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Caravana!: intimacy and immersion for family audiences

Adam J. Ledger



Adam Ledger welcomes visitors to Lower Caravana in his role as Minister of Internal Affairs. Photo: William Fallows

The Bone Ensemble's *Caravana!* is a playful, interactive, intimate performance for a family audience of up to six spectators at a time, which lasts for about twenty minutes. By 'family' we mean spectators of mixed ages (from four years old) who have a relationship with each other, not necessarily a traditional nuclear family, though we have certainly welcomed those groups, as well as other configurations of spectators who don't necessarily know one another.

Caravana! comprises a real, old, touring caravan and its awning, conceived as a micronation. In fact, The Bone Ensemble has written to the British government to declare Caravana's independence, invoking the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, one of two (more or less) legally-recognised paths. As with many micronations, we await a reply, but continue to fly our blue and white flag. *Caravana!* has toured the UK in the guise of this portable mini-country, visiting theatres (starting life at mac birmingham, one of our partners, and visiting the National

Theatre, London) and festivals (including the Spot On Festival, Lancashire). It has also been performed in Welsh.ⁱ

Advertised as an intimate, participatory piece, it's not a 'we-do, you-watch', it's a 'we-do-it-all-together' performance. During *Caravania!*, what might be called 'participant-spectators' (Heddon et al, 121) play on a micro-beach concealed under one of the seats, take part in a space-flight simulation exercise, chill out at one end of the caravan turned into a meadow, and visit the chemical loo. The term 'participant-spectator' offers a closer definition of the role of our visitors, involved both in 'practices of *exchange* between selves' (Heddon et al, 121, original emphasis) and, in our case, shared activities. The caravan's awning, cheekily designated Lower Caravania, functions separately from the show, where visitors can design their own country, colour in their own paper caravan (often choosing to leave these behind, pegged up on Caravania's washing line) and take the micronational quiz.

Caravania! was created, in part, to extend our practice into the outdoor arts scene, an identifiable area (and indeed market) of performance practice, which tends to comprise large, outdoor performance at festivals and summer events, theatre that can be shown outdoors, 'walkabout' shows and street performance. Although creating an outdoor piece followed our earlier site-based work (usually created in large, found spaces, such as a municipal multi-story car park for *The Car Park Show No. 1*, 2008) and indoor work (the solo performance *Again*, 2004-6), it stemmed also from a desire to make more intimate theatre and to bring this to the family audience base of outdoor arts. We were struck that this burgeoning field tended resolutely to offer experiences for an adult audience and - perhaps rooted in one source of intimate or 'one to one' performance, that of live art - often theatrically experienced, informed spectators. Whilst we admired the thoughtful work of one-to-one artist Adrian Howells, for example, we find from our own experience as facilitators that one-to-one work can be challenging, centred on the personal, and requiring, as Howells and collaborator Dee Heddon put it, 'a committed and at times vulnerable sort of spectatorship' (Heddon and Howells, 1). This seems particularly to exclude children, around whom there are inevitably also ethical concerns. On the other hand, we were intrigued by *Oogly Boogly* (2002), a piece for very young children inside the intimate space of an inflatable tent,ⁱⁱ where the performance is led by the children, whose action is mirrored by adult performers; and one of our performersⁱⁱⁱ was involved in *Uluzuzulalia* (2012),ⁱⁱⁱ a

sound and voice-based piece, again in a created, installation space, where children are actively enabled to make all sorts of interesting vocal sound.

Work staged outside the confines of a traditional theatre set-up seems to need nevertheless to create a delimited environment, a feeling of being inside - *immersed* (even if the immersion is one of an audio world, seen in the burgeoning walking pieces, where participants wear headphones). Given its tour on the bustling outdoor arts circuit, *Caravania!* has, quite deliberately, a beckoning quality: the bright blue and white colour scheme extends throughout on surfaces and with objects; the awning is covered in hand-made fabric panels; metres of bunting extend out into the immediate area; Caravania's flag flies; and blue chairs are scattered around, inviting people to stick around for a while. In contrast, the bright red post box stands ready to receive spectators' feedback postcards. These colourful tactics extend the presence of the caravan out into the space, but just like *Oogly Boogly's* tent, it is only in the interior that more direct participation occurs, either by taking part in the awning's arts-based activities, or inside the caravan for the intimate performance itself.

Howells' spiritual and contemplative work, *The Garden of Adrian* (2009), provided a similar invitation to enter a delineated, constructed space that promises to 'transport participants to another world, another time and place' (Heddon and Howells, 2011, p.10), yet contained real things. Adrian's garden had grass and real plants, and everything happened in silence amidst an installation placed within another environment (in Howells' case, a theatre that had originally been a church; in ours, a retro caravan in an outdoor arena). In *Caravania!*, the caravan and awning are evidently real and separate from their surroundings and can be entered into, but, like *The Garden of Adrian*, it is a conceived space; its construct as a micronation provides the (semi-fictional) environment which liberates ideas and engenders the performance.

Participant-spectators are not only immersed in a location, but an action sequence. Set up as a tour of 'Upper Caravania', the show immediately invites participation: spectators hear a knock from inside a cupboard and unless someone lets whoever it is out (the performer apparently 'in a tight spot' during a clear out of the cupboard), the performance can't even start. The first section gets everyone to introduce themselves to each other, establishes 'who's been in a caravan before?', what an independent country might be, and what you can get up to if you're in charge (all Caravania's 'staff' wear pyjamas, because they don't have to get up in the morning). Spectators next help move the caravan's bench seating to reveal the beach (the sand is real) where (true) stories of being by the

seaside are shared and a sandcastle built. Although a small country, 'Caravania has big ambitions': the caravan's space centre is revealed, someone steers, everyone counts down, and a mini-Caravanian flag is planted on a model planet ('that's one small step for [insert person's name here], one giant leap for caravanning!'). A 'hike' is organised 'to the wilds of Northern Caravania' at the other end of the caravan, where a meadow is revealed. Participants are invited to contribute ideas for national foods to be recorded in the Caravanian Recipe Book. Finally, participant-spectators are shown the chemical loo - which strangely deals with stuff without a normal flush - and are serenaded on the ukulele: the show finishes with the idea that in fact started the project, a song about poo. Overall, this structure creates a definite performance 'track', within which participant-spectators are enabled to fulfil their part in the work.

All this sounds fun - and it usually is - but claims to an audience's agency ('we-do-it-all-together') or indeed how free or flexible the performance 'track' is, can or should be, are limited. The first section sets the scene and works through questions and information; the performer asks, the others can only answer. But there is deliberate physical contact here: everyone shakes hands and the performer has to be helped out of the cupboard - and it's usually one of the children keen to do that part. The performer thus invites visitors into this quirky game. Mindful of the cross-age range of participant-spectators, it is proactive in its involvement and reassurance; importantly, first name terms are used too. The beach section is deliberately quieter, and the first time a participant-spectator can 'author' her/his 'content' by reminiscing about a personal experience on a beach (a memory perhaps already shared with some others present). The engagement is sensorial, rather than dialogic: you can put your hands in the sand and listen to the 'sea' in shells.^{iv} As it's announced as a 'simulation' exercise, the 'space' sequence has elements close to role play and is noisy. Again in contrast, the 'meadow' section is deliberately gentle, a relaxing, physical engagement that encourages the intimate, before the cheeky song at the end, when everyone can yell 'poo!'

Heddon et al. are right to warn that 'we must be careful not to confuse action and activity, or participation, with agency' (130); nor should we, however, uncritically equate agency with good and meaningful work. Twenty minutes can be a long time for an intimate performance of this kind: it can 'flatline' unless its 'architecture' dramaturgically is maintained. The performers, and I as a director, monitor the need to shift the tone or quality of each section, to decide in each performance whether to

probe for responses or not. As with so much intimate work, participant-spectators have agency in *Caravana!*, but not overall control.

Discussion of the immersive seems easily to invoke participation; performances often redefine spectator-performer relationships, typically through the nature of the spaces used in this type of work, which can invite movement around or through a location or site. But that isn't necessarily real participation in the *action* of a performance, merely a presence in its unfolding, sometimes as passive pseudo-characters. The interior of the caravan is of course small, but we have come to realise too that the size of a performance venue does not equate to intimacy: take, for example, Res de Res and Artigues' physically-immediate *Remor*, an eleven-minute dance-based performance which takes place in a large container, inside which is a replica prison cell. Performers do not explicitly relate to spectators nor, as happens in our piece, do spectators relate to *each other*. *Remor* is intimate in its proxemics and is certainly immersive, but lacks the essential relational or transactional aspects we have found so crucial to intimate performance. In contrast, whilst *Caravana!* is a 'constructed engagement' (Heddon et al., 122), it is an environment (in our case portable), which is both real (it's actually a caravan) and fictional (it's also a micronation), each framing immersion. As Heddon and Howells put it, *Caravana!* achieves "transaction" and "transformation" (1) through progressive, framed, mutual action.

Commentators on intimate theatre have allied its rise to a disenchantment with our paradoxically disconnected, digital age, where other performative 'inter-subjective' spaces might offer some alternative (Heddon et al., 121; 126; Heddon and Howells, 1). But *Caravana!* is no easy sell. A twenty-minute performance for only six people at a time does not easily pull the crowds evident at bigger spectacles. Arts Council England has been supportive of *Caravana!* and our future plans,^v but we have had to work at 'public engagement', a notion that often equates audience figures with value for money. The real problem is that promoters and bookers have been nervous to schedule *Caravana!* due to its limited audience numbers - an issue other artists working in intimate or immersive practices also sometimes identify. Whilst we have never turned away a spectator because of our limited capacity, the awning was added as a strategy to increase footfall. We are considering reducing the running time of the performance for future tours, insisting still on intimacy yet mindful of the realities of the market.

ⁱ *Caravania!* is produced by The Bone Ensemble in collaboration with mac birmingham, the University of Birmingham and the Birmingham Hippodrome. It is performed either by Jill Dowse, Sam Fox (who also performed in Welsh at Cardiff's Millennium Centre) or Graeme Rose, directed by Adam Ledger and designed by Kate Wragg and Janet Vaughan. Awning activities created by Jack Ledger-Dowse.

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.ooglyboogly.org.uk/index.htm> (accessed 19 July 2013)

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.uluzuzulalia.com/> (accessed 19 July 2013)

^{iv} This also happens in the first part of Howells' *Held* (2006), when reflection upon times when the participant has held hands is undertaken simultaneously with holding Howell's own hands.

^v *Caravania!* has received two Arts Council England 'Grants for the Arts' awards. The Bone Ensemble is working on *Igloo*, an off-grid performance and performance-installation about climate-change, sustainability and displacement, which, in its final form, will take place in a specially constructed 'igloo' holding twenty-five people at a time.