

## Creating the Circus:

Collective Shapeshifting and Evoking Performance within Immersive Events.

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Art Piece: *The Big Top*

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As an events producer and performer, I often find myself living at the threshold between performer and audience—neither fully one nor the other. Traditional events tend to enforce a rigid divide: performers are granted the spotlight, while audiences remain passive observers. But this binary, I’ve come to believe, is itself performative—each side locked into roles that obscure the potential for something more fluid, more participatory, more alive.

To test the limits of this structure, I launched a 3-part(y) event series in Spring 2025 titled *Residency*, created to blur the unstable line between performer and observer, human and animal. At the heart of this exploration was the concept of shapeshifting—as a state of embodied transformation, where people temporarily slip into new identities or modes of being. Through ritual, costume, movement, and shared energy, participants could become something—or someone—else, however briefly.

Each party experimented with artistic form using DJs, dancers, circus motifs, and improvised performance to ask: Who are you offstage, and who do you become on it? By the final event, *The Big Top*, it became clear that something deeper had taken place—not just individual performances, but a shared frequency, a collective state. Audience and performer began to blend. People danced without inhibition. They weren’t afraid to be seen—or to perform.

Could this have been a form of collective shapeshifting? A temporary world where we all, together, entered an altered state of being? This piece asks: Can an immersive performance catalyze such a transformation? And if so, what conditions—environmental, social, ritualistic—make it possible?

### **The first shift.**

*As I put on my top hat and gripped the microphone in my hand, right before speaking I spoke to myself.*

*“You have one task Victoria, see the end see where you want the people to go and bring it there. Go. Go. I felt my energy building up and heading towards my forehead. I grew excited and urged to actualize these thoughts. Keep it simple and go.” For around ten seconds I closed my eyes and merged space and time to achieve the intention of the ringleader: I needed to make an event that evoked the aliveness of the crowd. I was responsible for this energy shift.*

*Body attuned, I was ready.*

*Then, I confidently spoke in the verbiage of the circus to the crowd...*

*“...Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to The Big Top...”*

Within each party, I was tasked with the consistent role as the shapeshifter who transitioned between being the ringleader and my authentic self – two states of

consciousness/being. At times I would don a top hat, black work jacket and microphone, at other times at the same party I stripped down to jeans and a T-shirt on the dance floor alongside audience members. These shifts into character were entire processes that would affect my body and then my relationship to those in the crowd.

I actively sought to enter the other, an identity that was not organically mine: the ringleader. With the dress of this character, I merged my internal desires to actively enter into this role and hence another state of embodied trance. Following this moment, I felt a shifted understanding of the environment I was in:

*After announcing the event for the next few, I continued to remain in this wide field of resonance for as long as I could bear – leaping into a relationship to the audience that felt highly connected and deeply interested in continuing my task of ensuring that the crowd's needs were provided for. I was in the world of the ringleader, responsible for the beings around.*

This differing state was noticeable. I would check in on others, smile much larger, make larger and wider jokes that I would not typically do as my typically, overthinking self. This made me curious: had I experienced a state of shapeshifting?

### **Shapeshifting with others.**

This internal transformation I felt onstage—into a character not quite myself—echoes ancient and cross-cultural tales of shapeshifting. Between lore and magical human phenomena, shapeshifters have been known as beings told to have the ability to transform themselves into a range of non-human beings – from tigers to super-human warriors.

These medicine beings have existed throughout history. For instance, In the Malay Peninsula certain shapeshifters are called ‘weretigers’ who were medicine men said to have the ability to transform themselves into tigers (Boomgaard). A shaman weretiger described his transformational journey to an anthropological expedition as one beginning with a walk and burning incense, then to transform into a tiger body for over a week. In this state the weretiger would actively pillage and eat prey in the said area for over a week before returning to his human body (Boomgaard). As these beings transformed their consciousness, they actively shifted their relationships to their external environment in way completely different from that of their human self (Boomgaard).

In another example, in Jenny Wade’s brilliant essay, “Going Berserk, Running Amok, and the Extraordinary Capabilities and Invulnerability of Battle Trance”, she discusses the role of “battle trance” and its formation. Using examples of ritual, warrior classes, and historical references she describes battle trance as an “evolutionary survival strategy that ... comprises a cluster of extreme capabilities bridging evolutionarily ancient survival techniques and cross-cultural spiritual attainment that represent potentials for enhancing human performance and healing” (Wade 2). Within this, she specifies the often-cited Northern European tradition of “Berserkerang” a form of this state of trance “characterized by animal transformation, fearlessness, ecstatic battle-madness, supernormal strength, invulnerability, and self-sacrifice” (3). The warrior participants, called Bezerks were often dressed in battle wear, were also called shapeshifters (6). Most notably, one of the main factors that allowed this brave consciousness to be attained was through collective dance and music making -- from war songs to battle cries -- which have all been proven to increase levels of group cohesion (13, 14).

Within our performance we used similar consistent dynamics of group dance. About an hour into our event, another performer entered the dance floor and began to organically lead the

crowd into following the electric slide without saying a thing. With some already knowing the dance and others dancing it for the first time, it brought bodies into a collective experience. Through sound and movement, it then caused the group to hyper-focus on the senses: the sound and visual dance cues of those around them. As all were trying to figure out the moves and attempting to match each other's movements -- the collective goal of finding each other moved through bodies -- making an alchemical intention shape itself.

Following this dance, as the dancer performer led a few more dance elements to challenge people's sense of bodily movement, we witnessed beings laughing and moving in ways that were much more open to each other and free. People were much more open to trying new things and dancing in silly ways than they had been prior to the collective dance. What states of being had we influenced?

### **Formatting the Circus.**

This collapsing of binaries has echoes in contemporary performance, particularly in immersive theater. Typically, traditional plays hold a strict dichotomy between the audience and the performer. This often means the performers are physically removed from the space that the audience is via a raised platform with differing lights and costuming. This spatial differentiation produces beings separated into two – bodies into self/other. There is the audience, the receivers and the performers, the sharers of knowledge. In this dynamic, the agency of these two groups prioritizes the movements and timelines of the main performers. These are the people who set up the agency to control the flow of the audience from a place that is not always directly related to the needs of the viewers. These distanced viewers passively receive the performer's vision—often without active participation or even consent. Additionally, as passive viewers, they do not

have stakes in the show and can often leave without feeling participatory change in the true lives of the “performers”.

Attempting to shift this dynamic, *The Big Top* played with strict notions of the stage vs. dancefloor, with performances and audiences' interaction with both inspired the artistic frameworks of immersive theater, or performance experiences which involving active audience participation – from examples like Punchdrunk to Third Rail Projects (Jacobson 164, 165). This shape of the show allowed for the audience to have different stakes in the interaction, perhaps allowing them to be open to the shapeshifting element proposed by the initial ringleader and dance ritual.

A key element in Immersive Theater is using abnormal venues as their newness provides a template for audiences to personally experience the ability to enter experimental states of being. Using a secret warehouse home within Inman Square, announced to partygoers only at the last part of the night, *The Big Top* intentionally used a space that evoked the strange. In her book *Real-Ish: Audiences, Feeling, and the Production of Realness in Contemporary Performance*, Kelley Jacobson describes the importance of these spaces saying how “placing audiences in novel large-scale environments or rearticulating an audience member’s relationship to a known site... consequently creates a unique relationship between audience and site that requires both mobility and interactivity... [and] creates a sense of the epic” (Jacobson 166). She details the ways this interaction affected the shaping of new relations and worlds:

*Not only is the actor in a different position, literally closer to the audience and thus inviting a different relationship, but the audience too is, according to Cushman, in a physical and psychological space in which the ‘barriers’ of the ‘traditional theatre space; have been lifted. (Jacobson 176)*

*In other words, navigating an immersive “other” reality feels in many ways similar to navigating one’s current reality. When these two worlds or realities collide, they become less defined, more porous, and more unstable; they allow an invasion of each into the other and a sense of real-ish-ness: something that feels real even if it is not entirely so.*  
(182)

The blurring of boundaries allowed questions of being in between perhaps making participants ask – *what is a DJ party like at a clown house? And with this abnormality intact, what does that make me?* These contrasting gaps between a typical reality -- a party at a night club, or a circus under a tent with animals – versus the distorted hybridization of both these worlds in this show forced audience members to fill with a new form of themselves. This could’ve perhaps allowed the audience to feel freer and more open to perform more wilder states of themselves at the party, that they may typically feel more nervous to do in other settings.

### **Collective Menagerie.**

As participants and performers were together on the dance floor, were all truly affected and able to enter this shapeshifted performance? If so, who was most affected? And who was likely left out?

A group of researchers measured the heart rates of participants, participant’s relatives and non-related observers of a Spanish fire-walking ritual, to understand the effects of events on participant/observer reaction (Konvalinka et al.). After researching a group of 38 participants, they concluded that “highly similar patterns of brain activity are present in an observer as in the observed actor who has the first-hand experience of the emotion” which followed the ritual structuring. Yet within these relations, it was determined that the group of those related to

participants experienced a “shared dynamics” of heart rate patterning over non-related participants (Konvalinka et al.). In other words, proximity—emotional and relational—enhances attunement.

According to this study, it shows how the actions of those on display can affect non-related observers. Thus, using this data within the context of *The Big Top* – as certain audience members with personal ties to the performers were more likely to be highly affected by the shapeshifting experience, it can be guessed that those without close ties were less likely to be affected. In the case of this event, these connected figures to the performing group made up around half of the audience, leaving the other half to be guests who found out about the event through 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> degrees of distance from the producing body. Understandably, it can be understood that fully letting go into a state of being can be more accessible when around groups of those you know and are comfortable being around. This is worth noting as a strong limitation in group participation.

### **Towards Better Circuses.**

As bodies shifted from the ringleader with the top hat to the many participants, was a collective shapeshifting made? Were many bodies at an event able to shape themselves into other ways of being? From witnessing the collective experience, it feels highly possible that the event evoked some sort of shift from participants to be something else -- certain people left they described to me how they had never experienced a party of this sort, and others saying that the vibration was so high. Yet, without the training and perhaps more tight ritual needed to enter a shapeshifting trance, I feel that we had only touched the edge of possibility.



Leaving this art piece, doing research, I am even more curious in learning ways to create immersive theater events that are much more structured ritualistically, using age-old shapeshifting techniques, to enter a true state of the other. I would love to experiment truly with forms of chanting and dancing with the desire to form more intentional forms of self that channel energy with more precision and intentionality, rather than the diffuse expressiveness of these initial events. Additionally, with a fascination of how relationships affect attunement, I would be curious to play with event invitations only given to close degrees of separation and how this could/would affect cohesive group experimentation and dynamics.

If I do end the project with one lesson, in an age of isolation and bodies desiring togetherness, it is that the stage and audience dichotomies desire to be played with. Stages to be sung by multiple people, performers to get on the dance floor and chit-chat with the audience. For us to all revel in the ability to become multiple beings that we always have been and need to be.

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