

Ira S. Murfin  
Interdisciplinary PhD in  
Theater and Drama  
Northwestern University

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SEP 10

600 HIGHWAYMEN  
THE FEVER

Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone, of the performance group 600 HIGHWAYMEN, make theater that depends on the conditions of live performance. Their work feels less like a theatrical production than like a carefully orchestrated convergence. *The Record* (2013), for instance, was a movement sequence for forty-five people that only came together in performance. And the performers of *Empire City* (2011) attempted to enact an old recording of a family outing in real time while constantly switching roles. These performances affirm live theater's essential sufficiency. Everything we need is already there. This is theater for lean times, art to survive the death of arts funding, experimental performance built to preserve and nurture a humane seed of communal cohesion for such time in the not-so-distant future when it will be most needed.

I saw 600 HIGHWAYMEN's newest work, *The Fever*, as part of the Under the Radar Festival earlier this year at the Public Theater in New York. The performance begins as a tabula rasa, as close to nothing as it can get—just an empty room, not even a theater, with a single row of closely set chairs arranged in a rectangle around the edges. Then, without indication that the performance has begun, someone in one of the chairs starts speaking. She asks the rest of us to do something simple—make a wave with our hands, touch another person's shoulder—and we do. Another voice emerges, the beginnings of a story about a party in a village. Individuals are called out of their chairs to take on roles. This will be a play of sorts, then, we think. It will be like *This Great Country*, 600 HIGHWAYMEN's 2012 choral deconstruction of *Death of a Salesman* performed in a Texas bingo hall. But then the village recedes, too, and we are left

again with no apparent material to work from. Still more voices announce themselves from our midst. They ask us to perform actions, both abstract and pragmatic—one at a time, in small groups, sometimes all together. At certain moments a tipping point is reached, and no one has to be asked to do anything, we just spring into action. We are all dependent on one another and *The Fever* is dependent on us; we must each keep agreeing to continue in order to keep it going. We are practicing being ready to help each other. We might be asked to hold another person up, lift them in the air, catch them as they fall. And we do.

For all of its sincerity and unsentimental good-heartedness, however, 600 HIGHWAYMEN's makeshift utopia is not without its dark corners. Early on, while still at that party in that small village, someone remarks how wonderful it would be if the friends gathered that night were the only people in the world. The model of community that *The Fever* enacts also models the limits community requires: someone must always be excluded.



Participation is central to *The Fever*.

Identity categories are introduced—age, gender, race—and alliances shift accordingly. As people are called out and in, lines of inclusion and exclusion form and re-form around and between us. Everyone is left out at some point, by chance or design, but everyone gets to feel the power of inclusion at some point, too. Inevitably,

a few people keep chasing that power, jumping into the fray and trying to beat everyone else there. A sound cue swells and the light changes as if a storm has passed close by, just missing us. We stay together. The delicate cohesion *The Fever* builds does not break despite powerful external forces. Those light and sound cues remind us, too, that this is all someone's plan. Despite appearances to the contrary, someone is in control. Audience participation is not an exercise in liberation but in voluntary regimentation. We want to join in, so we give ourselves over to a collective will. But under what circumstances would we withdraw consent?

## WE GIVE OURSELVES OVER TO A COLLECTIVE WILL

*The Fever* was imagined long before our most recent election, but it points to the danger and possibility of this moment. 600 HIGHWAYMEN is using the tools of group mobilization to stage a rehearsal for greater empathy.

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# REHEARSING EMPATHY IN 600 HIGHWAYMEN'S FEVER

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