

The New York Times



Sandy Huffaker for The New York Times

A large puppet of Aphrodite is the centerpiece of "Seafoam Sleepwalk," performed during La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls festival in San Diego.

Surf's Up, and So Is the Curtain at This Festival

By IAN LOVETT

SAN DIEGO — Sitting silently in a seat was pretty much off limits at the Without Walls festival, a weekend of theater set in, near and around La Jolla Playhouse here. Instead, one play saw the audience up and down in an elevator (Dramamine recommended). Another put attendees to work in a power plant.

A third show, "Kamchatka," roamed across the playhouse grounds, leaving festivalgoers to debate how far they wanted to follow when the actors fled across the parking lot.

With more than 20 shows at a variety of locations, the inaugural festival, which concluded on Sunday, brought site-specific and immersive performances to the West Coast in a big (and expensive) way, taking advantage of the city's sunny climate while signaling just how quickly this strain of theater is growing in the United States.

"This kind of work really makes a lot of sense to a generation that grew up on YouTube, because everyone is potentially both subject and viewer," said Christopher Ashley, the artistic director of La Jolla Playhouse, which joined forces with the University of California, San Diego and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego to produce the festival. (Some shows, including the elevator-set "Counterweight," continue through this weekend.)

While site-specific work has been popular in Europe and in avant-garde circles for decades, theater companies like Punchdrunk and Third Rail Projects have scored recent main-

stream hits in New York, with shows like "Sleep No More" and "Then She Fell," which allow audiences to explore elaborate environments while performers move around them.

The organizers of Without Walls, which they hope to produce every other year, are betting that this appetite will only continue to grow, after attracting a total attendance of 9,259 last weekend. The festival was largely financed by at least \$1 million in grants, including \$900,000 for project development from the James Irvine Foundation. Several shows were free, with the others costing \$5 to \$25.

For this first festival, Mr. Ashley said, he wanted to take advantage of the "surreally perfect San Diego weather" by staging as many performances as possible outside.

As a result, many of the works could never make a transition to Broadway. Take "Seafoam Sleepwalk," the puppeteer Basil Twist's take on the birth of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. Best known for his "Symphonie Fantastique," an underwater puppet show staged in a custom 500-gallon fish tank, Mr. Twist went one better this time, setting his show in the Pacific Ocean.

The audience sat on the beach, just down the street from the playhouse, as a 20-foot-tall Aphrodite puppet emerged from the waves, its eyelashes fluttering and its blond seaweed-like hair dripping saltwater. Surfers caught waves around the puppet as the play went on.

"I thought it would be cool if we had stuff coming out of the water," Mr. Twist said. "I mean, where else would stuff come from? We don't have a backstage

or anyplace like that."

Most of the shows, however, put the audience in very close — sometimes uncomfortably close — contact with the performers. One series, aptly titled "The Car Plays," trapped a two-person audience inside a car with two actors for 10-minute vignettes.

In one, the pair of actors trained their focus on the audience members, instructing them to begin, as though they were the ones expected to provide the entertainment. "So they're just going to sit there and stare at us?" one actor said.

Most audiences stayed quiet. But not

La Jolla plunges into immersive theater.

all. An older couple devised an impromptu, highly sexual plot for the paid performers.

"It's such a social experiment, because people feel like they are all of a sudden onstage, and some feel compelled to perform," one actor, Gary Patent, said afterward.

While La Jolla Playhouse has dabbled in immersive theater before, for most of the year it puts on plays and musicals in a typical theater. Only one festival show was performed onstage there, but it too had an interactive twist.

Created by the German ensemble Rimini Protokoll, the play, "100% San Die-

go," brought together 100 residents of San Diego County to represent the area's demographic makeup. They were asked questions that grew increasingly personal ("Have you ever tried to save a life and failed?"), then were divided and redivided into countless groups based on their answers — a kind of live, shifting pie graph of the region's inhabitants. (The group developed the piece in, and about, Berlin, five years ago.)

Outside, the actors in "Kamchatka" roamed the playhouse grounds, portraying a band of immigrants who had just arrived in the United States. Each carrying a suitcase and wearing an unseasonably thick coat, the actors solicited help from the milling crowd, asking (nonverbally) for food and water, then lifting the person who had fed them into the air in thanks.

Without a stage, though, it was sometimes hard to tell when a performance was supposed to end. Each of the "Car Plays" concluded when a "valet" came to open the car door. Aphrodite sank back into the water at the end of "Seafoam Sleepwalk," and Mr. Twist and his cast began bowing, knee-deep in the Pacific.

After racing across a parking lot, the "Kamchatka" performers began to scale the walls of a nearby college dormitory. Members of the audience helped push them up.

Finally, two students opened a second-story window. They helped one performer inside, then held out ladders, taken from their bunk beds, so the rest could follow. When all were safely inside, one of the actors slowly lowered the window curtain.