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So They Think I Can Dance: A Reflection on Bluemouth Inc.'s
Dance Marathon

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Canadian Theatre Review, Issue 141, January 2010, pp. 96-99 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctr.0.0010>

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ways that theatre can play along, so to speak. For example, to adapt dramaturgy to the language, imagery, and means by which identity is staged through peep media. Yet I'm now convinced of the opposite; that theatre has much to offer peep culture, and perhaps especially those who have had their fill of it. Theatre happens on a scale—between people and in real time—in such a way that addresses fantasy and the void of celebrity without the latter becoming an ontological vacuum or an exploitative freak show for the consumption of millions of viewers.

In this issue's *Views & Reviews* section, there are a variety of writings that explore how different practitioners navigate the terrain of celebrity. There are personal (not prurient) accounts here, where theatre is seen to offer meaningful exploration not exploitative over-exposure. In the way that we can preserve both mystery and questions, as well as suspend the hysterical exposure of technology and our rush to judge, there is hope for theatre in the world of peep.

This is my last issue as a Views & Reviews Editor. I want to thank Rosemary Clark-Beattie, my trustworthy and talented copy editor, who always had the patience of a saint to wait for my late material and always had the best advice for my writing. I would like to welcome Jenn Stephenson and Natalie Alvarez, who will both replace Laura Levin and I as editors of this section. I can't think of a cooler or more capable pair to be editing this section, and I look forward to reading their work for years to come.

Notes

- 1 These are examples of people who have gained celebrity status due to a well-publicized spectacle, such as a hoax (Balloon Boy), an experience of good fortune (Sweepstakes Boy), or a bizarre incident of apparent callous disregard on the part of a young woman and her dog that turned into widespread, vitriolic criticism (Dog Shit Girl).

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So They Think I Can Dance: A Reflection on Bluemouth Inc.'s Dance Marathon

Dance Marathon, by Bluemouth Inc.,
Harbourfront World Stage, Enwave Theatre,
Toronto, February 4–7, 2009.

By Melanie Bennett

I am amazed by the current desire a lot of people have to become famous, and the assumption that it is an easily attainable goal. In the past, celebrity status was reserved for a few elite individuals who demonstrated extraordinary success in their profession as an entertainer, artist, athlete, politician, philanthropist, activist, or entrepreneur. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and reality television, however, have broadened the concept of celebrity status to include *anyone* capable of claiming the spotlight. While obsessive fixation on celebrities in the traditional model are more outrageous than ever before (think Oprah, Brangelina, and Obama), unremarkable people are taking extreme measures to promote themselves in ways that captivate the media's attention. For instance, the highly-publicized separation of Jon and Kate (and their eight children) and Richard and Mayumi Heene's "balloon boy" hoax are among the faces of these new average Joe celebrities whose fame will have expired by the time this article is printed. In the spirit of *CTR 141*'s "celebrity" theme, I find it only fitting to review a performance that explores the recent trend of everyday people becoming a focus of entertainment.

Harbourfront Centre's World Stage, as part of their Fresh Ground new works commissioning programme, produced

Participants at *Dance Marathon* by Bluemouth Inc.
Photo by Nancy Piava, Courtesy of Bluemouth Inc.

Dance Marathon. It is devised and performed by Bluemouth Inc., a Toronto/New York collective comprised of Ciara Adams, Stephen O'Connell, Daniel Pettrow, Sabrina Reeves, Lucy Simic, and Richard Windeyer. When I heard about Bluemouth's *Dance Marathon* at the Enwave Theatre in Toronto, I was ridiculously excited for this reason: the Bluemouth members are among my favourite performance collaborative and my admiration for their experimental approach to theatre admittedly borders on crazed fandom. Furthermore, the competition premise of *Dance Marathon* reminded me of *So You Think You Can Dance*—the only reality television show I admit watching—where many of the contestants are promoted as underprivileged with no formal dance training.

Bluemouth is best known for their site-specific and environmental performances that challenge how everyday

Enwave Theatre in Toronto transformed into dance floor for *Dance Marathon* by Bluemouth Inc.

Photo by Gordon Hawkins, Courtesy of Bluemouth Inc.

architecture is used in the way the production is staged in non-traditional performance spaces. With *Dance Marathon*, however, they transform a conventional purpose-built theatre into a fully-realized dance hall. Bluemouth employs skills of environmental manipulation in ways that utilize every corner of the Enwave Theatre. Elements of multimedia, a live video cam, choreography, and live music (orchestrated by Windeyer) are present in the space. The live musicians and Master of Ceremonies (Reeves) are situated in the middle of the room, while the action and dancing revolves around them. This staging ensures all participants are in view of others.

Bluemouth is also known for blurring the boundaries between performer and spectator. Part endurance competition and part staged performance, *Dance Marathon* expands the level of audience engagement by asking spectators to take on roles of dance competitors. Upon arrival, audience participants are given a number to wear and are asked to sign a release form. They are then ushered into the theatre space and paired up with other dance partners. Under the direction of floor judges and the show's referee (Pettrow), the competitors mingle and dance with Bluemouth members and other participants. If a

participant is caught not moving their feet, the referee blows the whistle and warns them about potential elimination.

This ambitious event was inspired by the physically grueling endurance contests of the Great Depression where destitute couples would try to win prizes and money by outlasting other competitors on the dance floor. While these dance marathons were legitimate competitions, they included elements of contrived deception—where organizers would plant hired professional dancers as fake competitors in order to control certain aspects of the event. Bluemouth drew from the spirit of these conventions by planting their own hired dancers among the crowd of audience competitors on the dance floor. Audience participants aren't aware if they are paired with someone from Bluemouth until late into the performance.

I was conscious of the embarrassment and awkwardness my participation could incite, but I was nevertheless compelled by the open-ended potential of this participatory performance. As Keren Zaiontz says of Bluemouth's tendency to emphasize spectators' engagement, "The knowledge that you (the spectator), like the ensemble, site, images, music, and other performance conventions, are an element of the show generates a sensation more closely linked to stage fright than distanced reception" (10). In conventional theatre, the audience is prohibited from speaking, moving, or interacting with the performers and other spectators. In *Dance Marathon*, however, the audience is encouraged to use their cell phones, socialize with each other, as well as Bluemouth performers, and come and go as they please. On the nights I attended, the environment evolved from a space full of quiet strangers standing and looking awkwardly around the room to something resembling a house party—with people sprawled on the floor laughing, cheering, and engaging in conversation.

In the wake of reality television, theatre has seen an emergence of this kind of participatory theatre, a form of performance that fosters audience involvement by transforming them from passive spectators into active performers. Bluemouth has been contemplating audience and performer relationships for years, continuing to find ways to further erode the fourth wall. In an article in 2006 for *Canadian Theatre Review*, Simic says,

As the performer moves closer to the spectator, the wall gradually recedes and diminishes until finally either participant is capable of reaching through. An interesting question becomes: Has the wall been internalized? For if the wall were truly to vanish, what would happen then? What would it be like if the viewer felt permission to reach back and affect the performer? Where would this lead us and how and where would it eventually end?" (Bluemouth Inc. 17)

Bluemouth's past productions have always included brief moments of audience involvement, but *Dance Marathon* goes further by placing the audience as vital figures in determining

the end of the production. The spectators as participants, creators, and viewers make the aspirations more complicated than those of a normative art practice.

Integrated into the competition are various performance monologues performed by O'Connell, Simic, and Reeves that intend to create sombre moments during the evening. These scenes are a kind of reckoning with the historical shadow of dance marathon phenomena, including themes of broken dreams, the struggle to overcome obstacles, and the pain of substantial loss. As a participant, it was difficult for me to connect with the heavy emotion behind the scenes, because I was having too good a time. Because the competition is framed as an aesthetic one and the spectators participating are not really destitute couples needing to win, the atmosphere in the room continued to be festive—never reaching the desperate aggressive competitive tone that the actual dance marathons possessed. *Dance Marathon*'s achievement is entirely contingent on the spectators' response and contribution to the narrative. The performance elements—monologues, multimedia, music, and so forth—are secondary to the audiences' interaction with the competition and its performers. As the participants of the competition vary from performance to performance, their engagement is central.

I attended both the Thursday and closing Saturday night performances. I was paired up with elderly gentlemen both nights, but had drastically different experiences with each partner. The Thursday night partner was quiet and appeared to be a bit uncomfortable with our height difference, but after a couple of songs and light conversation, he began to enjoy himself. We made it through to the end of the competition and were among the last handful of competitors. This positive experience was thrilling, in part because of my "success" as a competitor/performer. On the Saturday night, however, I had an opposite experience. I was still tired from the five hours of dancing I did the previous Thursday, so my mood was a bit more subdued. In addition, my dance partner was high and drunk, reeking of tobacco, pot, alcohol, and cheap cologne. His heightened state of intoxication made him clumsy and incoherent as he behaved inappropriately while we danced. Embarrassed and disappointed about being paired up with such a creepy contestant, the evening's festivities were somewhat lost on me. I also became self-conscious about performing well, and not wanting to draw negative attention to myself. Eventually a floor monitor noticed my clear sense of discomfort and tactfully moved me to another partner.

While I anticipated that *Dance Marathon* would explore audience/performer relationships, I hadn't realized the celebrity theme that emerged from my experience. Aware of being in full sight for others to observe, the floor judges critiquing us, and the referee (who never stopped looking at our feet) touring around the floor on retro rollerskates, I became conscious of the event situating me in the spotlight. Instead of dancing with a partner in a dark bar where it's easy

to go unnoticed, the production sparked a feeling of "dance like EVERYone is watching." As the night wore on, I began to feel more confident about my longevity and dance moves and found myself performing for the judges and those already eliminated. Just when I would begin to develop a competitive focus of wanting to win the competition, Bluemouth would complicate and derail the competition. Unlike the reality show *So You Think You Can Dance?* and others like it, winning isn't based on dancing ability. Competitors in *Dance Marathon* are eliminated for reasons such as being "too honest" or not being able to answer a question on pop culture. Bluemouth created a playful, non-threatening framework that subverted the risk of vulnerability and ruthlessness normally associated with competition.

Losers of the dance competition are ushered upstairs to the balcony to be filmed and interviewed by Adams, who asks them what they think about being eliminated. This interviewing process parodies the tension and drama of the backstage narrative seen on reality shows where losers confess their humiliation and confusion about being cut. Once interviewed, eliminated competitors of *Dance Marathon* become spectators—retaining the option of continuing to dance (with their numbers removed) or to sit in one of the chairs along the periphery of the theatre and watch. As the evening wore on and remaining competitors lessened during the performances I attended, the hype grew more intense. I found myself fixating on certain contestants I favoured because of their likeability and enthusiasm, rather than their dance skills. The "winners" of the two performances I attended were not particularly good dancers with competitive spirits, but rather people whose personas were amiable. The first night I attended, the winner was a funny, good-humoured, portly gentleman who danced with reckless abandon using his colourful neck scarf as a prop while performing. On the second night, a mother and her young daughter won. The coveted place of celebrity in *Dance Marathon* then, is both deserved and arbitrary, authentic and manufactured.

Artists like Bluemouth Inc. ask us to reconsider the expectations held about performance space, art, and reception in theatre. As an inherently self-conscious person, I appreciate participatory theatre because it opens up opportunities to confront anxiety by engaging with strangers. An event like *Dance Marathon* also forces an ordinary person to examine curiosity about fame and competition.

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Melanie Bennett is a PhD candidate at York University in Theatre Studies and recipient of the Canada Graduate Scholarship. She holds a Master of Performance Studies from the University of Calgary. As an artist-researcher, Melanie's current creative practice in site-specific performance is a response to her research interests surrounding the value of ethnographic methodology in contemporary performance. She is currently in the process of devising *Garden//Suburbia*, a part auto-ethnographic/part relational site-specific project that takes place in and around her apartment in Toronto.

From Dream, to Dream, to Dream

By Heidi Bickis

Nevermore: The Imaginary Life & Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe. Catalyst Theatre, Edmonton AB, May 10, 2009.

Writer and poet Edgar Allan Poe, famous for his dark and macabre tales, is now Edmonton-based Catalyst Theatre's most recent muse. Their latest creation, *Nevermore: The Imaginary Life & Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe*, premiered in May 2009 under the artistic direction of writer/director Jonathan Christenson and designer Bretta Gerecke. *Nevermore* tells the tale of Poe's life—a dramatic biography shaped by Catalyst's unique style of musical theatre. Through storytelling, music, song, and larger-than-life costuming and props, the cast and crew brought to the stage an Edgar Allan Poe born of the fantastical and mysterious. As Christenson explains in the program notes, both the fantasy and the mystery were crucial for Poe's story: "The line between fact and fiction, dreams and reality, life and death has always been blurry in the work of Poe." This blurring became the basis for the play: "It is a version of Poe's story that unfolds according to the logic of dreams, where the lines between his life and his work remain fluid and where, as Poe himself said, 'all that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.'" The production captured the sense of the imaginary and the dream, but didn't push the boundaries of biography far enough, as promised in both the production's style and Christenson's remarks. The lines between dream and reality weren't blurred as much as absent altogether; the production had no sense of contrast between what is real and what is fiction—an absence that diminished the effects of the dark and fantastical imagery. The play was all dream; a dream safely contained in the conventional structure of biography without any threat from waking life, the unravelling of time or the mutability of space.

Catalyst's strength lies in its creation of imaginary worlds on stage. In *Nevermore*, the world created was a dream-space of horror, suspense, and mystery; a world brought to life by the great ensemble work of the cast, the Andrew Lloyd Weber-esque pop/classical/broadway musical style, and Gerecke's imaginative design. Herein lay the world of the dream: The action of the play unfolded was through storytelling and narration—a magical tour through a life. The telling of Poe's tale rested, for the most part, in the hands of the Chorus. Aside from Poe, played by Scott Shepeley, all the actors moved between their more neutral roles as Chorus and the various persons (and creatures) in Poe's life and fiction.¹ The Chorus recounted Poe's story to both the audience and Poe himself, filling in details of each event with song and monologue. They were figures of fate that whisked Poe away on his life's path, a path over which he had little control.

Adding to the dream-like feel, Gerecke had created a simple set with simple lighting design. A screen divided the front of the stage from the back (a division that seemed to separate past from present, dream from reality, although the effect of this division wasn't fully explicit) and the lighting moved from blues to reds. All the costumes were black and white, period-inspired, and accented with bold, exaggerated pieces and lines including excessively large hoop skirts and disproportionately large hats and head pieces. Talons and raven heads evoked the creatures from Poe's writings and occasionally swept across the stage.

The performance unfolded, however, according to the conventions of biography; a sequential telling of events that followed the rationale of "and then": Poe is born, and then he plays with his brother and sister, and then his father turns to the bottle, and then his mother dies, and then he is shipped off to a foster family and separated from his siblings, and then he is tormented by his classmates, and then he skins a cat, and then his foster mother dies, and then he falls in love, and then he goes to college but must drop out because he loses his foster father's financial support, and then he suffers heartbreak, and then his foster father dies, and then he goes to live with his aunt and is reunited with his siblings, and then his brother dies, and then he marries his cousin, and then she dies, and then he turns to drink, and then he reunites with his first love who is now widowed, and then he goes on a trip, ends up in a

The cast of *Nevermore*.
Sean McLennan