

TARRAGON



Undercover

A world premiere

Created by Rebecca Northan with Bruce Horak
Co-produced by Tarragon Theatre & Vertigo Theatre
September 19 – October 29, 2017 in the **Mainspace**

Education Resource Guide by EmmaRose MacDonald
with consultation by Rebecca Northan

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About the Play

Synopsis:

Before the show, members of the cast mingle with the audience to find potential willing candidates to participate in the play. An audience member is then invited onstage, to act as a rookie detective alongside their partner, “the grizzled cop”, and a team of improvisors. Together the partners solve a murder mystery and create a play before the audiences’ eyes.

About the Creators:

Rebecca Northan is an actor, writer, director, improviser, and Artistic Director/Producer of Spontaneous Theatre. She trained in improv with Keith Johnstone at Loose Moose Theatre Company. Northan has won two Canadian Comedy Awards, one for “best female improviser” and one for “best comedic play” and has also won a Dora Award and a Betty Mitchell Award. Her hit-show Blind Date has toured across Canada, the US, and in London’s West End. A queer version opened in the the 2016/17 season at Buddies in Bad Times in Toronto. In addition to developing Undercover at Tarragon Theatre with Vertigo Theatre, Northan is working on another spontaneous theatre piece called An Undiscovered Shakespeare at the Stratford Festival. Northan teaches at the Canadian Film Centre and offers improv workshops for artists and corporate clients.

For more information visit <http://cfccreates.com/mentors/27> or <http://www.spontaneoustheatre.ca>

Bruce Horak is a legally blind visual artist, story-teller, improviser and performer/creator. He is an Artistic Associate at Spontaneous Theatre. He has won several awards for his stage work including the Just For Laughs Frankie Award for Best Comedy (The Canada Show), a TWISI award for Contribution to Arts in Canada (this is CANCER), 2 Betty Mitchell Awards for Outstanding Performance, (This is CANCER, Evil Dead: The Musical) and “Best of Fest” awards across Canada with Vancouver’s Monster Theatre (The Canada Show, The Big Rock Show, Freud VS His Ego, No Tweed Too Tight).

Since 2011, Bruce has created over 700 paintings which attempt to capture his unique vision. His works have been installed in the Kelowna Art Gallery, The Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, the Pacific Theatre in Vancouver, the Caravan Farm in Armstrong, B.C., and the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver.

For more information visit www.brucehorak.com or <http://www.spontaneoustheatre.ca>

Resources:

Rebecca Northan

Northan, the creator of *Undercover*, has produced numerous plays in this particular genre she calls “spontaneous theatre” where a play has a structure of scenes in which there is room for a large amount of improvisation. Her work often involves the participation of an audience member who is a non-theatre professional. The following links offer context on Northan’s previous work to provide an idea of how *Undercover* is performed and also includes some of Northan’s thoughts on improvisation.

On CBC radio -The Candy Palmater Show

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/candy/the-candy-palmater-show-for-september-1-2016-1.3744194/embrace-failure-and-other-rules-rebecca-northan-learned-from-400-blind-dates-1.3744362>

In this radio interview on The Candy Palmater Show CBC, Northan discusses her top rules of improv (be positive, say yes, fail forward, look for ways to inspire your partner). She reflects on her experience with the play *Blind Date* and explains her concept of “Spontaneous theatre.”

Useful Epiphany: Rebecca Northan at TEDxYYC

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd06mzZ7Omk>

In this TED Talk, Rebecca Northan discusses fear and the principals of improv as well as what she learned from her show *Blind Date*. She examines how improv can support our relationships, creative thinking, and collaborative projects. Some mature content.

The World of "Legend Has It"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPV9PTJs_18

This video gives a description of a previous work of Northan’s with a similar structure to *Undercover*. *Legend Has It* is an adventure fantasy themed play where an audience member is invited onstage to act as the hero.

Spontaneous Theatre *Legend Has it*

<http://news.nationalpost.com/entertainment/theatre/spontaneous-theatre-like-improv-but-nicer>

This article from the National Post discusses Rebecca Northan’s creation *Legend Has It* and the idea of “spontaneous theatre”.

Spontaneous Theatre

Spontaneous Theatre is narrative based improvisation, which is slightly different than 'short-form' where improv is used as a tool to create instant sketch comedy. In Spontaneous Theatre, the performers are combining the values of good theatre (story, strong character, good acting), with the thrill of improvising with an Audience Member in the lead role. The company members' number one job is to take care of the Audience Member by making them look good, and insuring that they are having a nice time. The narrative structure actually allows the performers to be MORE in the moment because they are not worried about where things need to go. They can truly be present, and respond honestly to anything that Audience Member might offer. Many people who see Spontaneous Theatre end up commenting on how surprised they were to be 'moved' by the performance, and how much they grew to really like the Audience Member, and see them as a hero.

Below, you will find links to a few people that the Company knows, and has worked with. Keith Johnstone taught ALL of them to improvise over the last 40 years, and is the innovator of most of the techniques that are used in the show. Patti Styles, and William Hall are both wonderful teachers who have studied with Keith. Dan O'Connor also studied with Keith, and his company, Impro Theatre, does full length, improvised plays in the style of particular, well-known playwrights.

www.improtheatre.com

www.keithjohnstone.com

www.pattistyles.com

www.improvgames.com

BOOKS:

Impro - by Keith Johnstone

Impro for Storytellers - Keith Johnstone

Impro Playbook - William Hall

The Mystery Genre

Getting into Genre: Mystery & Thriller

<http://thewriterspot.weebly.com/getting-into-genre/getting-into-genre-mystery-thriller>

This website discusses Mystery as a genre, including the history, characteristics, and key differences from other genres such as thrillers. Details different mystery types ranging from Hard boiled/Noir fiction to Caper/Heist mysteries.

A Brief History of the Mystery Novel

<https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/a-brief-history-of-the-mystery-novel>

This article provides a mapping of the history of the mystery novel.

History of the Mystery

<http://www.mysterynet.com/timeline/history-of-mystery/>

This website offers a history of mystery fiction and provides a brief introduction to significant mystery writers.

Characters To Watch Out For In Classic Murder Mysteries

<http://www.loupdargent.info/2013/02/characters-to-watch-out-for-in-classic.html>

This article discusses common archetypes in murder mysteries and how they are specifically portrayed as suspects.

Mystery Tropes

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MysteryTropes>

This website provides an extensive list of tv tropes or devices commonly used in mystery fiction. Each trope is accompanied by pop culture examples.

Literary Terms: Mystery

<https://literaryterms.net/mystery/>

This website offers an introduction to the mystery genre, discussing differences between fiction and non-fiction mysteries, as well as giving examples of mysteries from pop culture and literature.

Understanding The Mystery Genre as a Mystery Writer

<https://www.universalclass.com/articles/writing/understanding-the-mystery-genre-as-a-mystery-writer.htm>

This website discusses important concept to consider when writing a mystery. Topics include sub-genres, where to look for inspiration, and question to deepen one's understanding of mystery.

Interactive Theatre and Participatory Art

This section includes links that examine participatory art generally and interactive performance specifically. Many artists are exploring the relationship between performer and audience member or artist and spectator. Common discussions include the ethics of involving the public and often vulnerable populations in art making, what makes successful interactive art...

PARTICIPATORY ART Tate Museum

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/participatory-art>

The Tate Museum defines participatory art and provides links to related terms, participatory art exhibits and pieces at the Tate Museum as well as video links on Participatory Art. Largely focuses on installation and visual art more than theatrical.

Interactive and Participatory Art

Art 21 Magazine

<http://magazine.art21.org/2010/06/03/interactive-and-participatory-art/#.WUgRysYZNsM>

This article provides an overview of important participatory art pieces and provides a history of the term.

Celebrating the Audience: Approaches to Participatory Performance

<http://howlround.com/celebrating-the-audience-approaches-to-participatory-performance>

This article discusses different examples of participatory performance and explores the difference between participation in "regular" theatre and in participatory theatre.

Why Audience Participation Is So Terrifying

<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/article/why-audience-participation-is-so-terrifying.html>

This article from New York Magazine discusses anxiety of audience participation from a psychological perspective.

Audience agency in participatory performance: A methodology for examining aesthetic experience by Astrid Breel,

<http://www.participations.org/Volume%2012/Issue%201/23.pdf>

This academic article from the Participations Journal of Audience & Reception Studies examines a research methodology on audience experiences of participatory performance.

Toronto Based Examples of Participatory or Immersive Theatre

The following are examples of theatre productions in Toronto that involve some type of audience participation. These works are useful for understanding and discussing the current interest in engaging audience members more actively during a performance.

Outside the March

<https://outsidethemarch.ca/the-mission/>

Outside the March is an immersive theatre company. This site includes production photos, video and descriptions of several projects produced in Toronto.

It Comes In Waves

<http://www.necessaryangel.com/it-comes-in-waves/>

This site includes production photos and video of the piece *It Comes In Waves* by Jordan Tannahill, co-produced by Necessary Angel Theatre Company and Bluemouth Inc.

Participatory theatre reconnected me with Toronto Islands: Micallef

<https://www.thestar.com/life/2015/07/16/participatory-theatre-reconnected-me-with-toronto-islands-micallef.html>

A Toronto Star article on the production *It Comes In Waves*. The production involved several sites on Toronto Island both on land and in the water.

Hogtown Experience

<http://www.hogtownexperience.com/about.html>

Hogtown: The Immersive Experience takes place in The Campbell House Museum. Audience members navigate the house following characters and storylines set in 1920s Toronto.

Discussion Questions:

Pre-Show Questions

1. What do you know about improv? What are important rules or points to keep in mind while improvising?
2. What makes an interesting mystery?
3. Pop culture is full of mystery and crime tv shows, movies, and books. Why do you think mysteries are so popular?
4. What might the performers need to consider when creating a play, with a member of the audience. What strategies might they use?
5. Can you think of other examples including in other media, where an audience member or a participant acts as a lead character? (Examples: Video games, Dungeons and Dragons, Escape rooms, Choose your own adventure stories, participatory art installations...)
6. What do you think the performers are looking for in an audience member to become a participant?

Post-Show Questions

1. What strategies did the performers use to build a story with the audience member?
2. What worked well and where were there challenges in the performance?
3. In theatre and visual art there is more focus on audience participation, or on community members being involved in the process of art making. Why do you think we are seeing more participatory art?
4. How might you create a piece that engages audiences? What are the questions to consider?
5. What is interesting about having an audience member as the protagonist and what are the challenges of this choice?
6. Did the play use mystery archetypes or stock characters? Which ones can you identify? Did they deepen or limit the story?
7. What elements or conventions of the mystery genre can you identify from the play?

Activities:

Activity 1 - What Have We Here?

1. Select your improvisers (2 for option 1, 2-5 for option 2)
2. Ask the audience for a setting.
3. The improvisers draw a clue written on a piece of paper out of a hat. Possible clue ideas: a single shoe, a shovel with red paint on it. A knocked over traffic pylon, 22 toy turtles, a locked suitcase...
4. Depending on your groups' level of experience with improv of your group. choose one of the next steps:

Option 1 - Have two students use the setting and the clue to tell a mystery. Have one student start the story and then the facilitator rings a bell or waves a flag to signal that it is the next student's turn to continue the story. Remind the students that they must build on whatever the other student has already established in the scene.

Option 2 - With the setting and the clue in mind improvise a mystery themed scene with a minimum of 2 people or up to 5.

Activity 2 - Choose Your Own Mystery Adventure

In this activity students create a simplified murder mystery with an audience member as the detective. The goal is to practice creating a mystery while also considering how an audience member would interact with the story.

1. In small groups of 4 or 5 use the following structure as a skeleton for your story. Feel free to make changes as you see fit.

In preparation you will need to:

Develop a description of the early facts of the case that are revealed to the detective at the beginning.

Choose a natural disaster that threatens the crime scene.

Prepare the clues that can be found at the crime scene.

Develop 3 or 4 primary suspects who all have strong motives for murdering the victim. Decide who is the murderer.

Scene 1: A Case is Given

The detective is told what we know about the case by another officer. Example "A body has been found at (insert location) by (insert character). Looks like murder. Will you go to the crime scene and see what else you can find?" As a group decide if there are any other details that are revealed at this time. For instance, any wounds on the body,

potential people to interview, or if there is something particularly unusual at the crime scene. Be sure to include the location and who found the body. The detective is also given a case file with the crime scene description and a brief description of the primary suspects.

Scene 2: Scene of the crime

The detective goes to the scene of the crime and reads aloud the description of the crime scene given to them in their case file.

A character comes in and tells the detective that there is some kind of natural disaster that means they need to leave the area quickly (Example: a tornado has been spotted, the nearby river is flooded, there is a forest fire nearby... choose something that would affect your location.) Your detective has only a limited time with the crime scene before they have to get to safety. Instruct the detective to choose 2 actions from a list of possibilities. Example: they could dust for fingerprints, gather a sample of soil/blood/etc that they want to get tested, or choose from a number of locations in the crime scene to take a closer look at and find a clue.

The detective escapes just before the disaster hits and then gets the results from the clues they have gathered.

Scene 3: Interview the witnesses/suspects

The detective reads out the description of each witness/suspect before interviewing them. The detective asks questions to 3 or 4 (depending on the size of the group) witnesses/suspects. Performers improvise their characters in role.

Scene 4: An Arrest is Made

Ask your detective who they think is the murderer and why? Break scene and reveal if the detective was right or if the murderer was able to escape!

2. Once the clues and characters have been prepared try out the scenes in front of the group with a participant from the audience in the role of.
3. Discuss what worked and what you would do differently. What did you learn from the process?