

# TEXAS LENS: AUDIENCE AS PLAYER

You arrive at Texas State University's Performing Arts Center in San Marcos and find the front doors to the lobby locked. Signs direct you to the side of the building instead, where you receive a ticket with a clue that will lead you to an assigned, isolated station inside, away from anyone you arrived with. With your fellow players you move through the raw, utilitarian backstage guts of the Patti Strickel Harrison Theatre into a fluorescent-lit hallway normally seen only by crew and performers. You insert and play an audio cassette in a tape recorder, and through the noise and hiss of the tape, a voice welcomes you and gives detailed instructions: "Take out your phone. Make sure the ringer is turned on and the volume is up. Save my number and text me so I know you're here. You'll need your camera and flashlight. When everyone is ready, press the green button on the wall." Someone behind you presses the button, and the large bay door groans as it rises up. The game begins.



Audience members find their assigned seats after entering the open bay door as performers flank the set at the beginning of *The Tower Is Us (A Prisoner's Cinema)*. Photo by Swng Productions.

What if a dance piece could be "played" like a video game? How would the audience feel if they had to literally "crack the code" of dance gestures in order to "win" and complete the performance? How can we, as performance makers, give audiences more agency in a production—what if, in fact, it were entirely dependent on their participation? How would this transform the performance experience for all involved? These are just a few of the questions my collaborators in the interdisciplinary dance group ARCOS and I were excited by as we developed *The Tower Is Us (A Prisoner's Cinema)*, a hypnagogic transmedia performance combining video game and live dance-theater to decode an urgent message in an unspoken language.

Considering the roles of audience and performer has roots in my multidisciplinary upbringing, where singing, dancing, and acting were as common at the dinner table as they were on stage, instilling in me an inclusive, fluid sense of where, how, and for whom performance could take place. Learning from and creating with my co-director Curtis Uhlemann fortified that curiosity into an obsession with subverting, disrupting, or abandoning altogether the conventions and expectations of performance. This began in earnest in 2011, when we formed ARCOS and was propelled further when interdisciplinary artist Eliot Gray Fisher joined our creative team as a co-director. We have since pursued our mission to "experiment rigorously to discover adventurous new forms of contemporary performance" by continually reimagining the roles of creator, performer, and audience.

Fueled by our desire to reach viewers in ways that resonate with our daily lives, we often invite audiences to interact with our performances using familiar consumer devices: in one work,

a single audience member manipulates a sensor to conduct the dancer's movement, and in another, virtual and in-person audience members post comments on a live video stream to control the camera's perspective. Our transmedia performance *Domain* (domain. arcsodance.com) took place over four months in online chapters, an interactive installation, and multiple performances across six cities in five states, culminating in an evening-length presentation at *Engagement: Symposium of Philosophy and Dance* at Texas State University. Organizers of the interdisciplinary event championed our increasingly interactive approach to performance, and, along with support from an Artistic Innovations grant from Mid-America Arts Alliance, we returned to the university to dive in even deeper with *The Tower Is Us*.

We cast a wide net in our research for this new piece, uncovering new sources of inspiration in indie video games like Campo Santo's *Firewatch* and Cardboard Computer's *Kentucky Route Zero*, which swept us up in their sophisticated narratives that unfold like novels. Most compelling were their unconventional incentives that complicating a dominant impulse in video games, to "win," encouraging a meandering journey as opposed to a clear and finite objective. This line of inquiry led to an influential shift for us during this creation process: leaving behind conventional tactics and take risks to inspire the spectators to take on the responsibility of actors or players themselves, to influence, and even directly control, their personal journeys through the work.

As the piece unfolds, the players, seated at isolated stations in the performance space and armed with a combination analog and digital tools to advance the game—a hand-drawn booklet of sketches and



Alyssa Johnson, Hailley Laurèn, Erica Gionfriddo, and Katie Hopkins (kneeling, left to right) and Tanya Lavery (standing on platform) perform in *The Tower Is Us (A Prisoner's Cinema)* in this snapshot captured on an audience participant's smartphone. Photo by Lynn Lane.

notes on the mysterious creatures the performers embody and the choreographic, gestural language they apparently speak, a marker for note-taking, and the ubiquitous source of communication and information, their personal mobile devices—collectively decide which storyline they want to pursue. The branching, chance-based nature of this structure required us to create many elements non-linearly: "scenes" or sequences were crafted both as a stand-alone units and as a seamless part of the whole, whichever paths the audience led us all down. The choreography, lighting, projections, and music were created to be interchangeable while still allowing for a sense of forward momentum for the players.

As performers working within this open-ended structure, we were more in service to the audience-players' experience than usual, including the time it takes them to make connections or take action. This practice demanded a level of intimate dependency amongst the ensemble, and between us and the public: while trusting our individual instincts, each performance cultivated a stronger sense of play, teamwork, anticipation, and a readiness to adapt in the moment that went beyond anything I had yet experienced. We played the game, too.

Audience participants shared similarly elevated sensations with us in surveys throughout the workshop and development process, describing feelings of excitement, frustration, engagement, gratification, confusion, competitiveness, satisfaction, and above all, a sense of ownership of the performance. As one player put it, "If a stage show were a painting, this was like being in a room full of canvas, watching the artists paint and trying to figure out what it means as they go, and occasionally they even ask you which color you think they should paint with!"

—ERICA GIONFRIDDO

Erica Gionfriddo is a dancer, choreographer, and somatic researcher experimenting with how bodies—and humans—connect. She co-founded and directs the transmedia performance group ARCOS Dance and is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin.