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Interview with Andrew Schneider New York Express (1).

Performance and Experience: YOUARENOWHERE by Andrew Schneider

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Interview with Andrew Schneider

New York Express (1).

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Emeline Jouve

[Figure 1]



Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*
Maria Baranova

The Context: *YOUARENOWHERE*, PS 122 and New York Express

- 1 In November 2015, Andrew Schneider presented his show *YOUARENOWHERE* at Théâtre Garonne during the New Express Festival. The show was commissioned by Mass Live Arts and Performance Space 122, a partner of Théâtre Garonne which organized the second New York Express in collaboration with that major non-profit organization supporting contemporary performance art.¹ One of PS 122's missions is to promote American innovative artists outside the borders of the United-States. PS 122 Global set a European tour called "New York Express" and in 2015, Annie Dorsen's *Yesterday Tomorrow*, Fraye Driscoll's *Thank You For Coming: Attendance* and Andrew Schneider's *YOUARENOWHERE* were performed in four venues in France.
- 2 *YOUARENOWHERE* is a meditation on time, space and the meaning of existence. Although technology is a central ingredient of the performance, it never steals the show but rather magnifies the very performance of the artist(s). OBIE award-winning creator and performer Andrew Schneider created the show with Alessandra Calabi, Peter Musante, Christine Shallenberg, Karl Franklin Allen, Bobby McElver and Daniel Jackson.

The Web: Online Information on Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, PS 122 and New York Express at Théâtre Garonne

- 3 Official biography of Andrew Schneider: <http://andrewjs.com/bio/>
- 4 Excerpt from *YOUARENOWHERE*: <http://andrewjs.com/work/youarenowhere/>
- 5 Website PS122²: <http://www.ps122.org/global/>

[Figure 2]



Logo PS 122

PS 122

- 6 Website New York Express 2015-2016 at Théâtre Garonne: <http://www.theatregaronne.com/evenements/2015-2016/new-york-express>

[Figure 3]

théâtre/garonne
scène européenne

Théâtre Garonne
Théâtre Garonne

The Interview: Meet Andrew Schneider³

Emeline Jouve : I'd like to start with a very challenging existential question : "Andrew Schneider, who are you ?"

Andrew Schneider : Haha, who am I ? I guess I am an artist who concerns himself with performance. But I would not call myself a performance artist. I think that is a much different thing. Sometimes people call me a performance artist but I think that comes from a visual field and not from a performance field. My undergraduate studies were in musical theater, so singing and dancing. Then, I realized that I loved performing but I did not think that the shows I was performing in were telling the story that I wanted to tell. So I went back to graduate school. At that time, I was also very concerned with technology like cellphones and texting and Facebook and how that was making us worse communicators. I thought that we were talking more but we were communicating worse. I was very concerned with that. I didn't like technology, I thought it was making us worse communicators.

EJ : Labels to define artists are interesting... You would not call yourself a "performance artist" but you are often introduced as a "digital performance artist"...

Andrew Schneider : It is very easy to talk about art, performance and technology in little neat categories but it doesn't help me to think about those things in categories at all. It is detrimental to me to think about myself as a choreographer or a performance artist. I have the need to express these things and I know that the medium of being in a theater and having that contract with an audience where you come in as an audience member and you have a ticket and you hand this ticket to someone and you sit in a seat and your attention is focused on a particular place through time. I think of it as I am concerned with bodies and space over a period of time. So there is always a beginning, middle and end. I am not interested in making an installation really. I just want to share an experience with people. But yes, I have written descriptions of myself that say I am a digital performance artist because it is easier to tell someone that than to have this conversation.

EJ : Would you say that using the label "digital performance artist" is a marketing strategy ?

Andrew Schneider : Yes ! If you want to get people to see a show, you got to say that there is a lot of technology and we are using crazy interactive technology and the lights are crazy. But that is how I tried to get people to see it because it is much easier than to say "well, you will come to theater and you will have an experience". Even with this show, *YOUARENOWHERE*, I tried to describe what this show is and what it does, but it is almost impossible.

EJ : You said you started studying technology because you were dubious about our use of technological tools to communicate. Could you come back to your approach to technology in art ?

Andrew Schneider : I have come to a point where I don't think it is valuable to talk about technology as a category. People love talking about performance and technology. Theater is just twenty years behind in all other art forms. We love to talk about technology performance as a thing, but I don't think it is a thing. We have these tools that we can use, so let's use them in ways to tell stories that we haven't seen told yet. So right after Grad School, I went to work with the Wooster Group, which is an experimental theater company in NYC. I worked with them as their video person for

seven years. And very slowly during that time, I was building my own work. I was eventually able to build this show during my time off from touring with them.

EJ : By "this show", you mean YOUARENOWHERE ?

Andrew Schneider : Yes, this one. I started maybe three years ago, in my apartment, just programming on my laptop there. Then for maybe six weeks, right before the show premiered in January 2015 we had a proper studio space. Myself, Peter [Musante] and Alessandra [Calibi] sort of built the show from the writing that I had done and the program that I had done. I always knew what the content of the show was going to be about but I didn't know what the content was exactly. I knew that this thing was going to happen and we will have to deal with it. That was the only challenge I set for myself : two things are happening at the same time, how do we resolve that ? And that has been a common theme in a lot of my work. I really like placing two desperate things next to each other and seeing how they inform each other and make a third thing. So even in the writing of the second half, I really try to do that with these true statements about myself that don't follow one to the next but hopefully by putting these desperate sentences next to each other a third thing emerges.

EJ : When you talk about YOUARENOWHERE, you refer to it as if it was your first show but you created other pieces like WOW+FUTURE in 2010 at the Chocolate Factory ?

Andrew Schneider : Sure but I consider YOUARENOWHERE my first because I did have a full length show at the Chocolate factory in 2010 in New York City but it was a lot different. It started as an experiment and it just happened to end up as a full length show that you could buy ticket for and come to see. One of the other shows that I have made just happened once, during one night. Well actually two of them only happened once ever and they will probably never happen again. Partly because no one was funding me to make any work so it was just me in spaces that have been granted to me. I had some space grants that I was able to get just to make the work but no one was paying me to make anything so I wasn't able to pay anyone else to help me make anything. This is the first time that PS122 commissioned the show and now, through the presenter network in France, we have the ability to actually bring the show financially.

EJ : As an artist, you said you were interested in "sharing an experience with people" : could you come back on that ?

Andrew Schneider : Yes, I just want to share an experience with people. I have an online project called *Acting Strangers*. I just act an intense scene with a total stranger ; we never talk, we don't talk before, we don't talk after. That to me is to say I am doing the same thing that I am trying to do with YOUARENOWHERE which is having an experience with a person. It is a terribly inefficient way of doing it but I find that it is the way I love doing it.

EJ : Inefficient way of doing it ? Why is it inefficient ?

Andrew Schneider : As a human being trying to connect with other people maybe it is not the most efficient way. There is a moment during YOUARENOWHERE when I just whisper to someone's ear and it is just for them. Or the end of the show when that thing happens and people have a reaction, I sometimes feel like I have had to build forty five minutes or fifty minutes of this craziness in order to have that reaction at the end. I can't just show that. I have to build this whole show to break it and just leave you with questions. If I was better at writing a novel or painting a painting to make people feel

things, I think I would do that. If I could be good at playing a musical instrument, I would love to do that. I made a thing and I want you to feel a reaction to it. I am not good at narrative. I am not good at writing a story about a person that you can be emotionally invested in and follow their journey. I am just not very good at that. So I have tried to concern myself with curating emotion without narrative and I think that is what music does very well. You can listen to a piece of music and be emotionally moved. That is the same as what I am trying to do with *YOUARENOWHERE*. It happens to be a performance but I am not really telling a story. The story is taking place in the theater in front of you but I don't know if anyone could really describe the journey of this person in a way that most traditional theater is structured, where you are presented with some characters and they have a problem and they overcome that problem and then they are different than they were before. In *YOUARENOWHERE*, there are always problems and my hope is that the audience thinks differently about themselves when they leave the theater. Not because they follow the journey of a person but because they follow the journey of themselves watching this thing.

EJ : ... the spectators also follow your own personal journey...

Andrew Schneider : Yes ... (laugh). *YOUARENOWHERE* is just sort of this higher version of who I actually am. This is completely autobiographical.

EJ : How did you end up writing an autobiographical show ?

Andrew Schneider : Basically I have always wanted to make a show that ends by being two shows. That was sort of what happened when two shows collide or two parallel universes collide. I don't want to spoil the show but basically *YOUARENOWHERE* is made up of two parts. I wrote the second half of the show in upstate New York as a writing exercise. There is a book called *Autoportrait* by Edouard Levé, who is a French photographer. An old producer of mine happened to suggest me to read this book. I read it and it inspired the second half of the show. There is no paragraph, it is a hundred pages long, it is just true statements about himself. But the grammar, the way he constructs the sentences and the way he puts them next to each other is very well done. You end up getting a portrait of a man just through these very mundane sentences about a person. I thought it was very moving so I set myself to the task of writing true statements about myself and the second half of the show comes from that.

EJ : In *YOUARENOWHERE* you dance, you sing, you act, you play with technology, etc. So would you define your show as "intermedial" ?

Andrew Schneider : Yes I would. I don't know how to explain that. I take the things around me that I have seen in my life and I just try to use them. I just happen to be interested in a lot of things. The technology of this show is just very precise. Someone wrote an article about it and said that I was inventing new things. I am not ! I am using things that are already existing just in new ways, or maybe not new ways but actually just in ways that allow me to do stuff. The only reason I am using the lights I am using is because they allow me to switch everything to black instantly or make very very precise changes. That is what the show needs. I really like playing with the concept of time in this show and I wouldn't be able to do that unless I had the video and the very precise lighting and the sounds because hopefully it ends up not to be a design but to be an experience that you are having. That is what I am trying to do. The only way I could do that is with these technologies that sometimes aren't used in a theater. The whole show started with me in my apartment building my own lights because I couldn't buy

the lights. But I knew I needed to have the time to program them so precisely that it would become something more than just a lighting design.

EJ : Light, sound, text seem to come together... from intermediality to transmediality...

Andrew Schneider : Yes ! When everything happens in simultaneity, everything becomes the same thing. For me the text is the same as the light, is the same as the sound, is the same as the video. Sometimes, I think that we need something else here, so I try a lighting shift, I try a sound shift or I try a video shift. And sometimes, it is just a combination of all these things. So I treat them all the same in the room. There are all just a mean to an end for the experience.

EJ : Touring a show is always a challenge since audiences react differently depending on the country, the venue... "Off-Off-Broadway" spectators generally respond differently from French spectators who are usually less outgoing, more shy, I would say... Yet, yesterday's show at Garonne in Toulouse proved me wrong as you got immediate reactions from the audience. People laughed straight away which surprised me.

Andrew Schneider : It has been consistent here in Toulouse and not so much in other places like in Strasbourg or Douai and not in NYC. This has been the best reaction that we have had for this show which is interesting to me. I am always worried about the subtitles because they go so fast and I don't speak any French so I don't know. I know that much of the show relies on bad grammar, on word play and I think a lot of those subtle jokes can get lost in translation. When I look at the people, half of them are reading and half of them are just looking at me. It has been like that everywhere we have gone that is not an English-speaking country. Here for some reasons, they just react instantly. I also think we have been making very subtle changes to the show and how the beginning sections of the show draws an audience in or pushes them away. I think we found a good spot now because very early on, the audience realizes that they don't know what is going on but they also realize I don't know what is going on. Then it suddenly becomes okay : no one knows what is happening ! I'm here, I'm going to talk to you guys and we will see what happens. I think that becomes okay somehow. But there is definitely something about Toulouse that has been different from any other places we have been and I don't know what that is about.

EJ : You worked with the Wooster Group, which is huge ; then you created YOUARENOWHERE sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, right ?

Andrew Schneider : Yes, this show was partly founded from the NEA...

Emeline Jouve : And that is quite something ! You were awarded an Obie Award in May 2015. So you have made a name for yourself nationally and internationally, it seems. People in France had heard about your work and the show was quickly sold out. How does that feel ?

Andrew Schneider : That is funny because in the US nobody knows who I am and it is very hard to get people, especially the national presenters. It is great we have been able to tour in France so much but in the USA, the national presenters don't know who I am. The word of mouth has been a great part of the show. We tried to get the press, the *New York Times*, but they mostly write about the people that they know and no one knew who I was. It was very hard to get people to see the show but when people do see the show, they tell their friends and then it is sold out consistently which it's great ! It is funny but I guess it makes sense that it was sort of like a hit in NYC and then we get to do this touring also because we have PS122 as an organization behind us.

I also sometimes feel that half of the reason we are touring and people know who I am is because of the photograph of Maria Baranova. She has never seen the show. I didn't know her. She came five minutes before we did a run through. I just said that there is a lot of blackouts. If the lights go out, just stay where you are because we are going to run around. And the images she got for the show are just the best pictures I have ever seen. I think the imagery of the show is also what has been promoting forward not just the content but how it looks. It has been very fun I have to say getting to France and seeing the picture of the show on billboards. My mother was always asking questions like what are you doing in theater. She didn't but you know. And now I feel like I am doing this ! See, there is advertisement, it is real, it is a real thing. People are coming to see it, it is sold out ! (*laugh*).

But to come back to your question, it doesn't feel so special from the inside. It feels like we put a bunch of equipment in the suitcase and try to get around. Those twelve years in NYC were all about driving things around in suitcases and I feel the same way here. It is just on a bigger scale, which is nice. I mean it doesn't feel like exactly the same but it feels a bit the same.

EJ : YOUARENOWHERE made a great impression and critics and spectators are now waiting for your next show. The pressure must be huge !

Andrew Schneider : The next show is going to be terrible (*laugh*). The next show is all about perception, light and space and it will probably be very slow. The first half might not even have people in it and just have lights and colors. I am really interested in James Turrell and Robert Owen who were light and space artists from the 60s and 70s in Southern California, just visual artists. What they do is that they use light and colors to alter your perception and I think perception is the closest thing we have to have in experience. They talk about perceiving your own experience, perceiving a perception, perceiving yourself see. Because I can't write stories that have catharsis, I am interested in providing experiences where you can have an emotion reaction without to follow a story. I feel I am doing the same thing for the next show as it is going to be very slow, maybe people will get bored. I really hope they won't but we will see.

EJ : Wait and see then ! Andrew Schneider, thanks a lot !

NOTES

1. Additional support from the Jerome Foundation; an award from the National Endowment for the Arts – Art Works; and made possible in part by New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature. Developed through a development residency by Mass Live Arts, an AIRspace residency at Abrons Arts Center, and a space residency at The Bushwick Starr.
2. For more information about PS122 and their *PS122 Global* program: Margaux Szuter, “Interview with Vallejo Gantner and Jess Edkins, New York Scene: Inside *Performance Space 122*”, *Miranda* [Online], 12 | 2016. URL : <http://miranda.revues.org/8338>
3. The oral interview was transcribed by Margaux Szuter.

The interview was edited and parts of the exchanges were cut off in order not to spoil the show, *YOUARENOWHERE*. The written interview thus focuses on Andrew Schneider's approach to theatre and creative process.

ABSTRACTS

Interview with Andrew Schneider who presented his show *YOUARENOWHERE* at Théâtre Garonne (Toulouse) for the New York Express festival in partnership with PS122. The interview was conducted on November, 28th, 2015 in Toulouse, France.

Entretien avec Andrew Schneider à l'occasion de la présentation de *YOUARENOWHERE* au Théâtre Garonne (Toulouse) pour le festival New Express en partenariat avec PS 122. Entretien réalisé le 28 novembre 2015 à Toulouse, France.

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Mots-clés: art numérique, autoportrait, théâtre américain, intermédialité, performance, PS122
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