

What Is It?

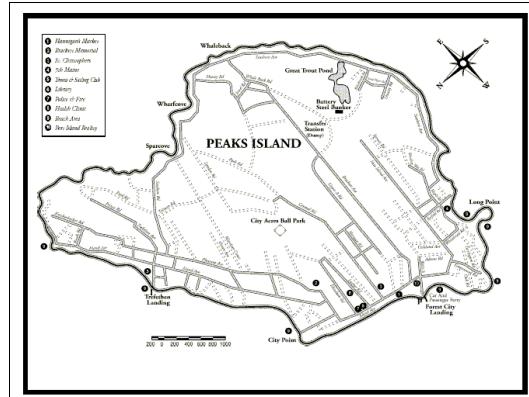
The Sacred and Profane festival is an art/performance/community event that takes place once a year the Saturday after the harvest moon in October on Peaks Island, Maine. It began about twelve years ago with a small group of artists creating public installations in the Battery Steele and sharing food as a way to celebrate the changing of the seasons. Over the years the festival has grown into an underground sensation and one of the most engaging artistic events in New England, if not the world.

I have participated in the festival the last two years and they were well attended. Casco Bay lines lists their ferry capacity as being 399 and usually sells out two boats, indicating that it's visited by upwards of 500 people every year. I spoke with a long term participator and she conveyed to me that the festival was founded on artist anonymity. There is no program, very little advertisements and unless you are involved, it is rather difficult to determine who made what. This anonymity is purposefully maintained in order to allow participants to navigate the experience on both a personal and collective level. Local musician and program director at Space Gallery describes it thusly,

“The event emphasizes artist anonymity, but there was nothing anonymous about this welcome wagon.”¹

The radical aesthetic is a purposefully defiant of current trends towards artist as celebrity. Participants and in many cases, even the artists, are unaware of who is creating the work. In my case, I had no idea until two weeks before the festival began who else were creating installations and performance. In the darkness of the battery, everyone one is equal and the line between artist and participant is blurred. This obfuscation of artist name maintains the focus on the experience of the event not on one single artists' contributions. It's a way of carving out a sacred space among the profane.

Participation is voluntary. I got involved by e-mailing the administrator and asking him if my company could perform. He asked me what I wanted to do and when I told him I'd create a formal pitch he refused, saying that the basic ideas I gave him were great and to just, “show up and be awesome.” Many artists return year after year to create installations or performances and often grow to become administrators themselves.



Participants take the 2:15 ferry to Peaks Island and are lead by procession along the tree covered roads to the Battery Steele. The procession is a performance in an of itself and differs from year to year. Last year tattoo artist Watson Atkinson lead the group by reading from a mystical text while accompanied by drums and instruments. I don't know exactly what happened this year but I heard that Pac-Man was somehow involved. Once at the battery, the participants are "processed" in one manner or another by performance art homeland security, pay their admission and are allowed to wander the battery at will. There is no electricity in the battery so it's mostly lit by LEDs, candles and a whole host of other sorts of creative, artificial illumination. The darkness is thick and not something that our light rich culture experiences very often. It's made more ominous and disorienting by the transition from daylight into a space of total darkness. The battery consists of a long hallway with rooms and passage ways leading to other areas of the abandoned structure. The Battery Steele has been abandoned since World War II and doubles as park and party zone for the locals. It's filled with the remnants of the festival as well as the adolescent graffiti, used condoms and broken beer bottles. It's a rough space and offers a multitude of site specific challenges given its isolation and lack of amenities.



Installations range from the reverent and simple, the tiny and the huge, the complex and sophisticated to the absurd and hilarious. This year featured niches filled with Jeff Goldblum action figures, an airplane made out of cardboard complete with live pilot, a room strewn with pine needles and logs simulating a forest, experimental music and light, even the room that was flooded was filled with floating tea lights. Last year I participated in an installation called, "Night Club", by Derek Jackson. It recreated the nightlife of downtown New York complete with light up dance floor and decadently dressed club kids. It's extremely difficult to classify the diversity of works created for the festival. There is no type or style. Unless one of the administrators has set a theme the only thing the artists have in common is the space who's rough, pitch dark interior offers an interesting challenge to even the most experienced site specific artists.

The first rush of the participants takes about an hour to mill through the battery. By then the performances begin to wind down and everyone emerges from the yawning darkness to join the line for soup, bread and apple crisp. Rain or shine the bread line is always a fascinating intersection of culture. It's one part community meal and one part post-apocalyptic art school refugee camp. Everyone sprawls

out on the lawn or if it's raining, under the awning of the battery to eat some hot soup, a crust of bread and a helping of apple crisp. After dinner bands play and those parts of the installations that are appropriate to burn are usually burned (though I'm told that this didn't happen this year for some reason). Drinking commences in earnest. I don't know how long the party goes till. I usually leave shortly after dinner (not much of a party person). Participants and artists wander back to rented homes on the island or take the last ferry back to the mainland to whatever or where ever the night takes them. Thus, the ritual ends. So mote it be.

Performer and Participant Instead of Product and Consumer

Finding out about the festival is relatively hard to do (though not as hard as it used to be). The semi-secrecy protects the mystery from unwanted inroads of consumerism and allows the festival to retain its artistic integrity. Mostly, people hear about it by word of mouth or by being asked to help one of the artists, like I did. Participants and artists involved with the festival represent an extended line of succession back to the original group of artists. In this way, the Sacred and Profane festival resembles secret, initiatory traditions of the Masons, Elysium or Wicca. While this year the festival was advertised with spots on the local college radio station, WMPG, and sold tickets at a few local venues, these advertisements were short lived, minimal and said very little about what the festival was. Just the basics: 2:15 ferry to Peaks Island, follow the procession. One has to be a petitioner of a kind or a risk taker or an adventurer. Participants have to want the experience. It's not an easy even to attend and the meek are not catered to.



I've used the terms "artist/performer" and "participant" consistently because I believe they more accurately define the relationships of the attendees and artists have with the festival. Artists/performers volunteer to create installations and performances within the battery for the attendees to interact with. This is their express and only purpose: to be enjoyed ephemerally for one day. Unlike traditional artistic venues of museums and galleries, there are no rules or permissions with which the attendees can interact with the installations and performances. Anything goes and for the most part no one gets hurt. Admission is charged but this doesn't automatically render the participants consumers. The money is more a form of tithing, more akin to a religious collection plate or the coins used to enter the underworld. The admission fee is a form of participation in and of itself, rather than payment for service.

In this way the festival is more like the theater festivals of the ancient Greeks in that theater going was wrapped up in Athenian identity and patronage whether it be with coin, by providing costumes, acting or merely singing along with the chorus in the stands, was considered a patriotic duty.

The festival itself, being called Sacred and Profane, offers the participants a mystical context by which to consider the what they are experiencing in the thick darkness of the Battery. This vague but surely spiritual quality is reminiscent of Medieval theater in it's performance and it's social culture. The various rooms with their collage of individual installations strung together by a common festival theme

are similar to the "mansions" or "houses" of the Medieval mystery plays where each "mansion" contained a different performance or scene. The festival is as much a time for revelry as it is reflection. It's not only an artistic experience but a social event as well. It's always interesting to see who was able to make it out to the island that year, as if you've traveled so far and survived such hardships to be there. Yet the majority of the



participants and artists are from Portland or it's surrounding towns. The Medieval mystery plays were community efforts, funded by the communities, performed for and witnessed by the community. Their mixture of the Biblical characters in contemporary dress or ribald shepherds amidst deeply spiritual themes (sacred and profane) was a way of reminding a community of who they were.

Fifth century Athenian drama and Medieval represent two periods in theater where community involvement superseded consumer demand or excessive governmental order. Both developed out of religious practice but became independent secular institutions. More importantly they developed because they were needed by the community not because of fashion or profit but out of spiritual, cosmological or cultural necessity. The festival, much like Medieval and 5th century Athenian drama, is a way of recreating, reaffirming and securing a collective cosmology.



Sacred and Profane is an event of wonder, spectacle, merriment and novelty. It is more like a feast day than an art festival. The participants take the day off from work to travel across Casco bay to be met by friends and relatives and to be reminded of something. The changing of the seasons? The beauty of the ocean? The miracle of human

cooperation? The blessing of fellowship? All of these, none of these. The mystery cannot be spoken of it can only be experienced.

Conceptualization

The conception for this piece began at the Sacred and Profane festival of 2009. As soon as I was introduced to the space I immediately wanted to work with light and slow movement. When I got confirmation that we were in for 2010 I began to further conceptualize what it was I wanted to do.

- **Navigation** – I was interested in the ways in which we navigate the world both physically and psychically. I've always had a fascination for the quality that beacons, buoys, signals and signs have. They seem to signify and yet are mostly wordless. How is it that we use these lights, non-verbal signals to navigate dark or unknown spaces? To transition, to enter and leave. Is ritual also a way of creating a familiar space within which to navigate the unknown? To differentiate between homogenized chaos? Further more, what is inherent in these signals? What stories do they tell us? The lighthouses offer warnings and hopes but also harbors tragedy and morbidity. It witnesses as much triumph as it does tragedy. How is it that we can give voice to that sense?
- **Narration** – There was a story that I read somewhere. I don't recall where I read it. I believe it came from The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony by Roberto Calasso, but it could be a me misremembering something from that book, which is very fitting. The story described the Athenians performing a certain ritual that was designed to absolve shame and reconcile with the goddess Athena. Every year, two virgins (maybe they were identical twins) were given a basket to carry down a passage to an underground cavern containing a statue of the goddess. The basket was left there at the altar as a form of sacrifice. This ritual was performed for many years until the original reason it was performed was forgotten. I ended up titling this performance *Untitled Sequence of Movements for a Forgotten Ritual* because of this story. I was interested in telling a story like this. One of carrying, sacrifice and reconciliation. Motions whose meaning is psychic, is felt but no longer makes any logical sense.

Structure

The site specificity of the piece forced certain restrictions. Really, the only way you can get a less ideal space to dance in is to fill it with water or bombs. Broken glass, grime, darkness, crowds, chaos, other installations all had to be taken into consideration. Also the fact that we had very little control over the space, getting to the space required a boat ride. So improvisation was central to our practice.

There were four rules:

1. Show up
2. Pay attention
3. Tell the truth
4. Be open to the outcome.

I learned these rules from dance-artists, The Architects, at their yearly intensive in Lancaster, PA. Simple as they may be they form the basis of our score. They the compass and sextant we turn to when we get lost in our improvisation. They served as a standard of evaluation for our work.

Dance – Six dancers were chosen and we began rehearsal with a half our of improvisation. This was done to allow the dancers to get to know each other physically and artistically. Good bonds between company members is important for authentic and high quality improvisation. Once a rapport was built I



began working with some choreography. I taught the dancers the base sequence of motions that would form the basis of the piece. The movements consisted of walking and carrying followed by a contraction an expansion, then a second different contraction and a second different expansion. This was done loosely in a straight line on a grid square with three dancers on one side facing the three dancers on the other side. I set up

an improvisational score to structure the way the dancers interacted with each other. I choreographed beginning to anchor the piece, but the rest of the movements were improvised with in the structure of the score. Dancers begin walking and carrying. When they reach an other dancer on either side of them, whether they be next to them or farther down on the grid, they have the option of stopping and entering

into the sequence I have them, to make up a new sequence of contractions and expansions, to mirror someone else's sequence or to simply walk on. When the dancers reached the perimeter of the space they would turn and walk back the other way. Movements could be fast or slow, large or small. The only stipulation is that the dancers always use two separate sequences of contractions and expansions and always return to walking and carrying.

The chorus was included very last minute. I wanted to try to get as many people as possible (I ended up with about 6 really great people) to hold a kind of vigil around the performance space. They were given some very basic movements but ended up being great improvisors.

Music

From the start the musicians were collaborators rather than accompanists. What they were doing informed how we moved, how we moved informed how we danced. Our opening improvisation was as much for them as it was for ourselves. Dancers and musicians were encouraged to form relationships and to spontaneously begin various elements of the improvised score if so inspired by the music or movement.

On a whim I put up a Craig's list ad looking for a cellist. I originally had in mind performing to some Philip Glass style arpeggiation. I had anticipated maybe working with one other person. In an unexpected stroke of good fortune Dr. DeScherer e-mailed me expressing interest. We spoke a similar language musically. He studied experimental composition and he and I share a love of contemporary music as well as early polyphonic music. I told him ideas about signaling, morse code, beacons, lighthouses, lights, darkness, hope, fear, etc. He took it quite seriously and developed the following improvised score for the four musicians follow.

Notes On Musical Composition

By: Joshua DeScherer, PhD

1. The piece consists of five basic elements:
 - a. Drones,
 - b. 'Foghorn'
- gongs.

- c. Whispered text provided to players (after initial introduction of whispering, players may also improvise their own texts)
- d. Morse code (of the player's names)
- e. Free improvisation

2. Each

used freely by any player. After the initial introduction of text and morse code, players may play

each other's text and morse code sequences. Players may choose to respond to another player invoking

3. The length of the written introduction should be scaled to suit the desired length of the complete performance.

INTRODUCTION

Percussionist plays three hits on gong. The piece begins on the third strike.



Musicians begin with their drones. They may choose the pitch themselves, and may change the drone

pitch at any time. Try to avoid changing pitch at the same time as other musicians.

As the dancers cross paths for the first time, gradually begin ornamenting drones with semitone above and minor third below.

When the dancers cross paths the second time and begin the core dance sequence, introduce free improvisation. Free improvisation continues throughout core sequence. Return to ornamented drones

when the dancers begin moving away from each other again.

When the dancers reach the edge of their space, and begin to turn around, diminuendo al niente. Leave

a significant amount of time before being answered and gradually increase the frequency of calls &
responses.
cues.

At some point, any player may introduce whispering. When whispering is introduced, all other players
should
rubbing
play

Begin free improvisation...eventually find an ending.

TEXT AND MORSE CODE SEGMENTS

Juliet Oscar Sierra Hotel Uniform Alpha / Hotel Echo
November Romeo Yankee / Delta Echo Sierra
Charlie Hotel Echo Romeo Echo Romeo

John
Henry Easy Roger Easy Roger



.--- ---- .- / -.- .-.- / -... ... -.- -.-.

It tolls for thee. No man is an island entire of itself; As well as if a promontory were,

This concentration of light is accomplished with a rotating lens assembly. In classical period lighthouses,
the light source was a kerosene lamp or, earlier, an animal or vegetable oil Argand lamp, and the lenses
rotated by a weight driven clockwork assembly wound by lighthouse keepers, sometimes as often as
every

lighthouses, electric lights and motor drives were used, generally powered by diesel electric generators.

These

omnidirectional light source requires a very large diameter lens. This would require a very thick, heavy lens

19th century, focusing 85% of a lamp's light versus the 20% focused with the parabolic reflectors of the time.

and volume of material in conventional lens designs. Although the Fresnel lens was invented in 1822, it

was

Lighthouse Establishment, Stephen Pleasonton. With the creation of the United States Lighthouse Board

in 1852, all US lighthouses received Fresnel lenses by 1860.

Papa Echo Tango Echo Romeo / Juliet Alpha Mike Echo Sierra / Mike Charlie Lima Alpha Uniform Golf

Hotel Lima India November

Peter

George Henry Lincoln Ida New York

.--. .- .-. / .--- - -- / -- -. .-. -.. - .. --- . .- .- .-

Europe is the less, Any man's death diminishes me, Every man is a piece of the continent

All foghorns use a vibrating column of air to create an audible tone, but the method of setting up this

vibration differs. Some horns, like the Daboll trumpet, used vibrating plates or metal reeds, a similar

principle to a modern electric car horn. Others utilized air forced through holes in a revolving

cylinder or
disk,
clockwork mechanism (or 'coder') to open the valves admitting air to the horns; each horn was
given its
own characteristics to help mariners identify their position.

Delta Uniform November Charlie Alpha November / Romeo Oscar Sierra Sierra / Hotel Alpha
Romeo

Delta Yankee

Denver

Denver Young

-.. -.- -.- .- - / .-. --- / - .-. -.. -.-

Red aids to navigation always have even numbers, and green aids to navigation have odd
numbers.

Under the IALA B standard used in North and South America, when you are going to sea, the
red ATON is

on your left, and the green on your right. Under the IALA A standard used in Europe, Africa
and most of

Asia, the colors are reversed.

In

Returning) and the green on your left. Red daybeacons are triangles and green daybeacons are
squares.

All

travel.

If a clod be washed away by the sea, for whom the bell tolls; Because I am involved in mankind

Alpha

Echo India Romeo Alpha

Adams Boston Roger Ida Easy Lincoln / Ocean Lincoln Ida Victor Ida Adams / Frank Easy
Roger Roger
Easy Ida Roger Adams

. - - / - - /

And therefore never send to know As well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; a part of the main

There white with orange markings and black lettering. They are used to give direction and information, warn of hazards not mark traffic channels.

On non-lateral markers, there are some shapes that show certain things:

Squares show directions.

Diamonds - warn about dangers like rocks, construction, dams, or stumps.

Circles - mark a controlled area such as no wake, idles speed, speed limit, or ski zone.

Crossed

Rehearsal Process

Dancers and musicians met once a week for 2 hours for a total of 7 rehearsals. I begin all my rehearsals with everyone sitting in a circle holding on to a circle of climbing rope. Everyone holds on

to the rope, states their name and talks briefly about their week, how they are, what they bring or anything else. I then convey any administrative business I've got and let people ask questions. This is a good way to allow people to come into the studio and really be there. It's about letting go of the rest of the world and preparing mentally to do the work.

The first two rehearsals were largely improvisation exercises where we set an arbitrary time limit (5, 10, 20 minutes). After each interval the group sat down in a circle and I posed questions to the group about how it went, what they noticed, what they liked, didn't like, what worked and what didn't and anything else they might have to say. The musicians were especially articulate a few of them having had the same improvisational music professor at Bowdoin who did an excellent job at teaching them how to offer criticism and to evaluate their own work.

As the rehearsals moved on more choreography and musical score elements were introduced and eventually our rehearsals were entirely overtaken by work on the piece. We continued to stop and talk about it after each run through.

Costumes

An other stroke of good fortune lead me to Lily Prentice. She is a current resident of the Quimby artist's colony here in Portland. A recent graduate of Bowdoin college with a degree in costume design she was applied and was accepted for a three month residency for costume design. Lily was enthusiastic about working with my company. We met and I told her my ideas, the general idea, the kinds of movements we would be performing and she did some drawing. We had a second meeting and agreed upon using simple kimono for the musicians and what we referred to as a "Kreekmonos" for the dancers. These were a mix of the Japanese kimono and the ancient Greek chitons. The costumes were held closed by obi-like sashes. When Lily showed me the prototypes I suggested that we add a little color to the costumes. She suggested that we dye the sashes using Shibori, a traditional Japanese tie-dye method. I did some research into the methods. We ended up using arashi shibori and kumo shibori.



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Arashi (storm) shibori a pole-wrapping technique. The cloth is wrapped on a diagonal around a pole or cylindrical object and then tightly bound by wrapping thread or wire up and down the pole. Next, the cloth is scrunched down on the pole. The patterns are on a diagonal in arashi shibori which suggests the rain from a heavy storm. Kumo shibori is a twist and bind resist technique. This technique involves wrapping sections of the cloth over a found object, usually small stones or pebbles. Then the cloth is bound in very close sections with rubber bands. The result is a very specific circular spider-like design. We chose a golden yellow color for the dye bath in the hopes that it would match the paper mache globes Ahna and I had created.

Props

Props were created via paper mache for the dancers and chorus members to interact with. In keeping with our theme of beacons and light houses, over 50 small lanterns were created. Some of them were used in the installation while others were given to the chorus to perform with.

Make-Up

The make-up was traditional butoh make-up. White face, white powdered on the exposed surfaces of the skin. I felt this was appropriate since this piece leans more towards the performance art and butoh spectrum of my work rather than the modern dance spectrum. The white also shows up beautifully in the darkness and creates the sacred, other worldly feel. Earlier in the process Lily and I had discussed possibly creating masks for the performers. I was inspired by some of the Greek mask theater I had watched and liked the effect they had on stage. This ended up not working time-wise and concept wise. The white face creates enough of a mask like appearance to work.



Staging

The piece was designed to be site specific so it effectively had no “front.” It was expected that the audience would surround the piece like a horseshoe and would be ambulatory during the performance. For this reason the dancers were set on a grid with the musicians anchoring the performance area at the four corners. The chorus was placed at one end of the square, completing the horseshoe created by the audience.

Performance

- **Show Up** – I tell the company it's the hardest rule. They always laugh because they know it's true. So the day of was full of last minute preparations and changes. Our room had been changed the night before so there was more cleaning to do, trash to pick up and broken glass to sweep away. I picked up the costume and costume designer who was assisting us in getting everyone dressed, pick up last minute supplies for Ahna and then ran to the ferry. Literally. I barely made the boat which would have been very, very bad.
- **Pay Attention** - By the time I got on the boat the stress of the morning melted away with the beautiful weather and the warm companionship. The boat was filled with wedding goers and



festival artists and assistants. Everyone was excited about something. We landed at Peaks Island around 12:40pm, loaded our stuff into Joshua's car and made the trek to the battery. I took everyone to the space so they could get a feel for it. We all wandered through the near total darkness of the hallway towards the room that

would serve as our performance space. After the space was inspected, we set up a make-shift make-up station on one of the palettes used for the food and began the process of putting on the make-up and costumes. As I made everyone up I got brief interviews of everyone talking about the work, the sacred and the profane and other topics as they came up.

- **Tell The Truth** – We started shortly before the participants arrived. It wasn't long before we were entirely over run by our audience. Throngs of people filled up our room and since there were people performing they tended to stick around. As I said before there are no rules as how the participants interact with the installations and performances. We had rehearsed the piece as a reverent, etherial affair. It relayed on subtly, whispering, concentrated movements and tenuous relationships. The themes of navigation and signaling were put to the test as we were suddenly overwhelmed by the participants. Some stood politely to the side, others merely passed through. Some involved themselves passing the paper mache lanterns back and forth, interacting or inspecting the dancers, commenting and examining the musicians. There was very little respect to the performance grid as well. The audience felt free to walk/stand/socialize directly through,

around and in the center of our performance area. It was a fascinating and unscripted relationship between our carefully considered piece with its improvisational structures and the participants. It went entirely against my expectations and was very interesting.

- **Be Open To The Outcome** – This amount of chaos made for an interesting performance. I only had to do crowd control once, otherwise, I left the dancers to navigate the unexpected circumstances. The dancers were instructed that no matter what happened or where the improvisation took them they were to return to the basic score: contractions, expansions and returning to walking. The dancers were forced to literally navigate a sea of participants all of whom who had different intentions. The musicians also had to contend with a tremendous amount of noise not just from the participants but from the rest of the artists and installations in the bunker. Whispering of technical details, codes and poems turned to shouting. Subtle percussion turned to loud banging. Everyone struggled to signal. To receive and to counter sign. I discussed the substantial difference between how we rehearsed it and the unexpected happenings of the actual performance. Both dancers and musicians expressed an ease with how things turned out. Everyone was enthusiastic about the project despite the struggle. It worked.



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