



Bricolage: Creating Immersive Experiences Through Artful Use of What Is at Hand

By Jeffrey Carpenter and Tami Dixon

Bricolage's Artistic Director, Jeffrey Carpenter and Creative Principal, Tami Dixon give you a bird's eye view into their methodology behind what it takes to create an immersive experience.

Bricolage's mission is to immerse artists and audiences in adventurous theatrical experiences that foster connections and alter perceptions. We envision theater not as a passive experience, but as a vehicle for heightened involvement for artist and audience alike. Our approach encourages artists to take the creative risks necessary to create full-blooded, high-quality theatrical experiences that challenge audiences to engage in new ways, react, and express openly their opinions about our work – to have a stake in the creative discussion.

The word Bricolage means “making artful use of what is at hand.” What excites us is the connection and interaction between seemingly disparate elements, and the potential for these components to resonate as one cohesive event. Sometimes what's at hand is a space (an abandoned Bally's Total Fitness - *STRATA*). Sometimes it's a burning question (How can we create empathy between strangers in just 15 minutes? - *I.E. Confessions*). Sometimes it's another organization in need (Can you help us invigorate engagement with our visitors? - *DODO at The Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History*). Utilizing what's at hand we seek

alternatives to more traditional theater models, resulting in work that explores dynamic and deep modes of connectivity, and places each audience member at the center of the experience from which everything else spins.

What follows is a journey through the why, who, where, what and how(s) for all our immersive work - a “Cliff’s Notes” summation behind Bricolage’s immersive methodology.

WHY?

All things are born out of the answer to this question. All creative ideas, narrative, design, casting choices, marketing decisions, spatial considerations—EVERYTHING is filtered through the lens of “Why?” Why are we making this? What is the point?

2012 – *STRATA* – How can we create a social framework to provide the audience with a personalized theatrical experience?

2014 – *OjO* – How can we place the individual audience member in the position of the artist at the inception of a creative work?

2015 – *Saints Tour* – How can we use theatre to reintroduce people to a community they thought they already knew?

2016 – *I.E.* (Immersive Encounters – an ongoing series of bite-sized immersive works) – How can we deeply engage participants in immersive experiences in 20 minutes or less?

2016 – *Enter the Imaginarium* (our immersive escape room) – How do we use immersive storytelling techniques to create an escape room?

2017 – *DODO* – How do we help museums break down barriers and find new and exciting ways to engage their visitors?

2018 – *The Forest of Everywhere* – How do we create an immersive experience for children with cognitive differences?

2019 – Project Amelia – How do we use responsive drama to promote dialogue around issues of data collection, A.I., and the ethics of consumer persuasion?

THE WHO?

We create work that requires the participation of the audience. In fact, that's what we call them: "participants". It is not enough for people to observe the work, we want them to add to the work, to alter it, to have agency. A crucial step in our process is to "cast" the audience with a role. If we fail in this then our audience has no clue how they are supposed to engage with the work. In order to engage fully, they need to have an understanding of who they are in the alternative world they have entered.

STRATA – *Human subjects* at a research and testing agency

OjO – *Travelers* at a next generation travel agency

Saint Tour – *Sightseers* on a tour of a forgotten neighborhood

The Forest of Everywhere – *Explorers*

DODO – *Donors* to the National Self Preservation Society

Project Amelia – *Various constituents of a future tech giant* (investor, board member, press, brand ambassador, hacker, etc.) attending a new product launch

Enter the Imaginarium – *Initiates* of the Ancient Order of Imaginaria

THE WHERE?

"Contextual practice" dictates that the space in which we work directly inspires the world we create. For instance, we had already established the team and knew the "why" (and even the title) on STRATA before we had secured the space where it would happen. As soon as we found the space, a former Bally's Total Fitness, ideas began to explode. The reflective nature of the "gym" with mirrors everywhere became a central design theme, and we began seeing the narrative framed around the "better yourself" culture of exercise facilities. This allowed us

to create specific language and utilize the space holistically and ‘what’s at hand’ had even deeper meaning. Here are the range of venues we have utilized:

STRATA – A bus stop. An alleyway. A 24,000 sq. ft. former Bally’s Fitness Center

OjO – Various locations: a storefront, a parking garage, an old porn shop, an alley near dumpsters, a maze and a mile long walk to the river.

Saints Tour – 5 miles in the town of Braddock, PA.

I.E. – various places including a swing set, a maze, and a confessional booth.

The Forest of Everywhere – An enchanted cardboard forest.

DODO – 17 acres in The Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History

Enter the Imaginarium – A former nightclub

THE WHAT?

Once we know the why and the where, we begin to build a framing structure. What is the throughput, timing, tracking, sequencing and style? Answering these questions allows us to determine budgeting, ticket price, logistics as well as marketing strategies, which often emanate from the work itself. In STRATA, for example, we worked with an advertising firm to develop an immersive marketing strategy that operated in two distinct parts. The front facing campaign mirrored highly produced “self improvement” pharmaceutical-like ads with strange and cultish copy. Simultaneously, throughout the run, we began a parallel “anti-campaign” that worked to undermine the public facing approach. This allowed us to give space for all opinions and conversations, both positive and negative, which served to foster even more buzz and alluring mystery.

STRATA – 2 people enter at a time culminating in 60 people a night. Highly curated individualized experiences culminating in a group.

OiO – A group of 10 people every 20 minutes culminating in a mile-long blindfolded walk to the river. Highly curated small groups with a solitary self-guided sensorial maze.

Saints Tour – 60 people a night for a group bus tour culminating in a community meal. Curated paths for a large group.

I.E. – 2 people every 20 minutes. Highly curated individualized experiences.

The Forest of Everywhere – 16 children every 30 minutes. Open world exploration.

DODO – 6 people every 15 minutes. Highly curated small groups and private experiences.

Enter the Imaginarium – 30 people every hour in 3 different escape rooms (Chamber of Illusions, The Inventor’s Paradox, and Search for Leviathan)

THE HOW? - THE PROCESS

The process of creating an immersive can take up to two years and begins with listening. After establishing a creative team made up of a diverse set of artist’s working in fields such as performance, design, playwriting, game design, architecture, philosophy and technology, we set about meeting weekly to develop a shared language. The goal is to learn more about the source material, to envision what engagement might look like, and to explore and research any history, philosophies and people who might be connected to the theme. Most of our adventures begin with a ‘listening tour’ – a six-month process that reveals the pathway through which the creative team walks.

Observation – The observation phase is structured to explore physical spaces (both public and behind-the-scenes), history, arts and culture, and current “rules of

engagement” connected to the source material. This phase helps us to identify opportunities, parameters, key constituents, and to evaluate all resources at hand.

Synthesis - We then synthesize everything collected from the observation phase and begin building the larger experience. We often identify a lead writer to take the first pass at encapsulating what the creative team uncovered in the first phase. The first draft goes through multiple edits until the team believes the vision of the group is reflected in text. In this phase it is crucial we have access to any facilities so we can ensure that narrative development aligns with a physical reality.

Testing – Before we introduce the work to the general public we invite select members of our immersive community to test portions of the experience. This allows us to receive crucial feedback, to determine gaps in the flow of the journey and gives actors the opportunity to learn in real time what it’s like to engage with a diverse set of participants. Immersive rehearsals are vastly different from traditional theatre rehearsals. We bring audience members in on the second day of rehearsal to give the performers an immediate feel for the experience. This is often uncomfortable work and the more comfortable the actors are with being responsive, spontaneous and present the more successful the experience will be.

Implementation - This phase incorporates all the research, data, beta-testing, and feedback gathered from the previous phases, integrating everything into a high-quality immersive experience that engages participants on a personalized and curated journey that aims to blur the lines between reality and fiction. The first two weeks of an immersive run are considered ‘previews.’ We have never had the experience of an

immersive being 'finished' on opening night. We set aside those initial weeks so that real audience members can have their way with the work, giving us candid feedback that helps to further shape the journey. The work is never considered 'finished' but at some point we have to let go and entrust everyone (actors and audience members) with the responsibility of keeping it alive.

Impact - It is not uncommon for attendees to write essay-length emails and letters detailing the lasting impact our immersive works have on their lives.

"This was one of the best experiences of my daughter's life. Please provide more sensory/ASD inclusive cultural experiences. Our kiddos need and them." – The Forest of Everywhere.

"Phenomenal work. I am quite thankful to have a theater company like yours in Pittsburgh. The experience was 100% remarkable. I look forward to seeing what is to come. And you make me feel very lucky to live in a city like Pittsburgh. You've ignited my own creative flame which was flickering low, and in a difficult year for me personally, that was quite an accomplishment. Thank you for creating such a captivating experience!" - DODO

" ... Thank you OJO. It is the first thing to even remotely allow me to experience Brian's blindness . . . And because of it I can see him better ... My thoughts keep coming back to Anne's room, the one with the windows. I keep wondering where B's sight is – which window best represents the way he sees the world now, the way he sees me . . . Is it between the third and fourth window? The second to last? The hardest part, of course, was the end. When I took off my blindfold and saw the majesty of our city and knew that had he come with me he would have removed his mask and still been in the fog." – OjO

"This experience only lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, yet it was like a vitamin shot for my soul. The concept was relatively simple in nature but it opened up so many thoughts and feelings within me while generating a human connection at the same time. Extremely impressive. This is wonderful work you are doing." – I.E.

The historical and social context of our work, then, might impact our audience in the following ways:

1. Audiences are asked to rethink their engagement with theater, their environments, each other, and our partners—whether they are organizations in a neighborhood, museums, experts in technology, or others.
2. Through designing ways to increase public awareness of and conversation around important issues related to our society, culture, and world, we engage our audience in altering perceptions, helping to promote dialogue, curiosity, and change—building a future that benefits everyone.
3. The field-wide impact of sharing our learnings extends our reach far beyond those attending our productions onsite, and affects arts audiences on a regional and national scale.

By providing a framework that allows the audience greater control, Bricolage creates unforgettable experiences. In a climate that pushes quantity over quality when it comes to people served by nonprofit arts organizations, Bricolage chooses to go deep. We spend more time and resources on each individual patron than is usual in order to create a lasting impression, and to offer a theatrical experience with true staying power and profound resonance for the individual's life.