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# *Kabeiroi* by Punchdrunk

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- 1 Punchdrunk, a British company founded in 2000 by Felix Barrett, appears as the ‘pioneer’ and most emblematic company in the field of immersive theatre—a form of theatre where the audience is placed ‘at the heart of the work’ (Machon 22).
- 2 The company defines itself as follows: ‘Punchdrunk has pioneered a game changing form of theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds’ (Punchdrunk’s website). Since the foundation of the company, these ‘theatrical worlds’ have inhabited the space of disused buildings in which the audience is invited to roam free. *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013), for instance, took place in a warehouse of ‘around 200,000 square foot and four storeys’ (Jones).
- 3 In this and many other respects, *Kabeiroi* (2017)—the company’s first production in London for an adult audience since *The Drowned Man*—marks a turning point in Punchdrunk’s theatrical trajectory: ‘*Kabeiroi* is different to what’s come before’ (Punchdrunk’s website). Indeed, this up-to-six-hour adventure for two people took place mostly outdoors across London. Punchdrunk also innovated with the way the audience purchased their tickets for the show. They were available only for randomly generated winners of a ballot—432 people in total who then had to choose a partner, but more on that later. On their website, the show is presented in these terms:
 

A lost play, re-imagined. Inspired by the ancient Greek myth of the women of Lemnos. *Kabeiroi* is a two-person adventure that takes place across London over six hours. You are at the centre of the story. Part city tour, part game, see the streets become your playground. (Punchdrunk)
- 4 In Aeschylus’s lost play on which Punchdrunk’s *Kabeiroi* is based, Jason and the Argonauts are initiated into a mystery cult on the island of Lemnos—an island where, according to a Greek myth, the women had killed every man. This initiation is what the audience experiences in the show.
- 5 Our ‘adventure’ started in a youth hostel in central London where we were given mobile phones and audio guides. The tour took us in Bloomsbury while the voice directing us told us about the famous writers who had lived in the area. After an hour or so of walking, we entered the British Museum and were guided to the Greek section.

There, a woman gave us an envelope that we were to open at the front entrance of the museum. Another woman took the audio guides from us. As of that moment, contact would be made via texts and calls.

- 6 The second part of *Kabeiroi* resembled a treasure hunt. We moved from place to place, doing what we were told—we picked up a bag in the locker room of a YMCA, waited in a pub, and searched a storage room to find a votive bell, the contemporary double of an ancient Greek bell pointed out to us while we were at the British Museum. At this stage, the show played with different paces. Sometimes, the instructions sent on our phones quickly followed one another. At other times, we had to wait for a while, which left us feeling lost and wondering whether we had followed the directions correctly. We experienced moments when we felt caught in the story and others when the mundane had time to settle back in. We also had fleeting encounters with performers. In keeping with the myth of the women of Lemnos, the cast was all female. A woman jostled us as we exited the museum. Startled by this sudden interaction, we realised a couple of seconds later that she had given us an ominous leaflet. Later on, a homeless woman shouted our name as we walked past her and another one chased us down in the storage place, which gave us the fright of our lives. After these brief encounters, we were constantly on edge, and we started suspecting every person we crossed path with of being part of the experience.
- 7 Our common journey ended in a hotel, where we were split up, as one of us went up in a room while the other stayed in the bar. In the third part of the show, we both followed our own individual paths in order to ‘rescue’ our partner who, according to the messages we received, had been kidnapped by the Maenads. Here is the transcription of one of the voice-mail messages that one of us listened to:
 

It’s gaining on you. You must find shelter before the storm hits. You’re running out of time, Jason. Go now, into King’s Cross. Find somewhere safe and brace yourself against the wind. Your guide must know when you’re safe. Only she can help you now. You must send her a message. Remember, eyes are everywhere.
- 8 This quest led us from Bloomsbury to King’s Cross, where we got on the Victoria line to reach a given location in East London. One of us got in the back of a car, was blindfolded and driven to a warehouse, where his hands were washed in preparation for a ritual, and was asked a few lines (learned in the tube) from a translation of a Greek prayer. In the meantime, the other had to make her way to the room where he was held captive to free him from the blindfold and bonds.
- 9 We were thus finally reunited for the final and more ‘Punchdrunk-like’ part of the show, which involved hiding from guards, performing a ritual in front of an altar, running through a labyrinth plunged in darkness while a storm raged, encountering three priestesses, one of whom was the woman from the museum. At the end of our adventure, we were driven back to the tube station in a car. Before stepping out, the driver gave us a card with the word ‘mystes’ written on it—the name given to an initiate in a mystery.
- 10 In a 2015 interview about the *Punchdrunk Travel* project—which has not yet been developed—Felix Barrett declared:
 

The idea is that your life becomes a theatrical wonderland [...] Everything is centered around you, whether you’re in the streets, or sitting in a cafe or whatever you’re doing you’re lost inside the show. It’ll be difficult if not impossible to pinpoint the exact place where the show stops and the real world continues. (Barrett quoted in Iezzi, n.p)

- 11 With *Kabeiroi*, Punchdrunk clearly takes a step in this direction through the erasure of the boundary between reality and fiction. Whilst their previous work maintained the separation between the real world and the dramatic world by staying within the walls of a single abandoned building, this new piece opens up to the busy streets of London and immerses the participant in real life.
- 12 The Bloomsbury audio tour is largely built on stories of the famous writers who lived and wrote there. Through anecdotes and quotes from Woolf, Eliot, Dickens or Betjeman, the houses, parks and churches of the area became literary as much as historical sites. Likewise, we were told that the reason why the massive architecture of Senate House looks familiar, is because it was used as the Ministry of Truth in Michael Radford's adaptation of *1984*. The cityscape was thus endowed with a fictional depth.
- 13 Therefore, similarly to Punchdrunk's other productions, *Kabeiroi* was very much anchored in a literary and cinematographic world. The bag that we found in the locker contained a copy of Robert Graves's classic *The Greek Myths*—the book from which one of us had to learn a poem. While we were waiting in the pub, we had time to peruse it and learn about the myth of Lemnos, about Jason and his initiation, and about the Maenads pursuing people who sought the power of the mysteries. This literary reference was blended with Orwellian influences—in the same way that *Macbeth* was blended with Hitchcock's adaptation of *Rebecca* in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, for instance. Orwell's dystopian universe was often lurking in the background of the *Kabeiroi* experience: we were indeed constantly told that we were being watched ('eyes are everywhere'), and that we should be on the look-out for unknown enemies. Similarly, since the early stage of the experience was punctuated by brief and startling encounters with performers, we were always on our guards—any passer-by could be part of the company. We were thus experiencing some sort of Winston-like paranoia, enhanced by the fact that previous participants, knowing the 'set' of the show and its trajectory, might actually have been present to observe us. As Anne Corlett underlines in her review of the show in *The Guardian*:
- There is a small piece of the *Kabeiroi* narrative which feels like an invitation to return to the "set" at a later date, not as an audience member but as an observer, watching another participant feel their way through the experience. If I found myself in the area, I can imagine giving in to the temptation to slip into one of the more public locations, sit on a bench and watch as the real world gives way to *Kabeiroi*'s mysteries. (Corlett, n.p.)
- 14 Yet another allusion to Orwell's world: *1984* was the code we had to use to open various padlocks during our adventure.
- 15 In connection with the Orwellian element, the experience was also reminiscent of spy fiction and movies through our playing the role of some sort of secret agent with a mission to accomplish. The message contained in the sealed envelope given at the British museum at the start of our adventure set the tone:
- You have both been chosen, now together you must decide.  
Your journey ahead may be filled with peril but the rewards will be plentiful.  
If you are ready and willing to accept then each raise your hand now.
- 16 In the same way, the moment we spent in the hotel—which, in itself, is a liminal place where social identities tend to be blurred—was clearly reminiscent of the familiar tropes of spy movies: we were rushed from an empty room to the emergency exit by an

actress dressed as a cleaning lady—whom we initially took for a real cleaning lady interrupting the show.

- 17 Such blurring of the frontier between reality and fiction is also partly borrowed from Aeschylus' tragedy, since the original play featured Jason the Argonauts as they were greeted and initiated into the Kabeiroi cult, a *real* mystery cult. In a sense, Punchdrunk's performance is a symmetrical image of the play, as the real people chosen to be participants embody Jason and the Argonauts going through an imaginary re-creation of the cult.
- 18 More importantly though, Kabeiroi did not just re-invent Aeschylus' play about an initiation, it made us perform it. As participants, we were frequently addressed as Jason, but we were also put in the position of real travellers, for the experience did involve quite a bit of walking and exploring the city. While it is shrouded in the mystery of the lost Greek play, it does not just treat it as fictional material to be re-enacted—it is adapted to contemporary reality. *Kabeiroi* does borrow some of its elements from Greek culture, but it is also anchored in contemporary culture through the constant use of a smartphone, the moment spent in a storage facility—a very futuristic and/or Orwellian place—and the necessary tube and car rides. It is therefore not just a re-enactment of the lost ritual in the way that amateur historians might recreate it; instead, we felt that we were involved in the performance of an actual contemporary ritual.
- 19 At times, the experience was frightening and thrilling in the same way that a haunted house or an escape game might be. You are an active participant in an adventure and that is both exhilarating and tiring. Crucially, however, and contrary to what might happen in a haunted house or an escape game, *Kabeiroi* does claim a transformative value. We were, for instance, repeatedly invited to observe the London crowds or try to make eye contact with strangers. It thus took advantage of the in-between position the experience put us in: neither completely part of the crowd, nor exactly abstracted from it. The point of such injunctions was therefore to encourage us to see differently, to instil a difference in the way we perceived urban life and the familiar streets of Bloomsbury and central London. In that sense, the experience had a truly performative ambition. Not just a separate aesthetic or ludic wandering, it was conceived as an initiation into a group of “mystes”—the word which was inscribed on the card given to each participant at the end of the performance. Beautifully printed, this token of our belonging to the cult was—quite problematically—redolent of business circles or gentlemen's clubs. Similarly, the much-criticized method of randomly selecting ballot winners (see for instance Andrzej Lukowski's article on *The Stage*: ‘Theatre ballots are a dick move that shut out dedicated fans’) certainly fits the narrative of divine election associated with mystery cults; and so does the choice of an audience of only two per performance—one could say that the participants were indeed singled out by fate to experience something that only a chosen few would have access to. In that sense, the exceptional nature of the initiation was respected and, although it was largely described and commented in newspapers and on social networks, the experience remained in part mysterious to a lot of Punchdrunk fans.
- 20 Despite the questionably exclusive sense of community that *Kabeiroi* builds, it is nonetheless fascinating for the way a work on the frontier between reality and fiction gives way to something that goes beyond such alternatives. While the exact nature and aim of the ritual is unclear, and the sense of the religious is not as central as it might

have been in Ancient Greece, the performance taps into a very contemporary fascination for the ancient and the archaic, in order to establish its own standards of the sacred via the visible signs of both myths, culture and literature. One learns to experience their presence as nested within reality, not as representation. Such direct contact might thus be construed as the contemporary equivalent to the contact with the divine that mystery cults attempted to establish. *Kabeiroi* does not just show, it tries to initiate, and in the process, change you.

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