

Miranda July: 'I'm always disappointing my dad politically'

Artist discusses whether her immersive stage show *New Society* worked, how it reflected US politics and why she had to be 'hard-assed'

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Miranda July has forged a large artistic presence working in small spaces: in other words, in intimate emotional terrain. She does it in her two feature films, which focus on the hermetic zones of romantic and interpersonal relationships, and it happens in her poignant, peculiar novel, *The First Bad Man*. It's evident in her uncommonly revealing recent interview with Rhianna in the *New York Times*, a conversation that pops the various bubbles of celebrity and human interaction. To experience July's work is to feel like you've had an encounter with her.

This is the effect in her recent performance, *New Society*, which just concluded a small tour of cities to which July feels an affinity: New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, and London, where she's at work on a still developing commission for art producers Artangel. To see the piece was to abide by a firm but gentle request to refrain from social mediation to maintain the sense of surprise. And for the most part, the audiences of 250 per show abided.

The show hinges upon the idea of creating a literal *New Society* within the immersive bubble of the theatre space. The performance is reframed as a shared situation, each audience member bringing their own set of expectations for a theatrical experience, and from July's free-range genre output.

"I've been doing audience participation things for years, but I'd never come up with a narrative reason for why people were participating," says July over the phone. "And that always bugged me. Like, I'm just having people participate because it's art! I remember having the idea for *New Society* and loving that there was a utilitarian reason why people were asked to participate. As much as that is a conceit, that really ignited me. I felt freer to take things much further when it was an artistic choice of how to tell a story."

She also acknowledges more personal layers of inspiration. "I'm the kind of person who is always thinking: 'What if we had to spend the rest of our lives in a particular place?' I catch myself saying that to my three-year old son. We're waiting for the doctor and I wonder, what would it be like to spend the rest of our lives in this waiting room?"

New Society starts awkwardly, July standing on a minimally dressed stage, forgetting her lines. The audience laughs nervously. Though this is a device to disarm us, we feel for her, and feel more apt to follow her down a participatory path. She pulls from the audience to fill out her cast and crew - a pianist is recruited to compose the society's anthem, an artist to create a flag, medical practitioners of whatever sort to be deployed as medics at an opportune moment of tragedy, and actors to read lines that describe our inhabiting the room for decades, tracing an arc from hopeful optimism to a decaying cult-like social and familial framework.

July is our leader. "I worked so hard to understand what the exact words were that elicited responses that I was looking for," she says. "I rehearsed it again and again with different audiences, sometimes to ridiculous results."

And sometimes sublime ones - an intermission sequence that turns the whole theater into a bustling bazaar where everyone wanders the aisles, using a torn image of July's head from the program as currency to buy and sell objects from their messenger bags, or take an impromptu yoga class on the stage. It is a remarkable bit of staging that has worked seamlessly every time.

"It was interesting to me that I am so controlling," she says. "Me and my husband [artist and film director Mike Mills] were talking earlier today about two different types of film directors. One allows people to feel free to make magic in a space that has been created for them. The other kind has an image in their head and they do take after take and make little adjustments until that image is created. Like it or not, I'm the kind of director who has the image in my head - the sort of no-fun kind. People are bummed when they find out this super creative person is going to be hard-assed through this whole thing."

For each performance, she multitasked, delivering her scripted lines while scanning the audience to cast the roles. The show also built in moments, like the intermission, to recruit performers, and to mollify any sense of stagefright. "A number of times people come up to me to say that that is their worst nightmare -and they are euphoric. It's my worst nightmare that it would be their worst nightmare."

"After some of the performances I'd have this funny feeling - I'd ask myself, was that good? Was that the best possible reader for that scene? Sometimes it was sublime. Sometimes it was infuriating. That was interesting to me. As directors, we set ourselves up right in the middle of our problems."

July is now in the courtship phase of developing her next projects. "When I say that, I mean I'm thinking of ideas and seeing if they like me back. I have to ask myself if I am thinking about something for reasons that will bear weight for a number of years or if it's just a passing anxiety."

Which brings us back to New Society. As the show was an exercise in nation building, and played during the start of the US presidential campaigns, it's tempting to see through an anxiety-charged political lens. While raised in Berkeley, California, July isn't that kind of artist. "My dad saw it and said, 'How could you not have addressed the refugee crisis?'"

Partly I'm just always disappointing him politically. But it's also true that taking refuge in a place is more on my mind now. I can't pretend otherwise: I was mostly thinking about very intimate things." It's what she does.

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