

The patrons plunge in

Interactive ART shows drawing droves

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By Geoff Edgers, Globe Staff | January 22, 2010

It was freezing, but a topless, pasties-wearing Tytania couldn't be stopped. She stormed onto Massachusetts Avenue, providing a preview for 250 people waiting to get into the American Repertory Theater's smash production of "The Donkey Show." A tow-truck driver passing the ART's Oberon club near Harvard Square slowed down and shouted out the window when he spotted the actress in character: "Oh, my God."

At the same time, at an old school in Brookline, another ART production was underway. For "Sleep No More," dozens of theatergoers, all wearing masks, followed 18 actors as they glided through eerie darkened rooms. These patrons knew they were lucky. The sold-out "Sleep No More" is the hottest theater ticket in town.

After struggling in recent years, the ART has created a splash on the cultural scene this season. Under new artistic director Diane Paulus, the company's first two productions - both immersive, interactive, unconventional takes on Shakespeare - are selling out and attracting many who rarely go to the theater.

Since the shows opened, hundreds of ticket-buyers have returned to them again and again, sometimes as many as two dozen times. You might see this kind of thing at "Shear Madness" or "Blue Man Group," but for local theater companies, such a phenomenon may be unprecedented.

"I loved 'The Donkey Show,'" said Rachel Prather, 20, a Boston Conservatory student who had never seen an ART production before. "I expected to sit down and watch a show, and I didn't expect to actually be a part of it."

But Prather jumped onto a platform for a preperformance dance at "The Donkey Show," a musical take on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" set in a Studio 54-style disco, complete with mirror ball, strobe lights, a string of '70s hits ("Last Dance," "Car Wash"), and a throng of bare-chested, glitter-covered male go-go dancers. In this version, Tytania is a disco queen, and the party starts the moment the doors open, as the room fills with shimmying, Corona-guzzling patrons.

Sandwiched between a pair of polyester-suited, afro-wearing cast members, Prather had such a good time that she planned to round up friends to head back on another night.

That is what Melissa Freedman, 25, had done. She came to Oberon with eight friends. Why was she back for the third time?

"The half-naked men," she said, laughing. "Because it's interactive. The music rocks. You get to dance on the dance floor. The glitter."

"The Donkey Show" has been a commercial smash, with 24,442 people attending as of mid-January. The show has been extended through the summer, with 102 performances added to the originally scheduled 87.

Meanwhile, at a temporary ART venue in Brookline, "Sleep No More," produced by the British company Punchdrunk, has inspired its own passionate following.

The production, an interactive installation filling four floors of the Old Lincoln School, is a kind of macabre, Hitchcock-influenced haunted-house version of "Macbeth." Audience members wander through the rooms on their own, encountering mysterious actions in dozens of strange and sinister settings, catching glimpses of an ever-moving slate of characters.

In a foggy ballroom with big band music blasting, couples dance as a pregnant woman collapses. In a hospital, an eel swims in an old bathtub before a stern-faced woman arrives to gyrate over another tub, this one holding red-stained water. There's an orgy, a Last Supper, and one-on-one encounters for a few lucky audience members.

It's impossible to take in everything in one night. Maybe that's why the production, extended through Feb. 7, has seen more than 800 of its 27,846 attendees return for more - some coming three, four, even 10 times.

With the show sold out, the desperate gathered near the box office on a recent night with hot chocolate and winter coats, hoping somebody would take mercy.

"We're going to break in if we can't get in," joked Chris Smyth, who had been there before and was one of a group on standby. The obsessed go on a "Sleep No More" Facebook page to share their experiences, theorize on plot twists, and even compile playlists of songs broadcast throughout the school.

Ryan Evans, 41, has been an ART subscriber for eight years. But he has never attended a production more than once. He's been to "Sleep No More" five times and plans on going back at least once more.

"It's really a mystery, a puzzle you need to pick apart," said Evans. "I've liked other productions in the past, but I didn't feel like I needed to go back and grab every friend I know and tell them, 'You need to go see this.' I have this time. I've brought three or four friends every time I've gone."

Neither show is without detractors. "Intellectually barren" is how one commenter on the ART's website described "The Donkey Show." "Dreadfully dismal," wrote another patron. As for "Sleep No More," one person wrote, "It was way too crowded, everyone chasing the actors in mass groups. The masks were uncomfortable. . . . The dancing and sets were groovy, but we were weary trying to find the action."

Such interchange - good and bad - is all part of Paulus's philosophy. She wants to provide a "social community experience that I think hasn't been part of the cultural scene as vibrantly as it could be in Boston," Paulus said in a recent Globe interview. "You have to make theater an event. You have to have a call to arms for your audience."

Paulus, who co-directed "The Donkey Show," also co-wrote and directed the R&B and gospel-tinged musical "Best of Both Worlds" - the third show in the ART's "Shakespeare Exploded" festival this season - which sold 70 percent of its tickets before closing Jan. 3 to make way for the next production, "Gatz."

Robert Brustein, the ART's founding director, said Paulus's approach is a significant departure from that of the previous ART artistic director, Robert Woodruff.

"She's very, very concerned about what the audience wants and has her hand on that pulse," said Brustein. "Robert Woodruff seemed to have no interest in what the audience wanted. He was just interested in what was on the stage."

Still, Brustein said he preferred not to compare "Sleep No More," which he loved and has seen twice," to "The Donkey Show," which he said represents itself as a club experience, not a play. The buzz is good for the ART, but it comes with expectations, he noted.

"The worry is whether people start generalizing from "The Donkey Show" and say, 'Is this all we're going to get?'" he said. "If indeed plays are going to take second place to spectacles, I think there might be a worry. But we have to give Diane a chance and look at her own palette. We've only seen a few things so far. In fact, "Gatz" is nothing but language. I don't think she's easy to catalog or characterize."

Dan Cronin, a 31-year-old insurance company clerk from Westford, doesn't care much about criticism of "The Donkey Show." Since September, he has been to the show 26 times. He goes by himself, often sporting a fake afro and a polyester shirt, and he collects the multicolored paper butterflies that drop from the ceiling.

As a teenager, Cronin loathed Shakespeare. In recent weeks, he's read "Hamlet," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and "Macbeth."

“You work in a cubicle all day, Friday night comes, and you want to go out and have fun and escape,” he said. “As long as they keep putting on that show, I’m there at least once a week.”

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