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OFF DUTY TRAVEL

The Most Seductive Theater Scene in New York Right Now, a Visitor's Guide

Immersive theater productions—where you might be part of the show—are popping up all over New York City. The best ones take place in the oddest spaces, from an abandoned hospital to an old graveyard



IMMERSION DIVERSION An actor at 'Then She Fell,' a sprawling theatrical piece inspired by 'Alice in Wonderland.' PHOTO: DARIAL SNEED

By *Tony Perrottet*

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SURE YOU'VE GOT the right address?" the cabdriver asked dubiously as we pulled up to a gloomy building on a back street in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood. I shared his skepticism. It was indeed my destination—Kingsland Ward at St. John, a century-old hospital—but it looked entirely abandoned. When the unmarked door creaked open, however, a woman dressed as a nurse checked my name off her list and ushered me inside. For the next two hours, 14 fellow "inmates" and I were led through 22 decorated rooms, the sprawling stage of "Then She Fell," a dreamlike theatrical piece inspired by "Alice in Wonderland." We jumped between seats at a Mad Hatter's tea party and watched acrobatic couples climb the walls together. At one point, I lay on a cot alongside the White Queen as she told me a bedtime story, while I tried

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Call it the “Sleep No More” effect. Since 2011, when the creative reworking of “Macbeth” opened in the McKittrick Hotel in Chelsea to huge acclaim and financial success, New York has thrown itself into immersive theater with gusto. The city now offers an ever-changing roster of live events that abandon traditional theater settings and grab audiences by engaging all the senses. Some ladle out gourmet food or craft cocktails, others waft fragrances or host interactive magic shows or poetry readings. All cater to an untraditional desire to become part of the action.

“Audiences today would rather have their own experience than sit and watch one passively from a seat,” said Arthur Karpati, a producer of “Sleep No More.”

These site-specific events offer travelers a bonus benefit—an opportunity to visit restricted or forgotten corners of New York, from Gilded Age mansions to historic graveyards or (as with “Then She Fell”) ghostly hospital wards that leave cabdrivers concerned for your safety. I’ve lived in Manhattan for over 20 years, but I recently decided to see what other secret portals the latest immersive shows might open. I would have to be discerning: The bewildering variety of options ranges from the genuinely moving to the comic and downright hokey. “Whenever I hear the word ‘immersive,’ I roll my eyes,” said DeeDee Luxe, an actress and producer at Manhattan venues including the McKittrick Hotel. People bandy the buzzword about so freely in the theater world now, she said, that it risks losing its meaning.

Some venues are hidden in plain sight. One night, to experience the less-than-reverent “Drunk Shakespeare,” I climbed an anonymous stairwell in Times Square and stumbled into a large room furnished like an antique library, save for the bar set up in a corner. Each performance features a different play. The night I was there both the audience and the performers imbibed liberally, an actress knocking back shots while channeling Lady Macbeth and presenting a hilarious, fractured and—by the end of the night—slurred slice of “the Scottish play.”



‘Carmen: To Havana and Back,’ performed in a basement bar. PHOTO: ADRIAN BUCKMASTER

A few nights later, I was transported to 1950s Cuba, reimagined at the Public Hotel on the Lower East Side for the musical drama “Carmen: To Havana and Back.” The hotel’s very new basement had been converted into the Tropicana nightclub, where I ended up



Often, the experience relied on its New York location. Last fall, I ventured to Brooklyn's 478-acre Green-Wood Cemetery for "Nightfall," an annual event. It was uniquely spooky to wander the candlelit grounds after dark, slipping at will between the tombstones to encounter circus acts, storytellers and even a classical concert in the catacombs.



'Nightfall,' at Green-Wood Cemetery. PHOTO: MAIKE SCHULZ

Other immersive experiences distinguish themselves with a decidedly high-tech edge. At the hands-on museum **Spyscape**, in Times Square, for example, visitors can dodge green lasers "Mission: Impossible"-style, break spy codes and practice their lying skills. Clearly, technology is the way of things to come. Recent advances in VR (Virtual Reality), AR (Augmented Reality) and AI (Artificial Intelligence) offer new possibilities in immersive theater. To get a sense of it, I hopped a ferry at Battery Park one crystalline morning to visit the Future of StoryTelling Summit (FoST), an annual, experimental-theater festival that incorporates the latest gadgetry into its performances, many happening simultaneously. It was held at a New York attraction I'd never heard of, the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Gardens in Staten Island, a complex that began life as a 19th-century home for retired sailors and is now run by the National Park Service. As I wandered through it, I stopped to take a VR tour of an Amazon tributary, then later, exploring the site's gardens, I found myself sipping a cocktail with an actress in Edwardian dress who was channeling Mrs. Dalloway, the heroine of the eponymous Virginia Woolf novel.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Which immersive entertainment experience has been your favorite? Why? Join the conversation below.

The most memorable moments blended the traditional and futuristic. I wandered into a tent for "Annabelle," a multidimensional exhibit inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's last poem about a doomed young woman, to find a mysterious, elfin grotto of babbling fountains, ancient herbs and

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melodies wafting around me; I then put on a headset to meet an avatar for a virtual tarot reading. “Nothing will ever replace live theater,” Ms. Scott said later, when she had stepped out of character. “But technology is providing the tools to go further into the intimate experience.”

Charles Melcher, FoST’s director, sums up the appeal of immersive theater another way: “To explore beautiful sets and see stories unfold and choose how to navigate them—it brings all your senses alive. And that doesn’t get old.”

Waaaaay Off Broadway / A guide to interactive theater New York City

As with all experimental theater in the sky-high-rent city, the immersive world changes rapidly. A good place to start is the website devoted to the form, **No Proscenium** (*noproscenium.com*), or to simply check the latest on the **McKittrick** website (*mckittrickhotel.com*). As well as the famous “Sleep No More” (which is now as much of a “must-see” for travelers to New York as the Statue of Liberty), the multi-level venue offers **Speakeasy Magick**, a night of close encounters with the city’s top illusionists, **The Bartschland Follies**, a raucous Weimar-style cabaret hosted by downtown diva Susanne Bartsch, and a roster of one-off immersive parties, including an upcoming three-night Halloween event on a Hitchcock theme. Even the outdoor rooftop restaurant, Gallow Green, is often prowled by actors posing as hotel “residents.”

Then She Fell, a cocktail-fueled take on the “Alice in Wonderland” theme by Third Rail Projects, is running in its eerie Williamsburg location until the end of the year (*thenshefell.com*, from \$125). A raunchier retelling of the Lewis Carroll classic, also in Brooklyn, is “**Queen of Hearts**” by the dance troupe Company XIV, which has converted its Bushwick space into the Palace of Versailles for a night of “baroque burlesque” (*companyxiv.com*; from \$115, until Nov 2). Back across the East River in Midtown Manhattan, the long-running **Drunk Shakespeare** has become popular enough to offer half-price Groupon deals (*drunkshakespeare.com*, \$55), while in the heart of the Theater District, a ticket to **Imbible** includes three craft cocktails (*imbible.nyc*, \$85). For a taste of 1950s Cuba on the Lower East Side, **Carmen: To Havana and Back**, a reworking of the classic Bizet opera into a salsa extravaganza, has been extended until Thanksgiving (*varietylifeproductions.com*, \$69).

One of the pleasures of many immersive shows is the opportunity to explore lesser-known New York attractions. In late October, Brooklyn’s Victorian-era Green-Wood Cemetery will be taken over for a two-day adult event **Nightfall** (*green-wood.com*), while classical concerts will be held over the next few weeks inside the acoustics-friendly catacombs with the Angel’s Share Series (*deathofclassical.com*). The curiosity-loving group **Atlas Obscura** organizes pop-up immersive gatherings in unusual locales, including last year, a Poe-themed party involving actors, readings and burlesque in a private penthouse and a theatrical ‘garden party’ in Hudson River mansion (*atlasobscura.com/events*). **The Poetry Brothel** offers louche interactive literary parties in sneakeasy settings such as the Back Room on the Lower East Side.



Menagerie d'Arte of the Dalia Carella Dance Collective (daliacarella.com/menagerie-darte) and **Speakeasy Dollhouse** (speakeasydollhouse.com), whose shows have recently involved such historical New York celebrities such as Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., and Harry Houdini, and the upcoming **Illuminati Ball**, a pricey immersive masquerade (*from \$250, theilluminatiball.com*). For a taste of immersive theater in the digital age, the **Future of StoryTelling** (futureofstorytelling.org) has held pop-ups and an annual summit, which has included speakers such as Al Gore and Margaret Atwood (although it is on hiatus in 2019, it will return in the fall of 2020.) One high-tech piece that trialed there last year involving an Edgar Allan Poe theme has evolved into **The Raven**, which will premiere October 10 as part of the New York Film Festival. Audience members will don Bose glasses to experience the latest advances in AR and AI, all while exploring the four-story Gilded Age townhouse of the American Irish Historical Society on Fifth Avenue. "Imagine 'Sleep No More' where the masks talk to you," says creator Ava Lee Scott. "That's our show." (\$85, theraven.show).

Corrections & Amplifications

Spyscape is a hands-on museum in New York's Times Square. An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to the museum as Skyscape. (September 18, 2019)

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