

Jim Findlay on the creative fuel of problem-solving

October 20, 2017 - Jim Findlay works across boundaries as a theater artist, visual artist, and filmmaker. His most recent work includes his original performances ["Vine of the Dead"](#) (2016), ["Dream of the Red Chamber"](#) (2014) and the direction and design of David Lang's ["Whisper Opera"](#) as well as the 3D film ["Botanica"](#). He was a founding member of the [Collapsable Giraffe](#) and in partnership with Radiohole founded the [Collapsable Hole](#) a multi-disciplinary artist led performance venue recently relocated to Manhattan's West Village. His work has been seen at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, BAM, Arena Stage, A.R.T. and over 50 cities internationally. In 2016 he was awarded a [Creative Capital](#) grant and in 2015 he received the [Foundation for Contemporary Art Artist Grant](#). Previous awards include 2 [Obies](#), 2 [Bessies](#), 2 [Princess Grace Awards](#), [Lortel](#) and [Hewes Awards](#) and residencies at [Baryshnikov Arts Center](#), [MacDowell](#), [UCross](#), [MassMOCA](#) and [Mt Tremper Arts](#).

As told to Jessica Massart, 2110 words.

Tags: [Theater](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Adversity](#), [Anxiety](#).

Your work encompasses everything from performances that [people sleep through](#) to [whisper operas](#) and [séances](#). How do you pick these projects?

They pick me. It's not like I plotted out this path of working on weird, esoteric ideas. In a way, I don't like the reductive descriptions, even though they make a deep sense to me, even in their reductiveness. When I started making work, 25 years ago, I was always interested in trying to find the border between what is a live thing and... I'm still having a hard time expressing it. I want to say that it's about rejecting the "pretend" aspect of theater, but I don't want to say that because I also like pretending. It's more like trying to find a way to make the event feel like it's really happening now. That's the thing. It's always been pursuing an idea of what's really happening now.

When I was making work with the [Collapsable Giraffe](#), it was pretty easy to do that, because we had a group dynamic. The group dynamic was ever-present and it insured that any real plan would go out the window. The interpersonal dynamics of the group made an engine that was inside the work and that always kept things alive and live on stage.

There was definitely a massive transition that happened when the Collapsable Giraffe were unable to find a way to continue doing that with each other in any healthy way. So then I had to take stock and figure out what was I gonna make. I had to figure out an engine that drove the live-ness still. From like 1995 to 2009, when we stopped making work as an ensemble, I had been relying on the engine of interpersonal dynamics of the ensemble. We could make a show about anything, but it would always be about us. When I started making things as a solo artist—not really a solo artist, but as a generative artist, kind of my own thing—I had to find another engine.

And that engine had to be ideas and not the interpersonal dynamics of who was in the room at the time. There were still interpersonal dynamics, and I was trying to find collaborators who would bring that kind of energy to things, but I needed an engine that was an idea. So, I started being very interested in this idea of how do we keep it as live as possible, so that it feels like it's happening now and it's not like a recapitulation or regurgitation of an event. You know, while still being something utterly repeatable.

I was very interested in very essential ideas about what it meant to be in the room and the components of that. For the sleeping piece, the component was, "What happens if we don't pay attention?" That question opened up this cascade of other questions: "What does the term 'pay attention' mean? Why is it an economic term that we use to describe the relationship between the audience and the performer?" Who's paying attention to who? Is it the performer paying attention to the audience? Is the audience paying attention to the performer?

I burrowed into those ideas. I'm also interested in the ritual aspects of performance. I was really taken by ritual when I was a kid. I was raised semi-religious and my first theatrical experiences were in churches. So I wanted to rescue my interest in the ritual from all of the dogma and social conversation around church and theology and religion. I guess all of it comes down to me trying to zero in on a really simple question, and then seeing how complicated that question can get without it being perverted into something bad. Each piece is an investigation of a question and that's why I haven't ever managed to successfully get the answer; the pieces get to stay alive because the questions are big enough that I can't quite grapple with them.

The work is never really done with performances. As long as you're engaging with a new audience and a new place, the energy shifts.

Totally. With the *séance* piece, because I'm performing in it, I really do have to surf an audience on any given night and sense where they're at, because large sections of the show aren't scripted and it's just me talking. I have to figure out how to connect, so it becomes a lot about that. And also, oddly enough, that part secretly feels like the fakest thing I do.

Like the "pretend" of theater?

Well, because I'm connecting in a way that doesn't feel formal. That was very uncomfortable for me. So, I feel kind of fake, even when I do it and it reads as very authentic—and I am being authentic when I do it—but it's weird. I can feel authentic when I do it and then, 10 seconds later, I can feel like, "What a bullshitter I was."

When you are working on something over a period of years, how do you sustain the tension—the joy and the pain inherent in that process—over so much time?

It takes me a long time to get down to these essential kinds of core questions. Earlier on in my career, we just took a long time, and I'm not sure I was so reflective about it. But, I'm also just kind of stupid. It takes me a long time. It's also money. I could make work faster if I could pay people to really indulge me in a more concentrated thing, but as it is, I don't have a funding structure that allows me to hire people for six months out of the year to help me figure out what the fuck I'm thinking. So, I have to figure out how to do that over a couple months one year and a couple months the next year. I have to find these islands of time and then give myself time in between so I can do a lot of work. I'm not sure how having some sort next-level funding would affect that or not, we just don't have it in this country so it's not even worth talking about.

For those in between moments where you're not with your collaborators in the room, how do you pick away at all of those ideas?

Reading. Looking at video of what's happened, trying to dream about what the "thing" is, working through design issues. I'm also always designing my own work, the visual elements. Designing helps me solve not just an actor problem or staging problem, but a problem with like, "Oh, why am I here? Where are we trying to be?" As an audience, as a performer, as a thing.

I'm always just sort of dreaming about all the other aspects. I constantly think of Robert Wilson in this documentary about the making of *Black Rider*, and he just had this enormous sketch pad and he's using charcoals and making this big mess on the sketchpad. All of a sudden they switch to this view of the stage and you're like, "Wow, he's literally staging the show all the way in his head before it happens." I was like, "God, I wish I could do that." I always kind of try to do that and totally fail. You know what I mean? It's like, okay if I were Robert Wilson, I would just draw this and it would then appear on stage and then it would be right, you know? But, it's never right when I do it. I guess I have to create a series of failures. How I get between periods of working with other people and failing is that I just make a lot of little failures for myself. Because, it's all failing. The only thing we're doing is failing.

Amidst all of that, how do you know when a project, or a performance, is done? You could just keep on tripping though all the little failures, no?

If I could go back and remake anything I've ever made, I would do it. I could tell you at least three things about anything that I would change in a rehearsal today. I sometimes fantasize about where I would start if I went back to that piece. There's always some problem to be sorted out. Problems are just engines. That's what kicks the engine into gear. If you don't have a problem, then you don't have a reason to make the work.

So, once you've put a show up and have it in front of an audience, there are still things to be worked out. Moving it or doing it in a different space will change things. Different space, different problems. A lot of the problems are practical, things like, "Well, here's a thing we couldn't do over there, but we always had an idea about, so we're gonna do it here

because, we can do it here.” How do we set up a screen and have people sitting on two sides? You solve that kind of problem, but then that practical solution changes all kinds of spiritual things about what’s happening. It changes how you experience your trajectory through the piece as a performer, or as a person who is trying to live in public.

How much of that can you anticipate before the actual performance is happening?

Well, you can just address the problems that you know. But then go into the show knowing that you have to be open to it.

You know, there was a moment in *Vine of the Dead* at The Invisible Dog where I would come around, early in the show after we had done some pretentious art thing, and grab some beers and be like, “Who needs a beer?” It would sort of deflate the room with expectations of like, “Okay, now we’re just people here drinking beer with the performer.”

The first night I tried that, it didn’t work. It was like, “Oh, this doesn’t have the same feeling.” Then, the second night, I knew I couldn’t do that again so I sneakily joined the audience so that they didn’t even know I was there. Then I started talking really quietly, so it became this totally other thing where I was blurring the boundary between “here’s a performer who just wants to have a beer” or joining them as a wolf in sheep’s clothing amongst them. There was a moment when everyone was trying to figure out what was happening and they were all looking around. I would just kind of sneak into the middle of them so that they’d be looking around like, “What’s gonna happen?” And then, “Oh, it’s happening here.” It was a similar kind of misdirection. You can’t really find out until you have the audience. Even actors on stage doing Shakespeare know that they can’t find certain things until the audience is there to see how and where they want to go with it.

The audience turns into that really elusive, final collaborator that you can’t anticipate. Or can you?

I don’t know. I think it is such a weird and perverse thing. Ultimately, it’s like, “Look at me!” I mean, I’m not really a “look at me” person. Which is, why I think I can be an interesting performer, because I have disgust for the exchange we’re having. That creates a kind of tension, a distrust of the whole thing. Disgust and distrust and a sort of embarrassment. So, it’s all still weird to me and that makes it worth doing.

For a lot of people to come into a room and watch other people do things. I think that’s weird. I guess we do that with sporting events. To me, the weird is the good. Again, it creates a problem and that makes an engine. You can find 50 ways to state what the essential thing of performance is, this problem of, “why have you come to look at me?”

But as a the performer, you’re also kind of looking back at them, even in the midst of your own performance ritual.

That’s always been my style. “Oh, you came here for us to entertain you? Hmm, good luck. I hope you get out alive. I hope you don’t get hurt.”

Jim Findlay recommends:

[Kathy Acker](#)

[Derek Jarman's *The Last of England*](#)

[www.uhuweb.com](#)

[Charlemagne Palestine](#)

[La Monte Young's Dream House at closing time.](#)

[Name](#)

Jim Findlay

[Vocation](#)

Theater Artist, Visual Artist, Filmmaker

[Fact](#)

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Photo by Thomas Kavanagh