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Intimacy, Immersion and the Desire to Touch: The Voyeur Within

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I discover a small, white cabin situated within a dark, misty forest. I approach the dilapidated structure and attempt to peer through the windows; I sense, for an unknown reason, a body. I attempt to open the door only to discover it is locked. I step back, disappointed that my attempts to find out what is inside have been thwarted. A second later, I hear the deep clunk of a key as it twists inside its chamber. A white-gloved hand appears through a small opening, beckoning me inside. Without hesitation I reach out: ‘This is it, this is my moment,’ I tell myself as I take hold of the hand and disappear into the darkened room.

In Punchdrunk’s The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable (2013), the one-on-one experience recounted above is the immersive money shot – the ultimate reward for hours spent searching and seeking, until finally finding a body, a body to connect with, a body to touch me. This chapter examines voyeurism from a position of spatial centrality, in the form of theatre often referred to as ‘immersive theatre’. Immersive theatre is a catch-all term: it depicts a range of practices concerned with experiential, embodied approaches to performance reception; such practices include promenade, site-specific, one-on-one, audio walks and installation. Immersive theatre privileges the promise of intimacy over distant spectatorship.

In this chapter, I explore the complex sensory and spatial functions I navigated when attending two different immersive experiences. Firstly, I examine the nature of aural intimacy in David Rosenberg’s and Frauke Requardt’s audio-visual production Electric Hotel (2010). Secondly, I explore the complex relationships between spectators, spectators and performers,
spectators and space in Punchdrunk’s *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013), an epic, free to roam site-based performance loosely based on Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*. In both these productions, I approach voyeurism from a scenographic perspective. I propose that the use of masks, headphones and the spatial organization of the works act as devices of concealment, creating spatial distances that situate voyeurism within an expanded immersive and intimate context – a field where touch and the promise of touch is an explicit dramaturgical tool.

Punchdrunk are arguably the UK’s most recognized immersive theatre company. Their production *The Drowned Man*, in partnership with the National Theatre, has firmly positioned the company inside mainstream theatre culture. This Hollywood fable was set within a former Royal Mail sorting office tucked next to Paddington Station. The audience – wearing masks – were left free to roam the multiple floors of intricately designed sets. The performance was set within ‘Temple Studios’, a fictional film production company that provides the backdrop and voyeuristic frame in which two narratives unfold. Within the multiple spaces, two stories mirror each other; we follow one couple confined to the inside of Temple Studios, and the other follows a couple living on the outskirts of Hollywood. Encouraged to separate and go solo, participants pieced together the looped fragments of performance that were played out across the multiple floors of ultra-realistic stage designs which included the film studios, motel rooms, a movie theatre, a market street, a trailer park and a more poetic landscape consisting of tonnes of rolling sand and dunes.

Single and collective performers, choreographed by Maxine Doyle, thrust, danced and fought their way around the building in sexualized motifs performed on cars, beds and dressing-room tables. The nature of voyeurism is explicit, both in the positioning of the spectator inside the world of theatrical action and within the cinematic frame of the production. Participants were encouraged to watch, open drawers, rummage through belongings, peek through windows, crawl through hidden tunnels, follow crowds and go it alone. These modes of engagement are doubled within the cinematic aesthetic of the work, which represents multiple angles and viewpoints, jump cuts and repeat shots of the stage action. The cinematic lens suggests the action is being filmed, and that the spectator is the filmmaker, responsible for getting the best shot, the best take on the action. Punchdrunk are not merely presenting performance, the spectator becomes an explicit vehicle for the performance dramaturgy – in a limited way, audience members direct the action.

Whilst Punchdrunk take an environmental approach that merges audience and performers within the same stage area, *Electric Hotel* uses aural augmentation to immerse its audience. With an increased application