listening. The dinner will provide a more sensuous experience, engaging our taste, smell, and touch.

By now (we hope) you've become well versed in asking questions about spectatorship, so what do you notice about your experience. What has shaped that experience? How does it differ from the other experiences we've had as a group? How have you changed as spectators over the past few weeks, and how has that influenced what you see now?

#UKinMay assignment:

- Post an image(s) with caption from this evening (or another) that captures what you've learned most about yourself as a spectator.