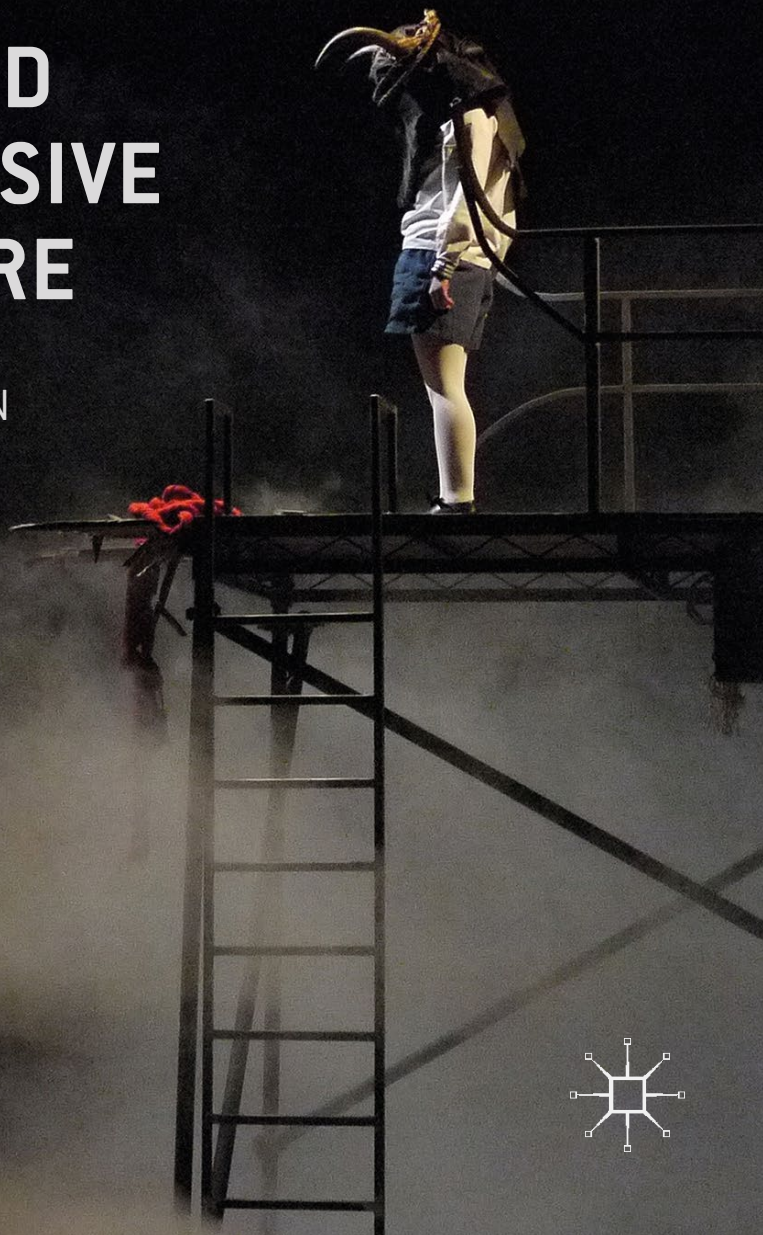


BEYOND IMMERSIVE THEATRE

ADAM ALSTON



Beyond Immersive Theatre

Adam Alston

Beyond Immersive Theatre

Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation

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*For my family
Marion, Jim and John Alston
for your trust, interest and support
and for Hannah Lane
with love*

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Some of my previously published articles and chapters informed the selection of case studies and the early development of a few themes and concepts represented in this book, although these have since been substantially revised and rethought. These include: ‘Reflections on Intimacy and Narcissism in Ontroerend Goed’s *Personal Trilogy*’; ‘Politics in the Dark: Risk Perception, Affect and Emotion in Lundahl and Seidl’s *Rotating in a Room of Images*’; ‘Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre’; ‘Funding, Product Placement and Drunkenness in Punchdrunk’s *The Black Diamond*’; and ‘Damocles and the Plucked: Audience Participation and Risk in *Half Cut*’. *Beyond Immersive Theatre* is also complemented by ‘The Promise of Experience: Immersive Theatre in the Experience Economy’, which is forthcoming at the time of writing. Full publication details of each can be found below, and my thanks to the various editors and reviewers: Eirini Kartsaki, Rachel Zerihan, Brian Lobel, Nicola Shaughnessy, Bruce McConachie, Joslin McKinney, Mick Wallis, Kate Dorney, Graham Saunders, Maria Delgado, James Frieze, and all of the anonymous peer reviewers.

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Introduction: Theatre as Experience Machine

My interest in immersive theatre was piqued in 2007 after experiencing two performances that were both intoxicating and exhilarating, and seemed to capture something of an innovative streak in theatre performed in Britain at the time: Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007–2008) and a piece by members of De La Guarda called *Fuerzabruta* (2005–).¹ The first was a delirious romp through the haunting, morbid imaginings of Edgar Allan Poe. Audiences wore masks, a Punchdrunk trademark, and were free to roam throughout the various rooms, staircases and corridors of London's Battersea Arts Centre (BAC), rifling their way through immaculately detailed and thematically cohesive environments, and encountering performed excerpts plucked from Poe's *oeuvre* along the way. The second, *Fuerzabruta*, was performed in a large tent at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe while it was on a world tour. For theatre critic Lyn Gardner, it was 'like having a spotlight shone in your eyes while being hit with a sledgehammer by someone who insists, "We have ways of making you have fun"' (Gardner, 2007). A series of spectacles followed on from one another in the centre and all around a single promenade space: a man running through cardboard walls atop a giant treadmill; dancers

¹ *Fuerzabruta* was devised by members of the Argentinian group De La Guarda, although it is not strictly 'by' De La Guarda following a split between two core members of the company: Pichón Baldinu and Diqui James. James worked on *Fuerzabruta*, but Baldinu did not. 'Fuerzabruta' is more accurately both a company name and a production name (split into two words in the United States – *Fuerza Bruta*), although the show is commonly referred to as a De La Guarda production, which also makes for convenient shorthand (Binder, 2011).