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All the World's a Stage at WoW Festival

La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls Festival stages theater, dance and music in real-world settings ranging from a car to a basketball court

By ZACHARY PINCUS-ROTH

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La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls Festival focuses on immersive theater, such as this tennis-court version of 'Three Sisters,' by THE TRIP. PHOTO: JIM CARMODY

A car, a garden path, a basketball court, a garage. Audiences at La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls Festival in San Diego last week weren't short of venue options. Some watched Anton Chekhov's "Three Sisters" on a tennis court. Others experienced "Hurling," a performance designed for one audience member at a time, on the roof of the University of California San Diego's engineering school.

Theater staged in the real world can be a jolting experience, but WoW Festival organizers hoped the unusual locations of its 22 site-specific shows would heighten the storytelling. "It's getting people off this fact that they're supposed to 'get it.' That there's a singular idea," said Liz Lerman, director of "Healing Wars," a dance show that had audiences wander backstage before the show to witness vignettes set during the Civil War. "It's truer to life."

While immersive theater isn't new, especially to Europeans, it's been gaining steam in the U.S. over the past few years. The trend is influenced by shows like the New York hit "Sleep No More," a mashup of "Macbeth" and Hitchcock in which audiences wear masks and follow performers around a Chelsea warehouse.

"The demand for it is immense right now," said Christopher Ashley, artistic director of La Jolla Playhouse. "It rhymes with [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) and Instagram and all this stuff that's instantaneous community-building." The biennial festival, which was held over three days last weekend, is a feat to produce. "It's a game of Tetris," said Marike Fitzgerald, the festival's associate producer. Organizers must coordinate foot traffic to venues spread across the UCSD campus and playhouse grounds, figure out how to route electricity to the sites and keep sound design from bleeding.

Holding shows in spaces typically reserved for other purposes brings its own problems. The opera “Queen of Carthage,” for example, was held in a grove of eucalyptus trees overlooking the Pacific. But eucalyptuses can topple easily, so an arborist was called in to inspect the trees and a crew cleared away weak limbs.

But perhaps the greatest hazard—and often the greatest joy—of site-specific shows is coming into contact with unsuspecting outsiders. The 2013 festival featured a wordless, improvisational show called “Kamchatka,” in which performers wandered the UCSD campus as the audience tagged along. At one performance, the troupe climbed the walls of a dorm, and students let them in through a window. At another, they knocked on the door of a bus, hinting that they might get on board. The driver called the police.

Some proposed pieces are just too difficult to stage. Mr. Ashley considered one show that had the audience join the cast in a mud pit. Another idea involved a performer and audience member strapped to each other while sky diving.

But sometimes ambition pays off. One of the more innovative works at this year’s festival was “OjO,” by the Pittsburgh-based Bricolage. As audience members arrived at the venue, they handed over “boarding passes” at what appeared to be an airline counter. They were then blindfolded and taken for a sensory walk through streets where the air smelled of curry, chickens pecked at their legs and fabric peddlers aggressively sold their wares.

“A lot of these artists think about the audience as the other character,” Mr. Ashley said. This kind of work, he added, “says ‘Please don’t be passive and sit there and give us a golf clap at the end. You’re part of the experience. What you do matters.’ ”