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Photo: JJ Tiziou

A Slew of Site-celebratory Performances

by Ellen Chenoweth

In the course of attending performances in Philadelphia in the last month, I have found myself:

- listening to King Britt on top of a double decker tour bus (Double Decker Bus Series, Bowerbird and Sebastian Petsu, King Britt and Keir Neuringer)
- eating a mash of corn, tater tots, and meat out of a Dixie cup (*A Brief History of Food, Augusta ME to Philadelphia PA, 1983 to the Present; Or, Let Me Cook You Dinner*, Steve Gravelle)
- enthusiastically urged to notice the birds that live back behind the Wal-Mart (*W*LM*RT Nature Trail*, Headlong)
- watching giant puppets in Bartram's Garden (*The Great and Terrible & The Small and Meek: Dorothy & The Wizard of Oz*, Der Vorfuhereffekt Theatre)
- seeing a rooftop performance race ahead of an impending storm (*Bottle 8*, Chris Davis)

June was a good month for adventurous performances in Philadelphia. At one point, June might have been a quiet spot in the city's performance calendar, but now artists seem to be using the traditional off-season to try new things. Part of this traffic to the offbeat path is due to the [SoLow Fest](#). Now in its fifth year and running for approximately ten days in June, SoLow encourages work that is intimate and low-to-the-ground. You want to see a performance that takes place in a blanket fort? Or your neighbor's house? Or in a car? SoLow has got you covered.

I was struck by the incredible generosity of many of these nontraditional performances. The small village of artists of West Philly-based Der Vorfuhereffekt Theatre worked for months on the complicated and elaborate puppets in the show, creating each one from recycled or found materials. Theatre artist and storyteller Steve Gravelle's show involved eight courses of food, prepared with his own hands in his own kitchen, assisted by friends; 8 courses x 6 performances x 12 audience members = 576 separate small dishes served up in the

course of the run. Headlong's latest work, *W*LM*RT Nature Trail*, was designed for one audience member at a time, meaning that the entire cast of 12 was focused on creating an experience just for one person.

The DIY geniuses at Der Vorfuhrreffkt Theatre (the name comes from a German word for a thing that works perfectly, except when being watched) were able to wrest new resonance from the familiar story of Dorothy's visit to Oz. I felt the pathos in it for the first time: how terrible it would be not to have a heart, or a brain, or be able to go home. How beautiful it is to find comrades to share a quest. Wildly inventive and delightful scenic elements and puppets abounded, with my favorites including two crows perched on a tree who formed a peanut gallery, launching sassy attacks on our heroes below. The program mentioned the group's desire for a "big, empty building (preferably in total disrepair) in which to keep making things like this," but I would also recommend a sound engineer, in order to make sure that the brilliant scripts and music created by the group can be heard by all, even in an outdoor setting.

"She had never heard Nirvana, or eaten a bagel." Steve Gravelle has a knack for the perfectly telling detail, able to take his audience back in time to various periods in his life, and encapsulate the people he finds there. What was your favorite food when you were six? What food did you eat on 9/11? Through his dinner theater performance, Gravelle explored his own food memories while coaxing the audience into remembering theirs as well. Each scene included the food being remembered, so we ate everything from mac and cheese with hot dogs to a mozzarella-stuffed meatball. What a gift.

I was one of the lucky few to experience the *W*LM*RT Nature Trail*. Act 1 took place inside the mega-store and Act 2 took place in the series of trails behind Walmart, with a dreamlike intermission taking place in a green Beetle as you were slowly driven from the store to the trail. Walmart was transformed into a surreal, alien landscape through instructions on a headset and the gentle guidance of performers Christina Zani and Justin Jain. There was a sense of being a visitor in a foreign land; a small boy solemnly waved at me, acknowledging the visible truth that the three of us were up to something besides shopping.

The second part of the performance was designed to highlight the stark differences between the two neighboring environments: one with climate control and an abundance of people and objects, one a relatively untamed and unpopulated tract of land and water. As I was guided along the trail, it felt like being led deeper and deeper into the realm of the unconscious. The last stop included one performer cradling my head and one holding my feet as I lay in a truck bed, sweetly serenaded about my own eventual death.

Bortle 8, written and performed by Chris Davis and directed by Mary Tuomanen, examined the usefulness of darkness. The one-man play took place on the rooftop of a South Philly row home and was timed to coincide with sunset (8:23pm), so the gloaming advanced along with the performance. As Davis embarked on a search for "true darkness," the audience was treated to a show that was part history lesson, part standup routine, part memoir, all leading to a final vortex of masterfully-performed stream-of-consciousness.

Experimental music presenter Bowerbird has teamed up with ten-year veteran tour guide Sebastian Petsu to produce a five-event Double Decker Bus Series. You board one of those double-decker buses for tourists, but you are allowed to bring your own non-glass adult beverages. The tour script is loosened for the evening, and musicians take over the front of the bus, creating a migratory performance audible to everyone around. I was so happy to be on a bus, drinking a beer, in the company of friends on a beautiful summer Sunday night in Philadelphia that I was only able to pay attention to about 50% of the tour information, but still managed to learn a few things along our way down Market Street into University City and over to Christopher Columbus Blvd where we took in some fireworks.

Besides the generosity and inventiveness of these performances, I was also struck by how each invited a certain kind of noticing, a payment of attention to the details of our surroundings. I saw beautifully colored song birds that I never would have suspected lived behind the South Philadelphia Walmart. I drank in the beauty of the sky and the row houses and the Center City silhouette thanks to *Bortle 8*. I admired the elephants on the façade of City Hall, unnoticed until now. Each of these performances celebrated their Philadelphia sites and crafted small-scale communities along the way.

(Disclaimer: I am not a neutral bystander of Philadelphia performance. Some of the people involved in these performances are my friends. Some I have worked with in the past or hope to work with in the future. My brother volunteered with Der Vorfuhrreffkt for a project last year. I'm in a book club with Steve Gravelle. Feel free to trust my accounts of these performances 15-18% less as a result. Or you could choose to trust them 15-18% more.)

Sebastian Petsu, King Britt and Keir Neuringer, Double Decker Bus Series, Bowerbird, June 28.

Steve Gravelle, *A Brief History of Food, Augusta ME to Philadelphia PA, 1983 to the Present; Or, Let Me Cook You Dinner*, private home in South Philadelphia, June 18-23.

Headlong, *W*LM*RT Nature Trail*, Walmart and surroundings, June 5-14.

Der Vorfuhrreffekt Theatre, *The Great and Terrible & The Small and Meek: Dorothy & The Wizard of Oz*, Bartram's Garden, May 28-June 6.

Chris Davis, *Bortle 8*, private home in South Philadelphia, June 8-13.

All performances have ended their run, except for upcoming performances in the [Double Decker Bus Series](#) on July 26, August 23 and September 20.

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July 3, 2015