

## **dog & pony dc's Sense-Able: Placing Audience at the Heart of the Experience**

As theatre artists working in America today, we have certain preconceived ideas of what constitutes theatre or a play. Our field is full of prescribed, yet “unspoken” assumptions, rules, and rituals, not only for theatre makers but for theatre consumers as well. Leading this is the assumption that stories are to be told primarily through visual and auditory elements. And yet: humans have other senses--touch, smell, and taste--that inspire us, just as vividly (and perhaps more intimately). In this paper I will outline my exploration, with fellow dog & pony dc company members and associate artists, into the use of touch, smell, and taste in our performance practices.

Two years ago, dog & pony dc (a mixed hearing and Deaf, fully sighted, devised theatre company) began interrogating what “normal” means in the theatre and questioning how inclusive and accessible theatre could be through our initiative Sense-Able. We were inspired by an article by DeafBlind poet John Lee Clark in which he concludes, “... my dream play would make me part of it. The wily playwright has decided who the audience is to be, and the audience, who is I, suddenly becomes an actor.” (Clark, John Lee. “My Dream Play”, scene4magazine, Apr 2015.) In outlining his “dream play,” it was as if Clark were inviting us, daring us to think more broadly and inclusively about what tools we as theatre makers use to tell stories.

Shortly after we launched Sense-Able, we became involved with a project of Gallaudet University to develop templates for creating theatre by DeafBlind artists, for DeafBlind audience, without relying on an interpreter or intermediary. dog & pony dc's

thesis narrowed. We asked: was it possible for our collective expectations of “theatre” to be met without using sight or sound in production.

While we spent a short period exploring the concept of 'senses' broadly such as sense of humor, sixth sense, etc., we ultimately confined our palette to the three other "primary" senses--smell, touch and taste. Due to its unique ability to stimulate not only taste, but touch/texture and smell, food is particularly effective at eliciting strong memories and triggering emotional responses, creating immediate “performative touchstones” -- tastes that the artists could use in every performance that would activate the same approximate meaning and corresponding response for an audience. These touchstones can then be linked, placing one in front of the other, into a narrative journey, creating a visceral intimate performance. This is ultimately a performance-for-one, with the artist only suggesting at story and the audience member empowered as meaning maker, positioned to construct the story using sensory reaction, memory, emotional response, and imagination.

We began our interrogation of the senses privately in the rehearsal room, with rotating groups of artists (hearing and Deaf), led by myself and colleague Ben Lauer (both hearing), examining our individual sensory preferences and biases through discussion and creative play. One simple activity: artists shared stories--personal, cultural, legend, myth--and brought in accompanying food and/or beverage that embodied the subject matter and themes of the story. This was a first step toward communicating meaning narrative, finding tastes, smells, and textures that highlighted and/or accentuated meaning in story.

Due to the highly personal and individual nature of the senses, as well as different cultural perceptions of taste, we found that our reactions to one another's offerings varied widely: from a complete acceptance and understanding of the creator's intent, to bewilderment and lack of comprehension. We worked to discover approaches to frame taste experiences in order to firm up the narrative. However: we continually reverted to traditional theatrical practices, primarily audio and visual components. To liberate ourselves from these standard methodologies of storytelling we decided to look outside of the theatre arts. dog & pony dc hired professionals that engage bodies and senses in different ways, from yoga to bartending to physical therapy techniques. We asked each of them to create a workshop in partnership with us to explain and explore their particular area of expertise. For the first half of the workshop, the professional would walk participants through their specific field in some experiential manner. The artists of dog & pony dc would then apply what the group just learned, in concert with the audience and the professional, in some creative exercises, attempting to create "a language" with which to communicate an idea or story.

One of our most successful workshops was with Washington, D.C. mixologist and bartender, Carlie Steiner. Carlie is a founder of both Stir Bartending Co., which specializes in craft cocktail catering, and Himitsu, one of D.C.'s best new restaurants, based in dog & pony dc's home neighborhood of Petworth.

(<https://www.bonappetit.com/city-guides/washington-dc/venue/himitsu>). Carlie began her workshop with an offering of a simple vodka cocktail (vodka, simple syrup, fresh sour mix) as way of welcome. Members of the audience were then invited to explore the

space which consisted of taste tables that covered sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami tastes, as well as several complex spirits and flavored syrups. As people were mingling and tasting, they were asked to write down any memories, thoughts, or feelings they experienced while tasting.

Once everyone had the opportunity to explore all of the offered tastes, Carly shared her approach to crafting cocktails and how she creates a full experience for her guests. She explained how she chooses glassware, the difference between the mouthfeel of cocktails that are shaken versus those that are stirred, the role smell plays in the perception of flavor, and the added effects that alcohol brings to mood and perception. Throughout her presentation Carly made different cocktails for guests to taste.

Next, the audience was subdivided into small groups and asked to create “Taste-Stories” based upon their taste experience as well as Carly’s information and advice. Taste-Stories could be as simple as a concept or gesture, such as “Hello” or “Excitement” or as abstract as a feeling. The goal was to figure out how to communicate an idea solely through taste and without the use of words or gestures. An example of one of the Taste-Stories created: a bite of fresh red bell-pepper followed by crystalized ginger, a slice of lemon, and a pinch of salt. Observations from the audience included:

- It felt very strong, almost aggressive.
- The sweetness of the red pepper juxtaposed with the fiery ginger makes the ginger feel very strong.
- The flavors were stepping on one another, fighting to be seen.
- It felt like losing a tooth.
- I felt jerked around by the flavors.
- The tastes made me think of an abusive relationship.

- The red pepper was kind of fun, then the ginger hits you a little harder, followed by the sourness of the lemon, and finally the salt which felt like tears.

After much discussion, the creating group revealed that their Taste-Story was “assault.” The entire group was thrilled to have discovered that we came so close to the “assault” Taste-Story. On reflection, Ben and I realized that much of the meaning-making was made possible communally through the group reflection. When we analyzed the “assault” Taste-Story, each observer built upon the observations of the previous one, continuing to build up and round out the narrative, not only confirming for each other that our perceptions were correct, but also paring down the observations that didn’t fit the larger group story. We got close to articulating the goal of the Taste-Story communally, through images of violence or jarring juxtapositions. This was an incredibly exciting discovery. Through continued demonstrations of the Taste-Stories the observations were the same. We could work our way towards the meaning behind the stories communally, through group discussion and discovery.

Ben and I were encouraged to discover that our language of taste is subject to the same semiotic vagaries of our agreed-upon languages of sound and sight. For example, a colleague joked with two participants that it would be unacceptable to substitute lime for lemon in their Taste-Story, just as it would be unacceptable to substitute the word lime for the word lemon in an ASL or English sentence. It wouldn’t mean the same thing. If a taste-language fails in the same ways as a sight or sound-language, surely it might succeed eventually as well. Even if it were impossible to

create a taste-language, the semiotics of our senses is, at the very least, an intriguing topic of study for integration into performance.

Inspired by our discovery of group meaning-making in the Taste-Stories we devised during Carly's workshop, we fueled our next phase of inquiry with the question: How can the delivery of a taste, as well as the smell and texture inform the meaning? Ben and I applied the learning from Carly in another series of workshops, this time crafted and hosted by dog & pony dc artists. The workshops' primary activity was to "translate" written English into "a language of senses." I was interested to see if we could create a "taste-sentence" that would approximate the written text, and wanted to explore different ways of framing the experience of receiving and consuming the food and/or beverage through texture, smell, and delivery of the tastes. In the first workshop we used a folk tale that is found in many different cultures (*Love Like Salt*. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/salt.html>) and focused on the imagery and overall emotional thrust of the tale. In the second workshop we used Shakespearean text and focused on the imagery, the meaning of the words, and the structure of the language. Shakespearean text proved to be the most helpful and inspirational because of the very structure of the language.

From its inception dog & pony dc has used text as a jumping off point for Sense-Able, attempting to translate the written word into sensorial performances through food sentences, textural experiences, and movement gestures (or combinations of all three). We again set out food/tastes covering sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami. We explored iambic pentameter through physical gesture (beat, brush, squeeze, tap the

rhythm on someone else's body) and through taste (soft/strong, sweet/sour). We then attempted to capture the meaning of the text both physically and through Taste-Stories, finally putting them together creating one cohesive piece. Again, we found that we were able to elicit reaction, to ignite imagination and emotion, but we weren't able to fully articulate the exact story except through group reflection. The gut response was more powerful and came through much stronger than a sense of narrative.

Following the workshops I regrouped with dog & pony dc and Ensemble Director, Rachel Grossman, and began devising sensory performances, the first of which was titled *Sense-Able, A Play*. We chose to work with the seven ages of man speech from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;  
And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,  
In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;

His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

-*As You Like It*, II.vii.146 - 173

Our first goal was to find our own cultural touchstones within the text. For example: “Mewling Infant” called forth memories of childhood, a mother cradling child and singing a lullaby, of teddy bears and “Whining Schoolboy” evoked memories of the feel of a backpack, of skipping hand-in-hand with best friend, playing in sand, and the taste of juice box. We created seven experiences, or stations, for each age. The performance was designed for an audience of one. One audience member, individually, would experience the show on their own. Each person was given a blindfold and earplugs so that they could focus their other senses and fully immerse themselves in the performance. We incorporated taste in both a literal sense and in the abstract. The audience member was given a juice box during the schoolboy section, and we handed them a donut for “second childishness.” We created a food sentence meant to convey the complexity of life for the “Justice.” (It began with a sriracha flavored veggie straw, then a dehydrated strawberry wrapped in basil, and finally a piece of dark chocolate.)

By the audience’s in-the-moment reactions, it felt that the incorporation of taste into performance was working. Furthermore, from audience post-show response we knew we were hitting something, creating some kind of spark of recognition or insight that led the audience member to connect. From those first few performances we knew

that we were able to suggest meaning without the help of sound or visual elements. We knew that the audience would give over to what we were doing and would begin to create their own story based on what we were giving them combined with personal experiences. It was exciting to watch audience's faces as they discovered the different tastes and tried to determine where the story was going. Many audience members took the time to feel and smell the food before actually tasting it, some passed the food back to the performer, or took a bite and refused to take more. It was clear that tasting without seeing the actual thing you were putting into your mouth was a highly personal choice.

When building a sensory play for the second time in Spring 2017, Rachel and I decided to revisit and expand upon our first performance (it was 10-15min in duration). I wanted us to push ourselves to be clearer in our storytelling--something we felt we "failed" to do in the first iteration. Rachel wanted to ensure we addressed each age individually and that the stations were clear and distinct moments for the audience. We were also wanting to move past a literal re-telling of the story. Trying to figure out how to communicate without relying upon sight and sound, we couldn't get past real, predictable, tangible things that related directly to what we were trying to communicate. Rachel and I agreed that our largest question was how do we continue to push ourselves to think and create in metaphor when we are already working in the abstract. Why do we feel the necessity to represent things as they are as opposed to how they feel? The "rewrite" of *Sense-Able: A Play* was titled *Seven Ages: your life through the*

senses, and nearly quadrupled in length (40-50 minutes in duration, which audience members reported back to us felt “too short”).

We removed the more straightforward taste moments save for one, and worked to create an age/station that was told entirely through taste. We chose “And then the lover,/Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad/Made to his mistress’ eyebrow.” to translate into a taste experience. Seated at a table, the audience member was hand fed watermelon, orange, and dark chocolate, while at the same time being stroked on the face and arm by feathers lightly scented with Sandalwood, roses, and finger-tips. Reactions varied from giggles, to uncomfortable body shifts, to leaning in towards the performer. Again, it was clear that something had been triggered in the audience members. They were feeling and reacting to what they were being fed and making decisions based on that. The reactions were individual and deeply personal for each person.

At the time of this paper, dog & pony dc is opening our third sensory performance, titled *Party On*. Adapted from Act 1, sc 5, or “the party scene,” in Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Romeo & Juliet* where the two young lovers meet for the first time, we are immersing the audience in the world of the party. Instead of stations that audience would move through sequentially, we’ve created one large event wherein the events, while still sequential, would transition from one moment to the next, building one upon another seamlessly. As opposed to *Seven Ages*, a show for one audience member, *Party On* will be experienced by an audience of six; this allows for more group interaction. In this iteration of a sensory performance, I am working with the use of taste

to highlight and enhance the narrative as opposed to using taste to convey a part of the story. With my collaborators Navid Azeez, Kala Granger, Tosin Olufulabi, and stage manager Trent Harper, we've established three tables: the Appetizer Table with the scent of patchouli, textures that are smooth and hard, and the taste of cherry tomatoes and crystallized ginger; the Bar Table with the scent of orange, textures that are rough and prickly, and the taste of cocktail onions, olives, and pretzels; the Dessert Table, with the scent of vanilla, soft, silky textures, and the taste of lemon cookies and marshmallows. The foods are meant to be both an interesting taste and over various mouthfeel. In rehearsals, with volunteer audiences, reactions to taste have been similar: people are wary of tasting food they can not see, are often surprised when they take that first bite, and having different tastes enhances and reaffirms their experience (that of attending a party).

In conclusion, we have yet to arrive at any solid conclusions, and we're excited about that. Almost three years in we are still in the beginning of our journey towards understanding the use of taste as a method of enhancing and/or creating narrative. With each workshop and sensory performance we create we have a better understanding of how someone might respond to particular textures, smells, and tastes. We have built a set of tools and gathered enough data to make an informed choice, and to assist in developing replicable templates for creating theatre by DeafBlind and, for DeafBlind people. However, there is much to learn and we look forward to learning from and sharing with this working group.



