Participation as Intimate Act: Reflections on Strategies of Consent in *Roll Models*

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Immersive, interactive, and participatory performances often promise co-creative or otherwise unique roles for spectators, who may be called upon to directly interact with performers, explore performance sites, or help shape plot. Punchdrunk's large scale shows like *Sleep No More* and *Burnt City*, for instance, are perhaps synonymous with immersive theatre and invite audiences to freely roam expansive sets.[1] Meanwhile, Belgian company Ontroerend Goed is notorious for their interactive content that asks audiences to vote, share secrets, and make financial decisions.[2] Even online shows during the COVID-19 pandemic made demands of audience members by pervading previously private spaces like home living rooms and asking for engagement via video conferencing, online chats, and more.[3] Such interactions offer a unique opportunity to examine the roles asked of audience members as participants and spectators. Indeed, a general trend towards this increasingly prominent role of the audience in performance–at least in Western theatre in which the proscenium arch and darkened auditorium historically establish a silent, unseen, and immobile audience–results in exciting and ambitious audience roles that blur the line between watching, witnessing, and doing (Heim 2012, 189; Reason 2015, 272). The nature of this heightened participation is important to note: audience members might be expected to be visible onstage, make choices that affect the show, offer personal information, or engage directly with actors in an ask for labor that is resultantly accompanied by increased risk, vulnerability, and relationality. In this article we use the case study of *Roll Models*, a longform improv show that enacts a short adventure campaign in the style of *Dungeons & Dragons*, in order to characterize audience participation as an intimate act given the risks, vulnerability, and relationality involved. Building on previous scholarship aimed at assessing consent, intimacy, and participation in immersive theatre and live-action role-play (Villarreal 2021; Biggin 2017; Machon 2013), we use empirical data solicited from audience members themselves to query the kinds of intimacy solicited and the care with which spectators are engaged in such work.

Given the recent professionalization of staged intimacy, which has prompted expansive and transformational discussion about the ethics, care, and responsibility necessary to generate scenes of intimacy onstage,[4] we also argue for increased awareness and use of consent practices in audience participation. While not all audience participation may be considered intimate, especially as compared to the staged intimacy practices that involve kissing, touching, holding, and simulating sex acts, the principles covered in Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard's *Staging Sex* suggest that audience interaction requires a similarly careful and considered approach. Pace

touches briefly on audience participation: "Audience consent is critical... Audience boundaries are particularly important in immersive and site-specific work where the more standardized rules of the proscenium theatre aren't available and audiences aren't sure how to behave" (2020, 109). While this is largely the extent of the consideration of audience intimacy in *Staging Sex*, the importance of consent when interacting with audiences is underscored in Pace's words, suggesting the necessity of articulating boundaries in work that facilitates an audience experience different than a conventional Western proscenium environment. Amanda Rose Villarreal's PhD dissertation on consent practices in immersive theatre and live-action role-play engages more deeply with a need for audience consent processes, analyzing numerous interactive experiences that range from online "gamified performance" to immersive theatre. They suggest that consent must "be recognized as a specific set of mechanics through which immersive creators can begin to establish temporary communities, validate empathy and care, and invite audiences to collaboratively create opportunities for intimacy, thought, and reflection while hacking the familiar power imbalances that our current U.S. society continuously asks us to accept" (2021, 41). Villarreal proposes that "consent mechanics"–embedded structures that facilitate ongoing negotiations of consent during gameplay–help to ameliorate substantial issues of equity and power, and that audience participants should be collaboratively involved in this negotiation. This proposition makes imperative an examination of what processes for communicating consent exist in interactive performance and how audiences understand and negotiate the intimate work of participation. In a conversation on ethics and site-specific performance, Rand Harmon makes the point that inviting audience feedback and participation is necessary in order to create more efficacious and ethical work (2019, 193). To this end, in this article, we incorporate first-hand reports from nineteen audience members of *Roll Models* who participated in group and individual interviews following nine performances at the Kick & Push Festival in Kingston, Canada from August 18 to 26, 2021.[5] These self-selecting audience members were interviewed over Zoom in August, September, and October 2021 and are cited here using pseudonyms that they chose or were assigned as per their preference. Taken together, these data offer insight not only into what participation, consent, and on-boarding processes were present in the performance, but also into how audience members themselves viewed such mechanisms, learned their role in the performance, and related to actors and each other.

Audience Participation

Our case study in this article, *Roll Models,* offers multiple means of audience participation. The show is self-described as an "interactive performance experience" and "longform improv dram-edy" ("Roll Models Audience Ticket") that engages audience members in a co-creative, participatory experience with an "emergent narrative," to use Villarreal's term (2021, 139). Following the mechanics of *Dungeons & Dragons,* the show uses a Dungeon Master, played in this version by Tyler Check, who articulates the story arc, offers game challenges, establishes and maintains atmosphere, and also works with the audience to generate a kind of "choose-your-own-adventure" frame for the performers to embody. In the performances under consideration in this article, there were two possible audience roles: audience player or audience spectator. Up to four audience members took on the role of the audience player at each performance. Embracing this role required the audience player to arrive at the show early to learn the basics of *Dungeons & Dragons* and create their D&D character[6] with the help of an actor (in this case Alicia Barban, Josh Blackstock, Callum Lurie, or Sayer Roberts), who would perform as the audience member's chosen character throughout the show. When it came time for the show to begin, these audience players were seated with a microphone at a small desk, two on each side of the stage. The audience players were visible throughout the performance and actively engaged in the action by rolling dice, creatively solving problems posed by the Dungeon Master, and offering suggestions to their assigned actor who would then act out the choices through improvisation. Audience spectators, on the other hand, largely watched this performance in a more passive role and were seated directly opposite the action of the performance (as in a proscenium-style set-up), but were also engaged by the Dungeon Master to come up with the initial performance scenario by offering their own recent experiences of "journeys." In the performances we observed, an audience member's move from Toronto to Kingston, a couple's recent wedding, and other real-life events became the basis for the improvised scenarios the *Dungeons & Dragons* characters and audience players would bring to life. Audience spectators were also encouraged to react vocally to the events to encourage or influence the audience players and the actors.

While this show does not offer physical intimacy (and indeed in the show's COVID-19 pandemic context, distancing and masking were carefully observed) nor even a particularly personally revelatory experience, audiences were nevertheless asked to take on a heightened participatory role. Their contributions to the show were a vital, visible part of the experience and

thus opened the audience members up to judgment, failure, and embarrassment. Audience participation has, after all, been generally regarded with suspicion, fear, and apprehension; Gareth White memorably begins his book on the subject of audience participation with the line, "There are few things in the theatre that are more despised than audience participation" (2013, 1). White goes on: "the prospect of audience participation makes people fearful; the use of audience participation makes people embarrassed," using loaded affective terms like "excruciating" and "humiliation" even as he advocates for taking a balanced look at participation's liberatory and effective potential (2013, 1). Helen Freshwater's *Theatre & Audience* concurs that it is necessary to recognize that:

> genuine participation has risks as well as potentials: that it involves vulnerability on the part of performers and participants, as both parties open themselves to unexpected circumstances and outcomes... not all experiences of participation are positive, requiring them to confront the limitations, disappointments and frustrations that are surely integral to any genuine participatory experience. (2011, 409)

Our own interviews with audience members confirmed this, with several interviewees articulating trepidation and referencing past experiences that made them hesitant to volunteer to participate. As audience member Regan said: "I have this thing where audience participation, like you said, you have no interest in doing that, I don't either. I think it's automatically going to be embarrassing" (22 August 2021). Pierre agreed: "In the past, I thought, if I put my hand up, they're going to drag me down the stage and I'm going to be on stage, and I know there's no way I'm going to do that again. I, it's happened to me once [and I won't let it happen again]" (22 August 2021). Such comments reveal the stakes of audience participation as perceived by audience members, and its association with embarrassment, disempowerment, and vulnerability. At the same time, Alice O'Grady's edited collection *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice* describes a "sharp rise in performances that claim to be aesthetically, psychologically, emotionally, structurally, socially, politically risky through their willingness to implicate audiences" (2017, x). Given the increasing popularity of such risky work, O'Grady's introduction lays out the ethical imperatives of participation, asking, "Who is at risk and to what extent are they aware of those risks?" (2017, 15). Helen Iball, writing on Adrian Howell's *Footwashing for the Sole*, similarly highlights the importance of investigation into audience participation:

> Whilst perceptions of a recent gamut of interactive and seemingly personalized theatre might be cause to celebrate the rejuvenation of 'audience participation' from its traditional associations with embarrassment and entertainment at a fellow spectator's expense, it is

also an apposite moment to consider the ethical implications, recognizing that this trend is associated with reported complications. (2012, 43)

Taken together, these ideas and audience data suggest that audience participation comes with increased risks and vulnerability, even when done thoughtfully and carefully. As a result, questions of ethics and how audiences might be respectfully empowered to offer their enthusiastic, ongoing consent to participate become vital.

Consenting to Participate

We understand consent-based performance to be built upon informed consent which, following Villarreal, was first introduced by Leo Alexander in the context of the aftermath of World War II and the creation of the Nuremburg Code as requiring "sufficient disclosure...and sufficient understanding" (2021, 1). More specifically, in the context of theatre performance, Erin B. Mee describes consent not explicitly but as part of an "aesthetic obligation...to think ahead about the kind of reaction the [audience] might have and the kind of invitation that you're offering and, in fact, the way in which you're offering the invitation" (Aviles-Rodriguez et al. 2019, 183). Putting these understandings of consent in conversation with audience participation, *Roll Models* offers useful insight into how consent-based practice can be mapped onto audience participation to ensure spectators are empowered to assert personal boundaries based on the invitations and information they receive. To begin, *Roll Models* extends the invitation to participate as an audience player at the time of ticket purchase. Audience members have the opportunity to choose between a player ticket or a spectator ticket, both listed at the same price point for their Kingston, Canada performances. This logistical choice is notable because in having audience members choose the extent to which they wish to engage when purchasing their ticket, *Roll Models* not only invites audience members to have say over their role within the performance but also establishes a precedent of agency within the performance structure. Making the decision of whether or not to take on the role of player before entering the space increases the likelihood that audience members make the choice that is best suited for them, as opposed to their choice being influenced by the environment with the actors present. The alleviation of perceivable pressures that surround agreeing to participate is reinforced by the time accounted for between the purchase of the ticket and the performance itself, allowing audience members to revoke their choice to take on the role of audience player if they so desired. Additionally, listing the two ticket types at the same price

communicates to the audience that neither audience experience is of higher value[7]. This lessens the likelihood of audience members opting to purchase the audience player ticket out of concern of missing out on the full experience or somehow receiving a "second-class" experience. This method of recruiting audience members also saw success in attracting audience members who enthusiastically wished to take on the participatory role. In one interview, audience member Isaac stated, "You don't have to be a performer, but as they said to me, I get the first five seconds of being there and they're just like oh, do you do theatre and I'm like yeah. And they're just like oh, because basically everyone here who likes to participate does theatre" (30 August 2021). Observing a consistent demographic of audience players, specifically those considering themselves "theatre people," indicates that allowing participants to select how involved they'd like to be in the performance at the point of purchase effectively attracts those who are comfortable in more active roles, instead of having the players roles filled with those who do not want to be in the participant position. The complication inherent in this process is, however, that the ability to later opt-out (or opt-in to such a role) is not clear; because players choose their mode of participation at the purchasing point before understanding fully what might be required of them, it is challenging to offer a process of ongoing consent. The ticket website informs audience members that "only FOUR Audience Player Tickets are available per show" and that players are also asked to "please arrive 30 minutes in advance (the earlier you arrive, the earlier you may select your player class)" ("Audience Player Ticket"). The website does also link a document that describes characteristics of each *Dungeons & Dragons* class, offering insight for participants who are unfamiliar with the game ("Audience Player Ticket") but this does not offer great insight into the mechanics of the performance. Villarreal points out that consent mechanics which do not allow for in-the-moment negotiation might become coercive or exclusionary (2021, 234). Indeed, this question of ongoing and fluid consent and the mechanisms for check-ins throughout the performance is one we return to in an assessment of the performance itself.

Another challenge to consent in audience participation comes from inherently unequal power held by the performers and audience members within a performance. This creates what Villarreal calls an "agentic asymmetry" in which some parties have more power than others (2021, 237). Given that the performers know the stage space, the theatrical form, have rehearsed, etc. while the audience is not equipped with similar knowledge, consent-based performance must focus on safety, comfort, and risk management, establishing boundaries and creating a safe and

sustainable practice (Villarreal 2021, 232). In the case of *Roll Models*, audience members, especially those without knowledge of *Dungeons & Dragons* may be operating from a place of insufficient knowledge of the subject matter to adequately issue consent. To partially ameliorate this, *Roll Models* executed an onboarding process before each show. When the self-selected audience players arrive at the theatre thirty minutes before showtime they are welcomed by the performers who will be their collaborators for the show. In the time leading up to the performance, the performers introduce audience players to the world of the game, getting a grasp of the participants' familiarity with *Dungeons and Dragons*, detailing the performance mechanics, and creating a character alongside them. In an actual game of *Dungeons and Dragons*, this time spent between the performers and participants is comparable to a "session zero." Here, campaign members meet before any gameplay occurs to establish characters, game structure, and tone, and clarify any questions to ensure that everyone is on the same page to encourage a positive and successful session (Cullen 2022). At *Roll Models,* the attention paid to the audience players by the performers during this time aids the participants' understanding of the role they are to uphold for the performance and does so in a context in which there is no spectating audience and the performance itself had not yet begun. One participant, Eli, stated that this session zero helped him feel like an active and equal contributor: "Definitely, it feels like you're a collaborative storyteller with the story that's going on, and I think they do a really good job of establishing that the second you arrive. I mean, they sit you down, ask what character you want to play and ask you to make a backstory" (30 August 2021). This pre-show session aimed at addressing knowledge imbalance helped ensure that audience members were equipped with adequate insight such that this barrier to consent was reduced.

Relationality and Intimacy

Minimizing the power imbalance between the performers and audience members through the session zero also greatly contributed to the participants' ability to establish their relationship with the performers. While intimacy may generally be associated with physical proximity and touch, other definitions of intimacy focus on the sharing of feelings and establishment of relationality, rather than physical closeness. Bruce Barton's thorough examination of intimacy, for instance, offers a variety of assessments that variously touch on self-disclosure, attention, mutual understanding, and interactivity (2008). Kirsty Sedgman defines intimacy in her work following

J. S. Siegel (1963, 248) who describes "a principle of attraction: it demands a closeness of association between subject and audience, and necessitates identification and involvement" (2016, 37). Rachel Gomme underscores intimacy as interrelation that "should be felt on both sides – a passage of affect shared between two beings" (2015, 285) which she offers after tracing a shift in the understanding of intimacy throughout Western thought from inner self to in-between selves (2015, 283) citing Prager (1995), Levenson (1974), and Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan (2012). She ends by summing up the "always risky negotiation of the spectators place in the performance, and in relationship" (2015, 298). Gareth White, similarly, cites Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) and James Thompson (2009) to connect intimacy with a loss of individual autonomy. All of the above investigations of intimacy underscore its multifaceted and subjective nature and, importantly, they associate intimacy not necessarily with physical touch or even emotional closeness but in spontaneous relation and engagement with the other. This is the kind of intimacy that is in play in *Roll Models* when audience members are invited to contribute information, engage with the performers, and work collaboratively with attention and cooperation to complete the performance.

In their blog post "Informed Consent vs Linear Dramaturgy," Mariah Horner notes that "as a strategy for good relations in participatory dramaturgies, inviting participants and collaborators to consent to everything that will be asked of them allows for a deepened engagement" (2022), explicitly tying together relationality and consent processes. Gareth White similarly offers, "The invitation [to participate] thus establishes the relationship between the participant and the performer, and it will do this by drawing on other shared resources, roles that are understood by all" (2013, 46). In *Roll Models*, relationality is established in the session zero, which sets the foundation for the relationship between the participants and performers throughout the performance by attempting to equip all those involved with the necessary knowledge to be active and informed co-creators. Receiving time to situate themselves within the space in collaboration with the performers, outside of the performance context, aids in the audience players' sense of a reciprocal relationship between the participants and performers. Reflecting on the onboarding process, Daniel shared: "You really got to interact with the cast members and get to know them on like a kind of personal level. Like, they asked your name, um, and they really seemed invested in forming a creative partnership with you during the piece, and that was something I found really interesting and really fun" (29 August 2012). Another audience member, Zoe, shared, "I definitely felt that–I was like okay, [the performers] really want to know what I think. [They] really want to

know what I have to say. And any offers that we made throughout the game were very much honored" (30 August 2021). This opportunity to form mutual relationships between the performers and participants is imperative to the gamic nature of the performance. As noted by Germain and Reynolds in their work *Consent and Gaming*, "Your game group needs to make you feel safe. This is a step beyond just being comfortable playing the game. This is a safe space free of hassle, harassment, negativity, judgement, and unfriendly behaviour in general, both in and out of game" (2019, 10). Connecting with the performers and building rapport prior to the beginning of the performance aided participants' ability to feel the safety and comfort that Germain and Reynolds identify as being imperative to any gaming, or in this case gamified-performance, process.

Roll Models also allows for a continued development of relationship through its performance structure, which naturally allows for check-ins between the performers and audience players by virtue of its improvised nature. These check-ins, while not explicit consent, do echo the idea of consent as ongoing. As Horner describes, "Asking for and receiving ongoing consent requires a kind of constant checking in. Over time, it can both be reinforced and retracted" (2022). Emma Vossen concurs: "Consent should be an evolving process and not a static 'yes' or 'no' to whatever is about to happen in the space" (2018, 217). Throughout *Roll Models*, the performers look to the audience players to offer suggestions about specific actions their character may take, make decisions regarding the plot in a choose-your-own-adventure sense, and roll die that determine next steps and efficacy of actions.[8] Throughout this process, the performers maintain the reciprocal relationships established with audience players during the session zero. Performers were observed in shows being attentive to the audience participants' reception of the performance and their role within it and responding to moments of audience affect (such as excitable gestures or hesitancy) with words of encouragement or by stepping in to offer suggestions if the player did not appear able to do so. One participant, Stella, described how "[the actors] would kind of wink at me at times like, oh yes, do it Stella. Speak up, I can see you want to talk" (30 August 2021). Notably, Stella described these check-ins as moments where the performers would step out of the fictional world; she continues, "So, just that stepping in and out of the world made me feel much more comfortable" (30 August 2021). These check-ins thus offer participants the opportunity to "step out of the game" and reinforce the reciprocal co-creative relationship between the performers and participants as one between real people, rather than just fictional characters. In this case, this flexibility of structure is in part attributable to the improvisational nature of the performance; the

more fluid nature of improv easily allows the performers to diverge from the narrative to conduct moments of real-world check-in. The execution of such check-ins is an effective demonstration of Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, Penelope Cole, Rand Harmon and Erin B. Mee's call for an aesthetic consideration of how the invitation to participate will be received by audience members (2019). In this case, the performers can observe and respond to the participants without risking breaking the narrative (or "fourth wall") or derailing the show. Of course, these check-ins throughout the performance are conducted onstage in front of an audience which calls into question the participants' ability to truly negotiate their terms of consent given the pressure to perform (Villarreal 2021, 232), but regardless, do allow for an ongoing, flexible, real-world relationality between performer and audience participant.

Conclusion

Overall, *Roll Models'* implementation of various self-selection, onboarding, and check-in processes generally fosters a confident and positive environment for audience participants. The success of this structure is reflected in remarks by interviewees, who generally reported feeling positively affected after the performance, with eased comfort levels and new interest in participatory performance. Daniel, for instance, expressed, "I think it opened my eyes to that participatory theatre isn't necessarily anxiety inducing…yeah I just thought it was really fun" (29 August 2021). To return to an earlier audience quote about the participant's usual fears of audience participation, Regan went on to say:

> I also have this thing where audience participation, like... I think it's automatically going to be embarrassing, but after seeing this performance, I was like oh that'd be really cool to play that role. Where it's more active, it's not to make the audience laugh at you type thing which is my fear, but I really liked the way the people were participating and got to throw in and as the kind of game went on, you could tell that the participants got more comfortable... I thought that'd be so fun to actually do. (22 August 2021)

The response from participants in *Roll Models* offers insight into intimacy, ethics and consent in audience participation, demonstrating how attentiveness to audience care and actual application in performance structure is received and perceived by audience members. There are, of course, also limitations to the consent sought in this performance, as well as with the self-selection bias inherent in the audience data. Questions of ongoing consent, or potential social coercion or pressure to

contribute positively to the show (or indeed, the post-show interviews we conducted) are factors that continue to require addressing.

Nevertheless, *Roll Models* and the accompanying audience data provide an example of how clear onboarding, supportive interaction, and solicited consent contribute to positive audience participation. In her paper on the legal implications and ethics of immersive and participatory theatre, Mary LaFrance argues,

> The challenge for experiential-theatre practitioners is to develop a voluntary code of conduct-involving audience screening and advance disclosures, supervision of spectators throughout the performance, and careful consideration of the appropriateness of content and venue-that will reduce the risk of harm to participants without undermining the essential elements of the dramatic experience. (2013, 507-8)

Villarreal similarly concludes their dissertation by describing the potential for an intimacy specialist to aid in the development of interactive, immersive or what she calls "gamified" performance:

> Consent mechanics for gamified performance could be an adaptation of the work that intimacy directors and intimacy choreographers are already doing in their work with more traditional staging practices. In this process, the intimacy director or choreographer is not required to be present during the performance. However, when audiences are invited to interact with performers, the consent negotiations relocate from the rehearsal room to the performance itself. And when participants become involved in the performance, the performers need to be prepared to facilitate the negotiations of consent. (2021, 239)

These calls suggest the necessity of more research—practical and theoretical—into what mechanics, processes, contracts and forms are most successful in cultivating positive and productive audience participation. Most importantly, we argue that the continued inclusion of spectator voices in the form of audience data is vital. In 'Ethics and Site-Based Theatre: A Curated Discussion,' Rand Harmon states,

> With the bounty of site-based theatre we've seen produced over the last two decades, outside of a few avid bloggers, there exists little discussion among the spectator population about what it is they're experiencing... I think it is important to open channels for audience members to provide feedback and to participate in that discussion with the producers so that the producers are learning from their participants instead of just making their best guess as to possible audience responses... We in the academy should cultivate more scholarly investigation into how to further this dialogue between audiences and creators of site-based theatre. I think we need this dialogue, not just with the occasional bloggers— albeit loyal, knowledgeable, really invested bloggers—but also, I think, with performance scholars leading the charge for this interchange, hosting talk-backs, and inviting the audience's feedback and participation in the evolution of the form. (2019, 193)

Given the inherent individuality of consent and boundaries, "best guesses" at audience response and reaction are inadequate when it comes to investigations of audience participation, intimacy, and interaction. Audience research and spectator voices are necessary for continued expansion and development of invitations for audience participation and intimacy.

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[1] Punchdrunk is a British immersive performance company who describe themselves as pioneering "a form of theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds." Their longest running show, *Sleep No* More, sees audience members traverse several floors of a hotel in a retelling of *Macbeth*.

[2] Ontroerend Goed is an interactive performance group whose works include *Fight Night* in which audiences participate in live voting, £¥€$ in which spectators seated at casino tables engage in global economic scenarios, and *Internal* in which individual audience members are invited to reveal intimate secrets in one-to-one "dates" that are then shared in a large group setting.

[3] For instance, Creation Theatre in the UK invited audience members on Zoom to add sound effects, speak lines, and have their video images used in their performances.

[4] See, for example, *Staging Sex* (2020), "The Evolution of Consent-Based Performance" (2022), and *Supporting Staged Intimacy: A Practical Guide for Theatre Creatives, Managers, and Crew* (2022).

[5] Total audience sizes ranged from approximately ten to twenty-four at each night of performance.

[6] This process includes various character construction elements such as choosing their class (elf, bard, etc.)

[7] In comparison to other participatory and immersive productions such as those produced by Punchdrunk, where the expensive ticket option promises a more intimate and engaging experience (Jacobson 2023, 201).

[8] It should be noted that actors could also reject, alter, or accept these suggestions from audience participants. In one particularly memorable performance, a young participant's repeated suggestions to throw monkey feces were negated by the Dungeon Master and performer in order to move the story forward.

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