

What the Thunder Said



Pictured: A scene from What the Thunder Said (photo © bluemouth inc.)

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Martin Denton · July 25, 2006

This is going to the theatre, right?: You hand somebody your tickets, you find your seat, the lights go down, and then you watch people do stuff for an hour-and-a-half or so.

But there is another way, and bluemouth, the Toronto-based troupe that has recently relocated to New York City, is here to show it to us. bluemouth's aesthetic puts the audience in the center of a visceral, hallucinatory experience; it's a theatre of immediacy and raw, pure feeling. It's not interactive theatre, because there's no pretense about it; it is instead more or less the opposite, a theatre of complete and total immersion in what's present around you.

It's extraordinary, exhilarating, and enormously moving. It's happening for just nine more shows in bluemouth's second NYC presentation, a revival of their 2003 show *What the Thunder Said*, as part of the Sidelines series at the River to River Festival in Lower Manhattan. People who care about what theatre can be—and people in search of a challenging, rigorous, adventurous evening out—will want to get to one of these performances.

bluemouth is an ensemble comprising Stephen O'Connell, Sabrina Reeves, and Lucy Simic (all creator-performers), and Richard Windeyer, a veritable magician with sound. Joining them for *What the Thunder Said* are actors Ciara Adams, Elijah Brown, Alexander Lane, and Greg Shamie, and costume designer Ciera Wells. The work that all of these people do on this show is never less than remarkable.

What they've done, for starters, is to transform a big open space on the ground floor of the old AT&T Building near Canal Street into a haunting and ephemeral house of spirits. *What the Thunder Said* has no narrative, per se, but flows in stream-of-consciousness fashion through a series of vignettes involving a variety of singular characters, all of them going about the delicate and difficult business of *being*, of actualizing. Stuff happens all around us in this mysterious space, sometimes from more than one direction simultaneously: there's film projected on the walls and music that fills the room expansively (and sometimes is performed live); there are snippets of conversations and more formalized "scenes" and routines.

Most evocatively, there are glimpses into the most personal of moments in the lives of these various unnamed characters—moments when we are permitted to eavesdrop on the innermost feelings of a soul, usually expressed in precise choreographed movement that exposes the pain or despair or joy that's being experienced by this stranger we've suddenly happened upon. I don't know if it's simply a function of the sheer immediacy, but I can't remember ever being as viscerally moved and touched by dance/movement as I was here.

Cast sometimes as supernumeraries in someone else's dream and other times as anonymous specters in this house of memories, the audience witnesses an astonishing array of events in *What the Thunder Said*. Lovers discover a pair of squatters and start to bicker about the political economics of poverty. A mother dreams of losing her baby. A pair of one-legged vaudevillians perform a clown/acrobat routine.

CAST

Ciara Adams, Elijah Brown, Alexander Lane, Stephen O'Connell, Sabrina Reeves, Greg Shamie, Lucy Simic

CREATED BY

bluemouth inc.

COSTUMES

Ciera Wells

SOUND

Richard Windeyer

FILM

bluemouth inc.

PRODUCING COMPANY

bluemouth Inc.

Two men debate about the brain capacity of various observers around them.

There's also a baseball game.

What's it about? That's hard to pin down: *What the Thunder Said* is inspired, we are told in the program, by T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. So it's about being alive, being in the here and now, being present and open and aware, and being responsible for our actions and responsive to what's ahead of us. The experience of the show requires us to be alert to our environment, which is strange and unfamiliar and full of actors suddenly appearing out of nowhere, often seeming to want to occupy the precise bit of space that we're currently standing in. *What the Thunder Said* is about negotiating and shifting and adjusting and craning to make sense of the unexpected; it's about testing our reflexes and resiliency. Above all, it's about our capacity to engage—to trust in and collaborate with the people and places around us as we journey through a startling universe of heightened emotion, where souls are bared and where hearts really are carried about on sleeves. Literal sense doesn't matter here; this is a house of feelings.

It's also a house of astonishing art; if I haven't made it clear yet, know that everyone of the contributors to this piece has stretched his or her imaginations and talents spectacularly. The performers execute their detailed movements beautifully and effortlessly, and the images and sounds that assault us are vivid and surprising throughout.

I've seen hints of what Bluemouth accomplishes in *What the Thunder Said* in other theatre events I've gone to, but never have I seen anything so immersive and sensate, not even in *lenz*, the show that introduced me to the company's work last fall.

I can't wait for whatever these formidable artists have planned for us next. Meantime, I can only say that something rare and wonderful awaits you in *What the Thunder Said*. Go experience it for yourself.