

# Taking the *Measure* of One's Suppositions, One Step at a Time

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## Abstract

One Step at a Time Like This, a Melbourne-based theater company, developed an astonishing interactive meditation on *Measure for Measure* for Chicago Shakespeare Theater's World's Stage Series in the fall of 2014. An immersive, ambulatory theater experience, *Since I Suppose* pushed audience participants to examine the complex sexual politics of Shakespeare's play, the city of Chicago, and their own personal moral identities through a variety of different lenses. *Since I Suppose* challenged its audience participants' assumptions of imperviousness to the corruption of a political aspirant like Angelo, the weakness of a political figure such as the Duke, or the myriad temptations of a sprawling city. In the manner of the best productions, One Step at a Time Like This produced an adaptation of *Measure for Measure* that left audience members with not merely a different understanding of the play, but of themselves. Diving deeply into a corrupt world of substitute political leaders, substitute sexual partners, and substitute decapitated criminals, *Since I Suppose* left its audience to contemplate the profundity of the most basic question of identity: Who are you?

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Take a city — Vienna or Ferrara,<sup>1</sup> Chicago, or Melbourne.<sup>2</sup> Examine it, clinically: its streets, its pristine halls of power, its dark underbelly. Suppose that you are the ruler of it, and understand that you have let the reins on license go slack. Like a coward, you put someone else in charge and disguise yourself to sit back and watch what will happen. But things don't go quite as you planned. Licentiousness is curbed more harshly than you envisioned. And then there is that girl, the nun, the novitiate. You see your substitute see things in her, things that you can see yourself. Before you know it, you are implicated, caught up in the drama you intended to just let unfold around you.<sup>3</sup>

Such, in its bare outlines, is the narrative of *Measure for Measure*, and of *Since I Suppose*, the riff on *Measure* that the Australian theater company One Step at a Time Like This<sup>4</sup> developed for Chicago Shakespeare Theater's World's Stage Series. A meditation on the themes of power, corruption, morality, and sexuality raised by Shakespeare's play, *Since I Suppose* allowed the

audience members who experienced it, one by one, to begin as detached observers of video clips of cityscapes inhabited by characters from the play, but slowly sucked you directly into the drama until, rather than watching a video clip of Marianna climb into bed next to Angelo disguised as Isabella, you did it yourself, wearing a fake moustache rather than a nun's habit. Audience participants were kept separate from one another by staggered start times, which meant that the performers in the live sequences were repeating their scripted and choreographed interactions with new audience participants at roughly fifteen-minute intervals.

*Since I Suppose* thus combined elements of immersive theater<sup>5</sup> and one-to-one theater. As Gareth White explains:

the former tends to make use of spatial and architectural interventions, and to ask spectators to involve themselves physically in tracking down or pursuing the performance; the latter seeks a more direct relationship with the individual spectator. Both of these putative new forms often, but not always, ask the spectator to speak or act in dialogue with the performers or the performance environment, or to make choices that structure their experience: they invite the spectator to participate in ways that are differently active to the typical theatre event. Both terms serve to legitimate participatory practice, offering something more edgy and exciting than mere audience participation, perhaps. (White 2013, 2)

Punchdrunk's celebrated *Sleep No More* is a site-specific work inspired partly by Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which a collective, masked audience is free to roam throughout the performance space, interacting with it as they choose. While Punchdrunk's audience members may be pulled away individually for a one-to-one experience, that production is primarily immersive in its orientation and permits its audience participants a certain degree of both detachment and anonymity via masks.<sup>6</sup> *Since I Suppose* remained both one-to-one and immersive throughout the experience, turning its audience participants semi-loose in a major metropolitan area, unmasked, where they interacted with regular citizens going about their days with no knowledge of the performance in addition to live and filmed performers with *One Step at a Time Like This*. In the final stage of the experience, audience participants were marked out as unusual via fake moustaches, sometimes attracting the attention of ordinary citizens on the street and in semi-public contexts like the Hotel Palomar which — unlike Punchdrunk's McKittrick Hotel, the warehouse-turned-hotel setting for *Sleep No More* — remained open for regular business. As Josephine Machon observes, "immersive experiences in theatre combine the act of immersion — being submerged in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated — with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium" (2013, 21-22).

## Follow Films

Audience participants experienced *Since I Suppose* one by one, but encountered directly at least eight different performers, several of whom also appeared in videos designed to move the audience participant through the play's plot, and the city in which it was (re)set. The audience participant's training in how to adapt to the unique delivery mode of this adaptation of *Measure* began the day before attending the performance, when an e-mail arrived with an embedded YouTube video introducing some of the characters and the adaptation's governing concept of the card trick.<sup>7</sup> The video also provided a street-corner rendezvous point in downtown Chicago from which the performance would begin, with instructions to bring a fully charged cell phone, wear comfortable shoes, and leave baggage at home (with an image of a woman staggering beneath literal baggage, but the subtextual suggestion of metaphorical baggage).

At the street-corner rendezvous point, participants received a phone call instructing them to walk toward the twinkling lights of the Palace Theater. There, an elegantly dressed and coiffed woman (Sara Sawicki) seated them on a velvet bench in the theater's empty lobby to orient them to the rest of the performance experience. While participants were asked to bring their own phones, these were immediately replaced by Motorola Moto G smartphones fitted with headphones, attached to both a lanyard placed around the neck, and a Velcro strap, to wear around the hand.<sup>8</sup> Participants walked through a brief example of a "follow film," in which the idea is to follow in real space the advancing image on the phone's video screen in front of you.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the orientation film, for example, the video showed the empty lobby; the unseen person making the follow film walked slowly toward a marble pillar. Once you arrived at the pillar in the "company" of the video, you then turned, as the image on the screen turned, toward a staircase with a burnished brass handrail, and back to the bench from which the journey began.

The elegant woman then oriented the participant to another part of the performance experience, the violation of physical boundaries between the performer and the participant. "May I blindfold you?" she asked, after the video had returned the participant to sit on the plush bench.<sup>10</sup> Sawicki's query constituted the first of three moments of blindfolding in the performance, each with higher stakes.

Once the participant was blindfolded, Sawicki leaned over them from behind, an open hand resting firmly on their shoulder, to whisper questions associated with the plot content of *Measure for Measure*, such as "Do you have a brother or a sister? Do you believe in the death penalty? Have

you ever wanted someone so desperately that you did something that you knew was wrong? Which would you prefer: immediate death, or a difficult marriage?"

These questions were not rhetorical; the woman waited for the participant's reply before continuing. After her whispered interrogation, she slipped silently away on the dense carpet of the theater lobby, leaving the participant blindfolded. A rough male voice then instructed: "Take off your blindfold."

The participant found that they now were seated across from a man in a baseball cap, fake moustache, and dark sunglasses. Participants had "met" him before, in the e-mailed video offering instructions on how to prepare for the performance experience, and where to go to begin it. "This is the situation," he said, using a deck of erotic playing cards, and deft card tricks with the participant to introduce the main characters and plot points from *Measure for Measure*. Telegraphing the role he was meant to be playing, at one point he used the first person pronoun in reference to an action of the Duke's, correcting immediately to, "I mean, *the Duke*."<sup>11</sup>

Spanning less than fifteen minutes, this entire opening sequence successfully oriented the participant to every aspect of the remaining two hours of the performance: traveling to the correct place in the city to receive a new set of directions about what to do and where to go next; following verbal instructions to get from one point to another; successfully navigating the follow films; orienting to the main characters and plot points in *Measure for Measure*; linking these characters and plot points to cards used in card tricks; and recognizing that substitutions would play a significant role in the proceedings.

The next thirty minutes or so of the performance invited the participant to look at the city — and issues like sexual blackmail, the commingling of Christian morality and secular law, and the death penalty — from fresh perspectives. I had never really noticed — until I was instructed through my headphones to stand in the center of Daley Plaza and really look at what flanked me on three sides — that City Hall, a courthouse, and a church all have real estate fronting that plaza, the site of the city's Christmas tree, the meeting point for monthly Critical Mass Rides, a common gathering place for political protests. As the audio playing at this point observed, three of the four sides of the square that constitutes Daley Plaza represent secular law, religious law, and the instrument of punishing those who disobey the law. As a participant in a talk-back with Suzanne Kersten and Julian Rickert, co-creators of *Since I Suppose*, sardonically pointed out, there is also a bank on one corner; thus almighty lucre, the god of capitalism, is present there, too.

Participants were invited into City Hall via a follow film of Isabella (Clair Korobacz) in a creamy white nun habit, complete with full wimple and veil. As she disappeared into an

elevator, the participant was instructed to wait for her in the lobby, but invited to "eavesdrop" on her interview with the Duke's deputy, Angelo. Key snippets of Shakespeare's text, primarily from 2.4, in an array of recorded voices highlighted Angelo's proposition to Isabella — "Redeem thy brother / By yielding up thy body to my will" (2.4.164-65) — her horrified rejection of it, and his ultimate sexual blackmail of her.<sup>12</sup>

One Step at a Time Like This titled their adaptation with a phrase uttered by Angelo in his harsh proposition to Isabella in 2.4 of *Measure for Measure*. Isabella unwittingly offers Angelo an opening by asserting that women are "ten times frail" and "credulous to false prints" (2.4.129 and 131). He retorts: "*Since I suppose* we are made to be no stronger / Than faults may shake our frames, let me be bold. / I do arrest your words. Be that you are; / That is, a woman. If you be more, you're none" (2.4.133-36, emphasis added). *Since I Suppose* works to challenge any belief the audience participant may have that they are impervious to the corruption of an Angelo, the weakness of a political figure such as the Duke, or the myriad temptations of a sprawling city.

In a subtle substitution, participants followed Isabella into City Hall, the seat of political power, but then followed Angelo out of it and across the street into the First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple, for his reflections from the end of 2.2: "Is this her fault or mine?" (167). Paradoxically, participants eavesdropped on a violation of the law in City Hall, and on the ruminations of a man contemplating a carnal sin — and a capital crime — in a church. After this front-loading of plot and Shakespearean language, Isabella led participants, via a follow film, down the steps to the pedway connecting the blue and red line subway trains. As they traversed the brightly-lit pedway mall, participants listened to audio of interviews with nuns explaining how they were called to their religious lives, spliced with the Mother Superior from *The Sound of Music*, admonishing the problem-child Maria about the challenges of the sisterhood.

A second descent took participants down to the platform of the red line train itself, where they were instructed to walk as far down the platform as they felt comfortable going, and then to stare down the darkened tunnel. Here, the audio switched to interviews with men on death row, including a man who described how his sister had not been to visit him in years: "We were real close," he explained, and, thus, she "couldn't handle" seeing him in this context. In *Measure for Measure*, Claudio, sentenced to death for fornication, has a sister who cannot bear to look at him after he begs her to sacrifice her chastity in exchange for his life. Next on the audio track came the familiar voice of Damien Echols, one of the West Memphis Three and the author of *Life After Death*, which recounts his escape from death row after a wrongful conviction for a triple child

murder. Like Echols, Claudio is spared in the eleventh hour, though Claudio's escape from death row is not, of course, based in DNA evidence, as was Echols's.

After these bleak reflections in the dark underworld of the city's subway system, participants rode the escalator up to street level once more, and were invited by the audio track to linger in liminality on the State Street Bridge over the Chicago River. The crossing marked a significant shift in the experience of the piece. A follower, listener, and watcher no longer, once across the bridge, the audience participants found themselves fully and directly engaged in the experience of the production.

### Seedy Bars and Dirty Bookstores

The street slopes downward at a relatively steep incline for a Midwestern city once one crosses the bridge northbound. The follow film for this portion of the journey featured Angelo, sleeves of his dress shirt rolled up, his suit jacket thrown over his shoulder, eating a slice of pizza from a triangular cardboard container which, in a wonderful gesture of characterization, he tossed down onto the street: the "precise" Angelo, a litterbug. And then, there were his incongruous surroundings: dive bars and dirty bookstores. Participants were on a downward trajectory, in Angelo's tailwind. At the base of the hill, participants ran into the Duke, in his fake moustache, at the door to a seedy bar. Rather than a follow film, participants now followed a person, into the bar.

"Are you a drinker?" he asked, looking furtively around the bar. An answer in the affirmative produced a shot. More card tricks, reminding us of what we had already seen, and what was yet to come. The central summative premise of the card tricks was that the play features multiple, interconnected head tricks. The nominal head of the city, the Duke, appoints a substitute head, Angelo, for his time "away" from the city, a time in which he does not really leave, but continues to watch how his substitute head performs, substituting himself in for him when necessary, as in the orchestration of the bed trick. Participants were brought up to speed on this portion of the series of head tricks in the bar, and then instructed to close their eyes.

"Do you prefer to suck, or bite?" the Duke asked from behind the participant, noisily removing the cellophane wrapper from an unseen object, which he dabbed provocatively at their lips, until the participant opened their mouth, to discover a sweet lollipop.

"It's usually best with both," he remarked,<sup>13</sup> before sending the participant back out into the street, following audio directions around the corner to Courthouse Place, where they learned that the alley behind this building was once the site of a public gallows. In addition to the audio guide, this portion of the journey also used chalk-drawn arrows on the ground, guiding the participant to a circled target on the pavement directly across from Courthouse Place.

After discussing the gallows, the audio guide directed participants to look directly behind them, where a pair of shoe prints were chalk drawn onto the sidewalk in front of a partial wall across an alley. The objective was to stand in them. Once you did so, a sharply-creased dollar bill appeared over your left shoulder, the sinister side.

"Do you know where the nearest dirty bookstore is?" asked yet another man in a fake moustache and dark glasses. It proved to be immediately to the left. Three options were presented: go into the dirty bookstore and complete a task, hear about the dirty bookstore, or change the subject. The task to be completed was to browse the shelves in the dirty bookstore and return with something — a title, a phrase — that you would be willing to wear emblazoned on a T-shirt.

The first time that I experienced the production, it was broad daylight on a Sunday afternoon. At that time, I opted to hear about the dirty bookshop. The second time I experienced *Since I Suppose*, I hit this portion of the journey at approximately 5:30 p.m. on a Friday. No question — I wanted to go into the dirty bookstore. My interlocutor was delighted with my choice and recommended that I select a fake moustache to wear. "They cost a dollar," he said laconically, taking back the creased bill he had used to get my attention. As I walked toward the bookstore, moustachioed, it occurred to me that I was being sent into a dirty bookstore sucking on a lollipop. I considered tossing it, but then decided not to. Surely it would add to the experience, or they wouldn't have given it to me.

I think I anticipated being ogled, perhaps even verbally harassed, a relatively attractive woman in a fake moustache, sucking on a lollipop, perusing the titles of dirty DVDs on Friday during rush hour. Instead, every man in the establishment (and there were only men in the establishment, although the lesbian porn selection was extensive, and well curated) — including the proprietor — looked at me in sheer terror. Deer in headlights. Cornered rats. It was a fascinating, impromptu study in sexual dynamics I would never have thought to conduct were it not for the specific urban choreography and props of *Since I Suppose*.<sup>14</sup>

But my exploration of sexual dynamics was just beginning. When I returned to report the results of my quest for an appropriate T-shirt message ("Neighborhood Slut Watch," which elicited the dry observation, "Charming"), I was given a hand-drawn map of the surrounding area on a page ripped from the same moleskin notebook that housed the selection of adhesive moustaches. Red lines drawn onto the map directed me to the Hotel Palomar, eighteenth floor.<sup>15</sup>

On the way there, the audio track supplied for the journey recounted the downward trajectory of a female sex worker, from her relatively innocuous, hands-off entry into the business, to full-scale prostitution. She started with ads on Craigslist offering her used panties for sale, delivered through the mail. Then she escalated to physical contact, selling "blow and go's," an arrangement

whereby men meet the sex worker for oral sex, and then leave. Eventually, she began having vaginal intercourse for money. She effused in the interview about how fantastic it was to be praised for her looks and sexual prowess by a john who then paid her, before admitting that her mother cried when she revealed to her how she was earning her money.

In the waiting area for the elevators on the eighteenth floor, another, different fake-moustache-wearing man in dark glasses found me, tossing a playing card to the floor at my feet while furtively peering at me around the corner from the adjacent hallway. Again, rather than following a film, the objective became to follow a live actor, into the service stairwell for the hotel. There, he played more card tricks, explaining the bed trick as yet another head trick: Marianna put in place of Isabella, whom Angelo wants "to give him head . . . her maidenhead."

The video "trailer" for *Since I Suppose* features a title card reading "head" both at its beginning and its ending. All senses of the word "head" are deployed in *Since I Suppose*, from the figurative use of the term to denote a leader, to the literal reference to the body part, to the lewd slang for the act of performing fellatio. All of these terms are bound up in the person of Angelo, who serves as the substitute for the Duke, or the head of Vienna, and who demands the head of Claudio even after he has been given head, perhaps — among other sexual favors — during his assignation with Isabella/Marianna.

Punctilious about every detail, *One Step at a Time* actually filmed scenes in the follow films for *Since I Suppose* at different times of the day, so that the lighting of the street environment would seamlessly blend for the participant from that depicted on the screen to their own environment, as they interacted with the video. Having seen the production twice, at different times of the day, I got the opportunity to experience this contrast. After the stairwell card trick introduction of the bed trick/head trick, participants were directed to one of two locations in the hotel, depending on the time of day and the weather.

The first time that I experienced *Since I Suppose* it was a warm, sunny afternoon in late August. The second time I experienced the production, it was a prematurely chilly and rainy early evening in the second week of September. On my first outing, I went from the stairwell to a posh balcony dotted with lounge chairs. A woman in a bikini, sunglasses, and a floppy straw hat met me at the door, placing her index finger with a pasted-on moustache along its length over her top lip. The lounge area faced onto the glass-enclosed, tiled indoor pool of the hotel. As in the contemplative period created by the crossing of the Chicago River earlier in the piece, this moment of contemplation by another body of water, albeit a man-made one, also served as a significant point of transition in the piece.



The second time that I experienced *Since I Suppose*, I passed this period of contemplation in the warm steam of the enclosed poolside, while the rainy evening darkened outside. My video darkened and moved indoors accordingly. I had found the experience of the production so unique the first time that I actually resisted seeing it a second time, despite the fact that experiencing it twice was an almost obscene luxury, when tickets were sold to only 300 patrons, and the run immediately sold out. I had thought, before my second journey, that I wanted to keep the first experience preserved in amber. Well aware of the tricks that memory plays, I didn't want to discover that something I treasured about *Since I Suppose* wasn't really the way that it happened at all. Sitting in the warm steam of the indoor pool, shifting this way and that, fooling with my fake moustache, which did not respond well to the climate, I saw immediately one of the advantages of a second trip.

On my first *Since I Suppose* excursion, I enjoyed the warm sun and the posh surroundings, snapped a ridiculous selfie of my face, framed by a floppy straw hat (provided on the lounge chair, along with an ice bucket of complimentary supplies, like sunscreen) and adorned with a fake moustache. Knowing the play, I should have known what was coming, but knowing the play only prepares you for what is coming in the play. It does not prepare you for what is coming for you. At this point in the production, it had been a fascinating adventure: exploring the city, listening to intriguing and moving narratives, watching gorgeous follow films, and, at times, having some frank good fun with card tricks and shot glasses. Isn't this play a comedy, after all?

Despite the physical manipulations of the participant via blindfolding, placing of lollipops to your lips, and questions whispered in your ear, you had remained largely an observer, albeit an observer upon whom some physical demands were made, such as walk these four, or six, blocks; ride this escalator; take this elevator to that floor. On my second go-round, however, I knew what came next, and sitting by that pool, I was nervous — nervous, perhaps, in the way that Marianna might be nervous, having navigated the first of the locks that will lead her to her assignation with Angelo, still waiting by the "garden circummured with brick . . . with a vineyard backed" (4.1.25-26), to enter the place where she will execute the bed trick. I knew, the second time, that when I left that poolside, I would have to *be* Marianna.

In one of the production's more sly substitutions, after leaving the poolside, the participant was directed to a room on the thirty-first floor of the hotel, where they were asked to take the place of Marianna in an actual bed next to the live actor who portrayed Angelo in the follow films, substituting themselves for Marianna, substituting herself for Isabella. Once the participant had obeyed the directive to "make yourself comfortable," the actor playing Angelo, buried under the bed's voluminous white sheet and comforter when one entered, rolled over and turned to face the audience participant. In keeping with the production's insistence that everything in the play can be

boiled down to a head trick, Angelo kept the sheets pulled tightly up to his chin, exposing only his head.

In a sharp deviation from the dynamics of the bed trick as it is performed in *Measure for Measure*, and the dozens of other early modern plays in which it constitutes a plot device, this bed trick was performed in the light of the bedside lamp, rather than in the dark. The audience participant was forced to come face to face — literally — with a person they did not know in bed. Paradoxically, this is exactly what happens in bed tricks played in the dark: "a sexual encounter occurs in which at least one partner is unaware of the other partner's true identity . . . because the couple meet in the dark" (Desens 1994, 11). In the case of *Since I Suppose*, the bed trick might, perhaps, have affected the audience participant less powerfully if they were not forced to confront the face of the person in bed with them, a face recognizable only from the follow films they had watched of Angelo, and not that of a person that they actually knew.

Audio for this part of the production came from a CD player on the nightstand, a CD that the participant had followed Isabella on film in retrieving from a neatly folded towel under the lounge chair by the pool. The track asked the participant to consider what it would be like to be in bed with someone you had longed for, to imagine the first touch, who made the first move to kiss. Marliss Desens points out that, in the case of bed tricks performed by women in the interests of winning back a wayward spouse (or fiancée, in Marianna's case), the woman in the bed "experiences the pain of having been rejected by her husband [or fiancée] and the humiliation of knowing that in the dark her husband cannot distinguish one female body from another" (1994, 61).<sup>16</sup> In both instances as I lay in that bed, all that I could think of was what it must be like to be Marianna, knowing that whatever passion or erotic desire is conveyed to her by Angelo is meant for someone else.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Marianna — and we, the audience participants — were in that bed at the behest of a disguised Duke, a trickster, a player of head-tricks. The lack of agency about it all carried its weight into that bed, too.

*Chicago Sun-Times* reviewer Hedy Weiss balked at this set piece, complaining: "Can't figure out how this works for male 'visitors' without corrupting this crucial bedroom scene element of the plot" (Weiss 2014). Though she did not pursue the implications of her own observation, Weiss inadvertently pointed out an intriguing challenge posed by *Since I Suppose* to the presumptive male gaze. The audience participant was confronted not with a bedded woman, but with a bedded man. Moreover, the issue that Weiss raises assumes a heteronormative audience; a lesbian woman might have the same difficulty imagining the male actor playing Angelo as someone they have longed for sexually that a straight man might experience. But all of this assumes that audience members

lack the imagination that the audio track playing during the experience directed them to exercise, erasing the actual person lying next to them, mentally, and replacing him with someone for whom they had experienced intense, unrequited longing.

The door to the bedroom in the Hotel Palomar was a wonderfully medieval-looking thing in dark wood, with wrought iron trimmings and handle, that slid along circular iron tracks at the top and bottom. The attention to detail in the places that one went, and their fitness for the play, cohered most clearly in this important vignette. Once risen from bed, the participant was told to step out onto the room's balcony. Incredibly, it looked down not only onto the lower balcony outside of the indoor pool, where fair-weather sojourners transitioned into the assignation with Angelo, but also onto a rooftop garden that had not been visible to participants from their earlier vantage point, but which, indeed, "backed" the poolside balcony.

Here, looking down on not only their earlier location, but also out at Lake Michigan, and at the forest of skyscrapers surrounding them, the participant was asked in the accompanying audio track to contemplate falling. What it means to fall, to have fallen. While participants entered the room as Marianna, they left as the fallen Angel(o). Back inside the hotel room, the participant found the door to the bedroom open, the bed ruffled and empty, the stray dress shoe that had been on the floor gone. As the participant stood in the doorway, looking at the scene of the crime,<sup>18</sup> a follow film began showing a morose Angelo getting up out of the bed, and getting dressed, flopping his flaccid penis into his boxer shorts and dress pants in full frontal nonchalance. The way out of the room was to follow him, on the phone screen.

Suit jacket thrown over his shoulder, in the same careless gesture he had used roaming the city streets when he tossed down his empty pizza box, Angelo took the service stairs, pausing to send a text message on his phone. The camera zoomed in to show the message, to the Provost: "Send me Claudio's head by 5:00." Angelo placed his phone on the step next to him as he tidied his shoe laces; when he picked it back up, the death card in the production, the ace of spades, lay on the ground beneath it. Claudio, too, had become detritus, a throwaway delivery mechanism for one of Angelo's carnal desires.

Participants followed Angelo onscreen into the elevator, to a floor that proved to give access to the parking garage, where a man in glasses and a fake moustache waited next to a sleek black sedan; an *a capella* cover of Radiohead's "Creep" constituted the audio accompaniment for the downward elevator ride. Extra diegetic for the follow film, the music shifted to Radiohead's version as diegetic music once the participant entered the waiting car. While Angelo and Isabella were clearly cast in the follow films, the identity of the men wearing dark glasses and fake moustaches

shifted. They looked similar, but were clearly not all the same man. Was one of them supposed to be the Provost? Escalus? Friar Peter? Fake moustaches and dark sunglasses hid all.

### Immediate Death, or a Difficult Marriage?

The mystery driver (Jose Nateras or Alex Tey) traveled a short distance, fiddling repeatedly with the radio dial, which reported story after story of political corruption and sex scandals, punctuated by the odd traffic report. Even here, *One Step at a Time Like This* curated the audio impeccably, as the voices one heard were recognizably those of local radio personalities. The driver stopped the car in the bowels of the city on Lower Wacker Drive after feigned consultation with someone via an earpiece.

"Put this on," the driver directed gruffly: one last blindfold. He rooted around noisily in the trunk, and then directed participants to hold out their hands, over their thighs. A warm, flesh and blood head was rested in the participant's lap. Then it was removed and, after much rustling of plastic, shoved unceremoniously beneath the participant's feet. Another short drive, and then, still blindfolded, the participant was escorted physically out of the car, shuffling forward under the guidance of a firm hand on each shoulder, into a small, wooden-walled container, of the kind used to move large pieces of furniture, where they were told to grope for a low, metal chair.

Once seated, a sardonic voice invited the participant to remove the blindfold. The walls of the container were emblazoned with character names from the play, skulls and crossbones. A milk crate sat between the participant and their fake moustache and dark-glasses-wearing interlocutor. One last card trick for the participant, recounting the play's final head tricks: the substitution of Ragozine's head for Claudio's, thereby saving his life, and the restoration of the proper head of the city, the Duke, to power.

"He sentences them to . . . did you choose immediate death, or a difficult marriage?" audience participants were asked after the final card trick. The four couples created at the end of *Measure for Measure* might well say, with Silvius, one of another four couples created at the end of *As You Like It*, that he will have Phoebe to wife, "Though to have her and death were both one thing" (*As You Like It* 5.4.17). As Emily Detmer-Goebel points out, the specific nature of the "difficult marriage" with which all of the men in *Measure for Measure* are left to grapple is to a woman whose chastity has been impugned, whether that be due to draconian laws (Juliet), political theater (Isabella and Marianna) or actual prostitution (Kate Keepdown). Detmer-Goebel wryly observes, "the play jokes about (if not celebrates) men being forced to marry their 'whores,' while at the same time, it questions which is worse, being executed for making the woman a whore or being forced to marry one" (Detmer-Goebel 2009, 126).

Left alone in the container to contemplate the choice between death or a difficult marriage that one had made, the participant in *Since I Suppose* listened to snippets of the final long scene of *Measure for Measure* from a Crosley turntable until ready to go through the doors, which had been analogized to the gates of the city, the entry way by which the participant would return to their "real" life. The doors opened on what proved to be a long-abandoned stage in the ground floor theater of the Fine Arts Building on Michigan Avenue, across from Grant Park. Random props lay scattered about, along with lighting rigs in varying stages of disrepair, the air heavy with the smell of drywall dust.

While *Measure for Measure* does not, explicitly, address fundamentalist religious objections to the theater itself in Shakespearean-era England, *Since I Suppose* did.<sup>19</sup> "There are those, you know," one of the men of the fake moustache observed laconically, "who think that even the theater is disgusting" and that it should be shut down, that its performances should cease. For the theater-going audience participants, this comment had the effect of looping them into the seaminess of the city, rhetorically implicating them in Angelo's furtive, illicit, hypocritical violations of the very laws he was meant to uphold. Guilty by association, audience participants became sullied by contact with the fake moustaches, the dirty bookstores, the unlocked hotel room doors, the tousled sheets, the decapitated heads.<sup>20</sup>

But the production was not over when the audience participant took the stage in the abandoned theater — the stage lights came harshly up, blinding them to all but their immediate surroundings on the stage. Slowly, the lighting shifted, to illuminate the upper balcony of the theater, facing the stage. The Duke, wearing an open robe and his fake moustache and dark glasses, sat facing Isabella, still in full nun habit, at a card table. As the participant watched, they silently played a game of strip poker, which Isabella lost. Blackout occurred when she had been forced to strip completely, wearing only her wimple and veil, looking out over the head of the participant onlooker on the stage with a detached, numb expression as she struggled to cover her exposed crotch and breasts. Only the Duke could play a winning hand with a dirty deck of cards designed for trickery.<sup>21</sup>

While the soundscape for the entire production had been expertly crafted by Julian Rickert, featuring Massive Attack prominently, the strip poker game was played in complete silence, the only sound the vicious, victorious slap of the cards onto the table as the Duke won yet another hand against Isabella. Following the blackout, the house lights came dimly up — the participant was alone in an empty theater. A flashlight appeared in the aisle; a security guard came to escort the participant out, skeptically reporting into their earpiece that this random person in the empty theater claimed they had been seeing a show, but that no one else was there.

"Did you leave anything behind?" the participant was asked at the theater's doors. In fact, participants had been instructed to leave all of their things in the black sedan, before entering the wooden-walled container. "Are these things yours?" the flashlight waved across the participant's things, in a small cardboard box.

Hours later, at home, I found a single playing card in my bag, the bag that I had left in the black sedan. A talisman, a reminder of the experience of *Since I Suppose*, along with the fake moustache and map to the Hotel Palomar that I had stuffed into my jacket pocket. The card tricks representing the head tricks, the masking of identity, the location of the bed trick: these were the things that *One Step at a Time Like This* singled out for physical souvenirs of their production, and of the play on which it was based.<sup>22</sup>

"Who are you?" the flashlight-wielding theater guard demanded, when she appeared in the aisle. Unaccountably, the first time I was asked this question, I faltered: "The Duke, maybe? I don't know." Participants were instructed to enter the theater doors as if making a return to their city. What kind of return, they were asked to consider: Triumphant? Defeated? Filled with trepidation? If we walked onto the stage as the Duke, returning to Vienna, that identity was immediately taken from us. There was the Duke, in the balcony, playing strip poker with Isabella. And who is she, at the end of *Measure for Measure*? A nun? A novitiate of the Order of Saint Clare? The fiancée of the Duke? Who is Angelo? The Duke's trusted substitute? A common criminal? Marianna's husband?

"Who are you?" In the end, that basic question was the one with which participants in *Since I Suppose* were left to grapple.

## Notes

1. Brian Gibbons acknowledges the Italianate nature of many of the character names in *Measure for Measure*, but simply observes that the location of Vienna "was presumably added by the scribe Ralph Crane" without questioning Vienna as the setting (*Measure for Measure* 2006, 87). John Jowett notes that

none of the play's recognized sources or analogues is set in Vienna, and Shakespeare elsewhere shows virtually no interest in either Vienna or Austria. Moreover, in contradiction of the linguistically Germanic setting, the personal names in *Measure* are consistently Italian. Some of the analogues refer to the Duke of Ferrara . . . There are reasons to suppose that Shakespeare set the play in Italian Ferrara, and that Middleton altered the setting specifically in order to establish the Thirty Years War as a backdrop." (2007, 1544)

2. *Since I Suppose* was performed in Chicago, Illinois from August 28 until September 21, 2014, and in the Melbourne Festival in Australia from October 15 to 26, 2014.
3. Great thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Borrowers and Lenders*, whose comments and suggestions helped to give this piece its final shape, and to Frank Ballantine for an early, thorough, and thoughtful critique.
4. The company does not capitalize its name, presenting itself as "one step at a time like this." The name is capitalized in this essay for ease of reading.
5. See Josephine Machon's masterful comparative chart outlining the differences between traditional theater and immersive theater in *Immersive Theatres* (2013, 54-55).
6. Keren Zaiontz notes the way in which these masks "not only rendered me and all other spectators alike, but it created a protective bubble (a fourth wall) between spectators and the theatrical world even as they inhabited it" (2014, 413).
7. The invitation video is still viewable via YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7HrBGyAaCk&feature=youtu.be&utm\\_source=mail2&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=M1415SIN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7HrBGyAaCk&feature=youtu.be&utm_source=mail2&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=M1415SIN)
8. Josephine Machon notes that such technologies constitute one of the tools of the immersive theater trade (2013, 283 n. 11). Punchdrunk's immersive production *Faust* (2006) similarly "operated on a series of choreographed sequences or timed 'loops,' running in parallel across the space and coordinated by audio or music cues" (Eglinton 2010, 50-51).
9. The trailer for *Since I Suppose* features examples both of the kinds of images audience participants experience in a follow film and footage of audience participants engaged in viewing/following them. See: <https://youtu.be/TzT2T8Ta8LA>. One Step at a Time Like This employed the follow film strategy in their own earlier work, *En Route*, also presented in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's World's Stage Series. The strategy also recalls Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice (Cast Study B)* as described by Josephine Machon (2013, 2).
10. I participated in *Since I Suppose* twice; while I made alternate choices in every other instance when presented with an option each time that I experienced the performance, I agreed to be blindfolded both times. Writing of Punchdrunk, Josephine Machon notes the radical lack of reiterability in immersive theater experiences: "as much as the 'form' of the event is repeated within the duration of any given performance night and across the performance run, the nature of each moment of this performance for each individual audience member is different and diverse and would be unrepeatable were they to attend every performance across the entirety of said run" (2013, 31). Keren Zaiontz builds upon Jen Harvie's critique of the "prosumer" to interrogate the extent to which such performance experiences are truly unique. The prosumer

model posits an audience that arrives "with the expectation that they will be put to work in the artistic production (even if it is just as a crowd)" (2014, 411). The work that the audience does

whether it is promenading through a neighborhood or purpose-built site or encountering scenes and talking to performers[,] is an expression of predetermined choices that spectators set into motion through their real-time interactions. While these choices might yield diverse experiences among audiences, they do not significantly expand the repertoire of what a production can do because the choices (and subsequent responses) are oriented around how best to consume the production. (Zaiontz 411)

While it is true that the choices of audience participants in *Since I Suppose* are circumscribed, to some extent, by the performance environment and the parameters established for the experience, within those confines audience members can have radically different experiences of and responses to even the same set of choices, given the unique alchemy of their own backgrounds, knowledge, and perceptions.

11. The only cast members who were firmly attached to specific roles were Julian Richert (Angelo) and Clair Korobacz (Isabella). The cardsharps were played by Julian Hester, Alex Knapp, and Paul Fagen. The casting functioned in conjunction with the nature of the show, since the start times, staggered by 30 minutes, meant that multiple audience participants were seeing different portions of the piece at the same time, though no audience members ever overlapped. If a particular audience member lingered too long in one part of the experience, the watching staff would intervene to move them along, as needed. Just as the Duke watches over his citizens unseen in *Measure*, the producers of *Since I Suppose* contrived to keep eyes on audience participants, although the means by which they monitored events was never apparent to the audience participants. Moreover, just as the Duke in *Measure* is a metatheatrical figure, donning disguises and playing roles, the Duke in *Since I Suppose* was also a metatheatrical figure played — depending on how one perceived the cardsharps vis-à-vis the cast of *Measure* — by multiple different people. Even more than the Duke in *Measure*, the shadowy, fake moustached figure of *Since I Suppose* existed "under erasure. He seems simply an effect of theatricality, constituting himself solely through performance" (McCandless 1997, 82).
12. All references to *Measure for Measure* are to the updated Cambridge edition edited by Brian Gibbons (Shakespeare 2006).
13. I can aver that this exchange is scripted, having been addressed with the same lines each time I experienced the piece.



14. Josephine Machon's observations about immersive theater experiences are apt with respect to this vignette in *Since I Suppose*. She writes: "such performances can offer lawbreaking conditions to roam free, take risks, be adventurous. They are specifically designed to immerse the individual in the unusual, the out-of-the-ordinary, to allow her or him, in many ways, to become the event" (2013, 28). Jennifer Flaherty's description of the oscillation between immersion and interaction in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* is applicable to *Since I Suppose* as well: "Audience members can literally interact with the environment and the actors, sometimes subtly changing the performance itself through their reactions. But the audience members are also voyeurs on their own personal journeys, as opposed to characters who perform their journeys for audiences" (Flaherty 2014, 145).
15. *Since I Suppose* rendered viscerally literal the observation that David McCandless makes about the odd disconnect between the Duke of *Measure*'s friar disguise, and his status as the orchestrator of a series of illicit sexual situations: "The Duke's neutered persona sanctions a series of covert intimate meetings with young women and a potentially titillating management of their sexual lives" (1997, 85). In *Since I Suppose*, the Duke bought the audience participants a shot in a seedy bar, provocatively fed them a lollipop, sent them on an errand to a dirty bookstore, and then directed them to a hotel assignation with a man waiting for sex.
16. Raymond B. Waddington asserts that "on stage, however conscious or unconscious the complicity, the bed trick works to exalt its operator's authority and control while conversely denigrating the victim. Male bed tricks put down women" (1996, 122). Who is the operator of the bed trick in *Measure for Measure*? The Duke proposes it, Isabella talks Marianna into it — offstage — and Marianna is left to execute it, consummating her marriage to the man who jilted her, knowing that he thinks that she is someone else while she is having sex with him. It is horrifying for all concerned, except, perhaps, the Duke, who gets to punish Angelo publicly and propose to Isabella as a result of it.
17. Michael Bristol notes that in discussion with students about this scene, one articulated candidly and movingly the problem with the bed trick: "I want to be loved for who I really am — or not at all," she said. As Bristol goes on to explain, "getting away with it was hardly the problem. The bed-trick was about a deeper question of self-acknowledgement and self-respect. . . To be rejected by someone you love would be bad, but faking your way through a sexual encounter to attain a token of that love would be a whole lot worse" (2012, 25).
18. Angelo's crime, but also the audience participant's, since, as Marliiss Desens notes, implicitly, having sex with a person when you know that they believe you to be a different person voids the consensual nature of the sex act, rendering it a rape (1994, 153 n. 21).

19. As Brian Gibbons notes, "moves were intermittently made throughout the period to suppress plays, arrest actors and playwrights, and close theatres. The city authorities associated theatres with public disorder; the court was suspicious of plays for their potential for political comment" ("Introduction" 2006, 5-6). In her foundational exploration of the tension between the bounds of the city and the liberties, law and license, Leah Marcus observes that "there were contemporaries who would have agreed with Angelo that death was not an excessive penalty for fornication, but they were the same zealots who were most vehement against the theater" (Marcus 1988, 181).

20. As Gareth White observes:

where classical aesthetics will privilege the beautiful or the sublime, progressive and participatory aesthetics (both styles and theories) are as interested in other pleasures and other effects: the uncanny, the unexpected and the transgressive, perhaps. Most importantly, they include the potential for political and ethical values and outcomes to form part of the definition of aesthetics and the work of art. (2013, 14)

*Since I Suppose* offered the unexpected and the transgressive in an exploration of gender politics and political ethics that was never heavy-handed.

21. Almost two decades ago, David McCandless could observe that "recent productions [of *Measure for Measure*] have . . . boldly engaged the play's erotic, sadomasochistic dynamics" (McCandless 1997, 182 n. 4); in an update to Gibbons's introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare series edition of the play, Angela Stock notes that most recent productions go for technologically-enhanced, grotesque, and graphic depictions of sex and criminal conduct (2006, 78-83), a trend that has continued, as evinced by productions such as Robert Falls's 2013 *Measure* for the Goodman Theatre in Chicago (Bourus 2013).

22. I have spent a year thinking and writing about *Since I Suppose*. As Keren Zaiontz notes, "works that challenge spectators to perform do not often grant this kind of reflection *during* performance, since the act of consuming yourself as theatre demands complete and continuous management of your own body within the theatrical space. You have to wait until you get off the ride to make sense of the experience" (2014, 406-407).

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