

Embodied Intimacy: The Immersive Performance of The Smile Off Your Face at Edinburgh

By Julia Storch

The Smile Off Your Face left me with my body coursing with adrenaline, stemming in large part from the restriction of my sight, a sense heavily relied upon. Unlike other shows which invoke blindness to heighten their effect, this immersive performance did not completely rely on verbal elements. In fact, I found that the use of touch, scent, motion, and loss of sight are what truly allowed the performers and audience members to explore intimacy. While the first version of this performance, premiered in 2004 by Ontroerend Goed, a collective performance group based in Belgium, KASK students revised and produced the version that I experienced at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on 16 August 2022, which claims it has been updated to be relevant to 2022. Certainly, the mere act of being in close contact with strangers post-pandemic is still a new sensation but I wonder what other elements of the show were altered to fit a world still besieged by contagion.



The Smile Off Your Face. Originally directed by Sophie De Somere and Joeri Smet. Photo: KASK

The piece begins by pulling individuals out of the waiting room and leading each person to a separate room where a blindfold is placed over their eyes and their hands gently tied with a piece of felt as they sit down in a wheelchair. Immediately, I understand that I am placing myself in someone else's care, becoming reliant on them, and trusting them not to harm me. The tying of hands feels particularly charged, an act of complete trust usually

reserved for sexual encounters.

I am then wheeled into a new space, which I cannot use to shape my experience, as I have never been in this venue before. I hear murmurs in the room, but I cannot make out distinct words. A match is lit near my face—I hear the strike and then smell the distinctive flint scent. To smell fire while unable to see is deeply unnerving and again I have to trust the performers to not hurt me. The temporary loss of my sight leads me to strain my other senses to understand what is going on and the smallest hint transforms my conception of what is occurring. After the match is lit and placed close enough to my face that I can smell it, sand or salt is sprinkled onto my hands. I rub it between my fingers, surprisingly unselfconscious of my position as an “ audience member ” who cannot see the performers although they can see me. I feel free to respond to the piece and move in ways that traditional performer/audience relationships do not allow for, simply because my sight is restricted. I cannot watch the people watching me, and therefore feel freer to engage with the piece as I desire, rather than trying to respond in a way that is expected of me.

The most striking moment of the piece comes next, as my hands are untied and placed in warm water. A soft, feminine pair of hands gently wash one hand, then the other, letting the hands roam over mine, caressing, fixing my rings, and then I am encouraged to caress the hands back before being led to feel the pulse of the wrist. This act holds so many connotations—the Christian act of washing Jesus ’ s feet, the commercialized service at a nail salon, and caring for an elderly relative who can no longer wash their own body. The act, even though the owner of the hands never spoke, feels caring and attentive, and most importantly, as something shared. The match and the sand happen to me, while I am able to explore the hands that wash mine, creating a sense of reciprocity and the closest likeness to true intimacy I feel during the show.

After the handwashing, there are two portions of the performance that involved the performers asking questions. During the first section, in which I am asked questions such as “ do you laugh often? ” and “ are you in love? ” the performer leaves a heavy silence in between my answer and the next question which disquiets me. I want to fill the silence with an explanation of my answer, or I want them to ask me a follow-up, so I can give more details and explain myself. Letting such intimate details about me sit unqualified between us feels dangerous and makes e feel vulnerable in a way that most situations in everyday life do not. I have to sit with the knowledge that some person who I have never seen knows things about me that I have not even told my closest friends. Here, however, is where I feel the cracks of the performance most significantly. Whereas the handwashing feels intimate regardless of how one responds, I imagine it would be perfectly easy to lie to this questioner and take some perverse pleasure in the reversal of expectations. I enter the performance with the mindset of being open to the experience and truthful, as I imagined this would allow me to get the most out of the encounter. After the performance, I spoke to other audience members who did not feel as exposed by the questions, choosing instead to see the question/answer portion as a casual chat, albeit one-sided.

The second questioner introduces the sense of taste into the equation, asking if they could feed me a piece of chocolate, a slice of mandarin orange, and a piece of gingerbread. I accept (though others I learn, did not) and the questioner has me lower my mask as she places the little treats inside my uncomfortably gaping mouth. While I enjoy all of these foods, I do not feel

as if the introduction of this sense alters my experience in the same way that the touch of someone's hands or the smell of fire has. Rather, it is the act of letting another person feed me, completely reliant on their account of what they are putting into my mouth and my body, which brings my vulnerability into focus very sharply. Again, this act feels weighty for many reasons, bringing up memories of watching my mother feed my grandmother after she could no longer feed herself and simultaneously calling forth the erotic nature of consuming food that another person gives you. After the second set of questions, my blindfold is lifted for the first time, revealing that the strange and leading questions from the second questioner are in fact small hints to this person's identity, which I am only able to put together upon receiving visual cues. Here, the mere introduction of sight is used to convey humor, upset our assumptions, and perhaps offer a sense of betrayal that the person we think we are speaking to is not how we imagined them.

In the last part of the piece, my blindfold is removed to reveal a wall of polaroid photos of audience members, including myself. It is terrifying because of its connotations (serial killer, stalker) and beautiful because I feel part of something outside of myself, after feeling very inside of myself for the previous parts of the performance. Then a performer sits in front of me, asks me a few questions, and looking intently from one of my eyes to the other begins to cry. I see their mouth tremble and twitch and their eyes slowly fill with tears until two drop in quick succession from their right eye. This moment creates the most mixed reactions, from what I am able to discern. Many people I spoke to after the performance experienced discomfort or confusion or even frustration, wanting to feel empathetic toward a person crying but unable to because there seemed to be no context for the tears. When the performer cries, staring first at one of my eyes and then the other, I feel truly seen. The sudden gift of my vision returning reminds me of my own physical presence just as much as showing me others, I become aware of others because I have regained awareness of myself. Before I have time to understand the tears, I am then dragged away in the wheelchair from this person I long to comfort, out of the room at breakneck speed, revealing the performance hall to me for the first time while the performers turn to look at me as they wash another person's hand or ask someone else if they are in love. Here, finally, at the end of small, intimate moments that feel infinite when one cannot see the end, sight snaps me back into reality, reminding me of the repetitive nature of this (and most!) performances.

The Smile Off Your Face is somehow both intimate and commercialized, a repetition of vulnerability that to me, points to what is beautiful about theatre. The performers have washed hundreds of hands, asked the same questions again and again, and cried a single tear multiple times an hour. The services rendered are rehearsed and stylized, yet I, as an audience member, felt their actions so deeply that it might have been the first time. We often analyze performances as holding aspects of both the extra-daily and the quotidian, yet I think the genre of the ritual was a strong undercurrent here. Rituals gain meaning from repetition, from being passed on through participants who choose to engage wholeheartedly with the process. This strength of belief carries the ritual over and over again and never undermines its impact on the participants. Similarly, despite the cracks existing in some of the show's elements, such as the one-sided, acted-upon nature of some of the actions, knowing that my progression through the room will soon be forgotten by all the performers does not bother me, even though it undermines my understanding of the reciprocal nature of intimacy. I will certainly remember it.

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