

Abigail Browde & Michael Silverstone



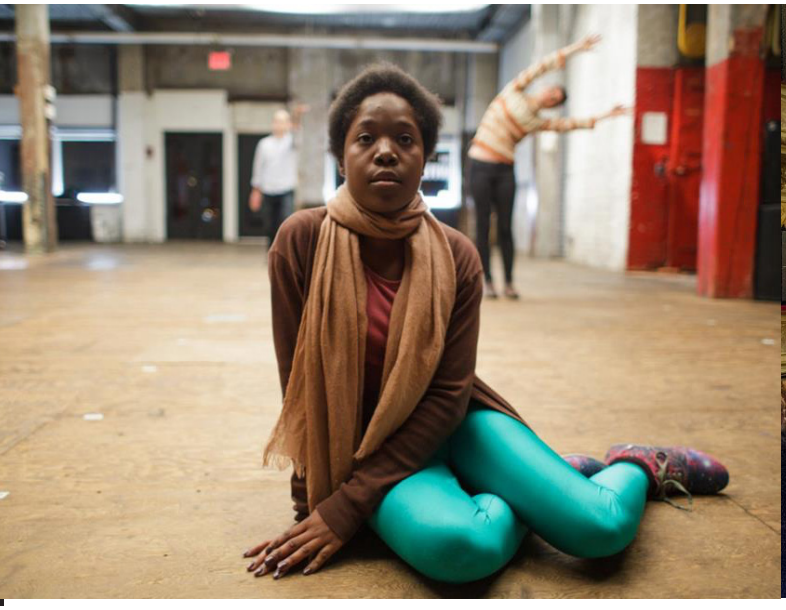


working together as 600 HIGHWAYMEN



ABOUT 600 HWM

600 HIGHWAYMEN (Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone) are a theatermaking duo who are aiming at a radical approach to making live art by creating intimacy amongst strangers and illuminating the inherent poignancy of people coming together. Their work exists at the intersection of theater, dance, contemporary performance, and civic encounter





HISTORY

Works since 2009: *The Following Evening*, *A Thousand Ways (Parts One, Two, Three), The Fever, Kasimir & Karoline, Manmade Earth, Employee of the Year*, *The Record, This Great Country*, *Everyone Was Chanting Your Name*, *Empire City*, and *This Time Tomorrow*. 600 HWM received an Obie Award in 2014, Zurich's ZKB Patronage Prize in 2015, and two Bessie Nomination for Outstanding Production. In 2016, Abigail & Michael were named artist fellows by the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Production history (selects): Under the Radar Festival (The Public Theater, NYC), Crossing the Line Festival (French Institute Alliance Française, NYC), On the Boards (Seattle), Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus), River to River Festival (Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, NYC), Abrons Arts Center (NYC), The Invisible Dog Art Center (NYC), University Settlement (NYC), Fusebox Festival (Austin, Texas), Mount Tremper Arts Summer Festival (Mount Tremper, New York), Noorderzon Festival (Groningen, Netherlands), Festival Theaterformen (Hannover, Germany), Züricher Theater Spektakel (Zürich, Switzerland), Festival L'Esprit de Groupe (Parc de la Villette, Paris), and Les Spectacles Vivants (Centre Pompidou, Paris), Onassis Center (Athens, Greece), OzAsia (Australia), In Between Time (UK), Salzburg Festival (Austria), Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago),
Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), NYUAD Arts Center (Abu Dhabi), and American Repertory Theater (Boston).

PRESS

“I wish to hear anything that 600 HIGHWAYMEN has to say … the company’s guilelessness is central to its beautiful art … 600 HIGHWAYMEN want to re-wire your theatregoing DNA, even if that means deadening your expectations until you fall asleep, wake up, and see and hear their world in a new way.”
- *The New Yorker*

"This simple but sublime production ... touches the deep wellsprings of our attraction to theater. In the course of just an hour, the audience’s immersion in this wordless dance- theater piece creates a feeling of quiet but intense intimacy, and even a shivery sense of reverence for the communal experience not just of theater, but of life itself."
–*The New York Times*

"Truly adventurous, assumption-busting thinking about what theater is and what it can be"
– *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Just when you think you might be getting a little cynical about the theatre … think about 600 HIGHWAYMEN.”

“Quietly shaking up American theatre since 2009." - *The Guardian*

“The term “experimental” tends to signal an ambition to flaunt difficulty and occlude meaning, but 600 highwaymen’s experiments with theatrical form are distinctly generous.”
- *The New Yorker*

“A new sphere of intimacy. I have never before felt anything like this during a live show. It was almost like a revelation – I kid you not.”
- *Culturebot*

“One of New York's best nontraditional companies." - *The New Yorker*

“Exploring the nature of being human, of being at all, moving and interacting with hundreds of others just like, but not quite like, us. To touch, to feel, to breathe, to see: it is an intense moment of being present and of being in this all together.” – *Exeunt Magazine*





THIS **GREAT** COUNTRY

BY **600 HIGHWAYMEN**



ABOUT THE SHOW

THIS GREAT COUNTRY re-spins Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Death of a Salesman* to newfound immediacy.

With a large ensemble cast that features individuals of various ages, backgrounds, and levels of experience, THIS GREAT COUNTRY brings Miller's story into our times by revealing the tension between an indictment of the American Dream and a song of American resilience. Told in an immediate and hyperreal context, seventeen individuals of various ages and back- grounds come together with an audience to breathe new life into a portrait of self-worth amidst shifting economics and fading dreams.

We first performed the show in a 4,000 square-foot bingo hall, and then the following year, in a vacant shopping mall in lower Manhattan with the East River and New York skyline as the background.





HISTORY OF THE WORK

Like so many others, we've always had a strong connection with *Death of a Salesman*. In 2012 in Austin, Texas, we undertook a 6-week casting process, meeting ranchers, professors, office workers, parents, and children – alongside a crop of seasoned Austin actors. With this diverse collection of people, it became clear that in the era of shifting economics, a vanishing middle class, and the struggle of so many to reach stable ground, *Death of a Salesman* was a story we had to tell.

In our version, theatrical artifice is stripped away, pruned to create a vacuum within which we can truly see these people, in this room, at this moment. In a process of subtraction, we removed anything that stood between the audience and the performers, foregrounding the immediacy and reality of the encounter between audience, performer, and text.

This *Salesman* restores to the play a sense of instability. It isn't just the characters feeling this precarity, but the audience, as well. Other productions of *Death of a Salesman* focus on grounding the play in an aesthetic of realism; ours fashions the text as poetry, asking the audience to meet the play halfway to place themselves imaginatively inside the story. It does so to remind us that our focus is needed, that attention must be paid.

"A new, post-recession take on a sacred text" - *Wall Street Journal*





click here to watch **video trailer**

"I was reminded while watching the show that *Death of a Salesman* is a story that America owns collectively. It's a play so canonical that it embodies both our conception of America and America's conception of itself. And America is no longer – if it ever truly was – embodied by the white, suburban nuclear family. I watched in amazement as 600 HIGHWAYMEN radically and refreshingly transformed the play into a portrait of America's diverse working class. Far from offering us a mothballed post-war period piece, *This Great Country* intrinsically understood Miller's original text as an ageless parable for the fallacy of the promise of the American Dream, and its gender-blind, age-blind and colour-blind casting enhanced both its timeliness and timelessness."

"*This Great Country* was the living embodiment of the theatrical ideal: a space where anyone can come together and confront that which oppresses them. Theatre as a radical space of togetherness, where we become other people to unpack the complexities of being ourselves, of being human."

– *Theater of the Unimpressed* by Jordan Tannahill (Coach House Books; 2015.)

“Co-creators and co-directors Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone whittle down the stylistic foundations of Miller ’s masterful script to give us a raw, fundamental version that’s nevertheless just as moving as the original ... **Browde and Silverstone have done something clever here: By dismantling one of the best known plays of the American theatrical canon, they’ve actually offered a trenchant new version." -** *Austin American Statesman*

PRODUCTION HISTORY

APRIL 2012: Fusebox Festival / Lucky Lady Bingo Hall (Austin, TX) - world premiere
JULY 2013: LMCC’s River to River Festival / Pier 17 Mall (NYC, NY)





600 HIGHWAYMEN: *The opposite of transportation*

by Ben Gansky | April 30, 2015



Performance still from *This Great Country*. Photo by Maria Baranova.

Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone have created performances together under the name 600 HIGHWAYMEN since 2009. I first encountered their work in the summer of 2012, when I saw *This Great Country*, their adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*, at the River to River Festival in Lower Manhattan. Presented in a gutted department store, *This Great Country* was an exactingly contemporary revision of Arthur Miller's play, in a way that was deeply and almost shockingly generous. I had never seen a show with a cast so diverse (in terms of age, ethnicity, bodies, voices) and so attuned to each other and to their audience. The performance felt like a portrait, not of the individual alluded to in Miller's title, but of the nation referenced by 600 HIGHWAYMEN's name for this piece. The presence and attention of the performers (seeing each other, seeing the spectators) seemed to deal directly with the reality of the situation—actors in front of an audience—rather than attempting to camouflage or mediate that relationship.

When I first spoke with Browde and Silverstone about this conversation, they asked if rather than conduct a one-time interview, they could instead write their responses over the course of several weeks or months. Since the success of their piece, *The Record* (a sold-out hit at the Public Theater's Under the Radar Festival in 2014, now touring in Europe), they had given a succession of interviews in which the writers chose to focus on the casting of their shows, and specifically on what had been labeled the casting of "non-performers" (Browde: "How can they be non-performers? If they're performing, they're performers!")

Currently in residence at the Park Avenue Armory, Browde and Silverstone are developing a new piece titled *The Fever*, inspired by Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which has them reconsidering their practices of relating performers to the audience.

Ben Gansky Let's start with why. Why make shows?

Michael Silverstone I make shows to get closer to who I am, and to get closer to other people, especially those who are not like me. Making theater is a way for me to have conversations with myself and with other people. It's the way I stay active. Also, I'm interested in staring. Things happen when you look at something or someone for a long time—like empathy, or compassion, or even just clarity, seeing the surface and imagining what's beyond. I'm making theater to do all that more.

Abigail Browde Living art feels like the deepest connection I have to a kind of poetic transcendence. I'm not even sure what that means, but living art, people moving in front of other people, is the purest, most

accessible, most moving form of expression to me. Humans perform for one another. We look at each other. It's what we've always done. Staring at each other—whether it's on the subway, in the grocery store, or onstage—feels like second nature, like eating, breathing, talking, and so on. Making plays is sculpting our animal instinct to look at each other.

MS I'm also making theater to wake up to agendas other than my own. We've got an idea of what we'd like to happen, and as much as we push it, something else is going to occur, something we can't control. The idea of dictating what to do or what to experience, and then expecting that very thing to occur, is an impossible expectation, and it's also a bit boring to make. I'm using the form as a way to put myself in collision with other agendas so that I might come out at the other end more tolerant, or more humanized, or just less narrow.

BG Do you see your work as engaging with any specific problems/issues in the field of contemporary performance?

AB In the relationships between artists and those who support them (institutions and funders) I think there's an over-proportioned value in "knowing." In my experience, there are plenty of artistic processes well worth their salt that can't be effectively put into words. Many processes are instinctive. We've got this system in place where we reward the people who make work that can be articulated—or people who can be articulate [about that work]—and so a specific arc of projects is rewarded with resources and support. I do realize it's hard to support someone if you don't understand their intuition or their practice, but I think it's a limiting system.

We addressed these issues from the beginning by making ourselves completely self-reliant. We chose to make shows where we didn't need institutional support. But the sustainability of this is difficult. And it's not always fun. I mean, had someone come to the bingo hall in Texas where we made *This Great Country* and offered to figure out how the electricity in that building worked, so we would stop blowing fuses two days before the opening, I would have been thrilled. Or if we had a producer or manager who would make sure there was adequate heat in the church when we made *This Time Tomorrow*, I would have kissed them. But I also know that had we held out for adequate heat and perfect electrical wiring, we probably wouldn't have made those shows. Or they wouldn't have been what they were. And what they were was genuine and specific and important to us. Also, when it comes to "problems in the field" there's the lobby problem: lots of money going to maintain and renovate the physical theaters, but not the same dedication of funds going towards the artists. Lobby renovations instead of living wages. I think this is a problem in the field.

MS Our first five shows were made in the social hall of our neighborhood church, often rehearsing while other things were happening in the room: baby showers, piano lessons, even setting up for a funeral, and instead of fighting the overlap, we fell in love with it. We learned to be fluid. The situation was always being complicated, and that kept it alive. There was only so much we could plan. We learned to watch the whole room, to see what was happening in a fuller sense. Working in the church got us thinking about human landscapes, and how to recalibrate the focus of an audience. We want our shows to be messing with the dials and the hierarchies. I want there to be a lot at stake in the way we assemble people.

BG One of the seminal texts of the last half-century on theatre-making is Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*. Rereading it recently, it struck me as dated—in fact, colonialist—to conceive of any space as "empty," without context or history, as *tabula rasa*. In the same vein, I am disturbed by the tendency of character- and plot-based theatre to treat actors as seemingly empty vessels for characters. What do you think about Brook's thesis, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage"? Any thoughts as to how the kind of responses your work has sometimes evoked ("non-actors," "non-professionals") might relate to its challenging the dominance of a theatre paradigm based in disguising the truth of a space and performers, rather than revealing it?

MS We're interested in the lives of the people onstage, both what is true and what is inferred. I want to look at a person and have an idea of how they were raised. Or where they live. Or what they eat for breakfast. I want to know that the creators are telling me that's an okay thing to do. This is important. My prejudices, my narratives, my values—there's so much I'm interested in sorting through in the theater.

AB Blankness is, indeed, impossible. It's a false premise to imagine that it's possible to be blank, bare, empty. But falseness as an idea must be addressed when you're working in theater. It's such an inherently fictional, false medium. The falseness of memorizing words and then reciting them effortlessly, the falseness of fictional circumstance, the falseness of acting like you are not being watched, when in fact what you're doing is sculpted for surveillance (and often by a large mass of people). Michael and I tend to deal directly with this falseness, to really engage with it. Each piece has a different relationship with this.

MS Richard Avedon has a quote about "the surface" of the subjects he photographed from his *American West* series in the '80s. "You can't get at the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface."

AB Our deepest success is when we can bend and manipulate the theatrical form (one that really deals in games of pretend and falseness), to make something true and real.

BG Can you talk a little about how your backgrounds have influenced your work?

MS After we graduated from NYU, Abby was making shows that she was writing, choreographing, and performing in. I was directing new plays, and I was having a hard time in that world. I kept getting hurt, and I didn't feel in control of my work. I felt like a janitor. At the same time, I was heading this theater group in a maximum-security prison, and I was spending a lot of time with this group. I was teaching them acting. We'd work on monologues, and ultimately we performed a full-length play for the public. Something about this specific group, and the way I figured out how to work with them, pulled me out of a disillusionment I didn't realize had taken hold. I began to feel a lot of possibility. And right around then Abby and I started working together.

BG How do you go about relating your personal lives together to the work you're making?

AB How we live our personal lives and how we make work is very messy. We spend an inordinate amount of time with each other, sharing and articulating and explaining things. At the same time, we're both very private people. Actually, neither of us *likes* to talk about our ideas with the other, but we do it. It's like an emotional shoehorn.

Actors have also told us that we keep our cards close to our chest. This is true. We prepare the process so that the actors' focus stays on the inside. We work with smart people, but we don't rely on them to have an outside perspective on what we're doing. Their job is to be inside the apparatus, working on the task at hand, so they're prepared to work with the spectators.

MS There are opposing forces in our creative process, but actually we're trying to simplify the whole thing in a big way. We're trying to open our shows so there's room for something to happen, something unknown to all of us. We're setting up a framework, and we're aiming to get lost in the gaps.

I thought a lot about this when working with *Death of a Salesman*. That first scene is so great because this guy, Willy, has come home in the middle of the night, and his wife finds him standing in the middle of the kitchen alone. She's in her robe and he's dressed for work, and it's the middle of the night and she turns the light on. And they're just standing there. It's the truest sense of reality, even they don't know how they arrived at this point in time. The thing is, in a lot of productions, all that reality gets lost. A bunch of decisions are made that take away all the uncertainty. Linda kisses Willy on the forehead, she helps him with his coat, a cup of tea is made, they do the special glance. It all becomes very digestible. But theater can be much more mysterious. We can deal with figuring it out on our own. If the actors are working and the setup is right, something really great can occur.

But this is really a matter of personal taste. I'm interested in work that has room for me to make something happen on my own. I don't want to be transported, I want to wake up to myself. I want to be triggered. Not every audience member has to feel the same thing, but I do know that you've got three minutes at the top of Miller's story to get the majority of the audience thinking about their parents, and I

think there's a way to do this that is more subconscious, more ephemeral—something that sneaks up on you.

BG How are you guys working to leave things onstage unresolved for an audience?

AB We're leaving gaps that are generally filled by traditional American realism. Put some spackle over the hole and paint it clean. This is super apparent I think in the choreography for*Employee of the Year*.

MS We're asking performers to think about themselves in relation to the experience of being seen by an audience, and in relation to the words being said. We're not very interested in psychological realism, or in the fictional given circumstances. Sometimes we talk through this idea I stole from Brian Mertes, which is that there are three things—character, self, and the text—and each occupies the foreground, middle ground, or background of every moment for a performer. They are constantly shifting and being rearranged by the performer. This is asking the person onstage to be thinking of who they are while onstage. It's asking them to be present and to be aware. It becomes a very concentrated thing.

BG When you say "reality of the narrative" or the reality of the lines, do you mean the reality as it relates to the actual personal life of the performer?

AB No, I don't think that's what I mean.

MS Sort of.

AB It isn't about the actor's "personal" life, but more the reality of who they are in the moment of doing the show. Less psychoanalysis.

BG So, reality perhaps meaning in this case the reality of the situation—this being a performance in front of an audience.

MS Yes, and really listening to the physical mechanics of being up there. Like, feeling your eyes move and your blood flow.

BG Can I ask you guys about your recent experience workshopping your new show, *The Fever*, at the Sundance Institute Lab at MASS MoCA? How are these questions resonating for you in light of this recent development period? Mistakes, presence, leaving things unresolved—maybe especially as relates to the dynamic between performer and content?

MS We're trying to disturb some of our core ideas with this next project. It's time to move to new stuff. When we hit material at MASS MoCA that felt like our other work, I couldn't digest it. It was as if my body was rejecting it.

BG Can you outline a sense of either what you feel like you're rejecting or what you're embracing through this process?

AB Ha!

MS Stillness. Standing on two feet.

AB Yep. And even looking at the audience is something to upend for us.

MS "The encounter" between spectator and performer. Symmetry. A lot of what we've been talking about, actually. These are things we want to put aside.

AB This does not mean we're asking the performers to pretend the audience isn't there. We're not erecting a solid fourth wall.

MS No, but it feels like we're partially building it up again. At least half-so.

BG And this show is based on material from *Rite of Spring*?

AB "Loosely inspired by" at the moment. I think we're in a "breaking up" period with *Rite of Spring* as a source. We need to see other people.

BG How do you go about that sort of dating scene?

AB For real. Tinder for art projects.

BG Tinder dramaturgy.

AB OKDramaturg.

MS Usually our work is in direct conversation with visual art, and we've been looking at sources that are thematically linked in some way for a while.

BG That's fascinating. It's something I didn't know about your process. Can I ask what or whose work in particular has influenced this and/or past pieces?

MS The artist Nick Cave. He makes these soundsuits, full-body pieces for people to wear. What I like is how open to interpretation they are. There are a lot of ways to read them. And they alter your perception, which is something we're always trying to do. In the past we've done this by playing with time and point of focus, but never with something so theatrical. To me this show feels like a goodbye to something, or a letting go of the argument.

AB Or a hello to something else. Something additional.

BG Do you feel like that's a reaction to a direction you were taking in *Employee of the Year*?

AB I think actually there's something about having made *Employee of the Year* and then remounting *The Record* in the Netherlands around the same time that made us look at our work in a very new way.

BG Did you have any particular revelations?

MS Both shows feel very solitary to me, and I'm feeling not so interested in the singular anymore.

AB Oh, that's interesting. That's right.

MS It feels like we're breaking the skin to get lost in the cells of something greater, maybe something more chaotic.

Ben Gansky is a director, writer, designer, and producer of new performance work. His company GRANDMA works at the intersection of comedy, performance art, and experimental theatre. He is currently at work on his MFA in Directing at Carnegie Mellon University with a focus in emerging media and interactive platforms.

THE **RECORD** BY 600 HIGHWAYMEN



45 strangers come together for 61 minutes to show us who they are, and who they could be. Part theater, part dance, part group hallucination – vivid human assembly on an epic scale. The subject is us; the time is now.

An acclaimed hit of Under the Radar 2014, **The Record** combines 600 HIGHWAYMEN's finely-tuned performance style with the investigation of how a group can come together to witness - and participate in - a singular experience.



"This **simple but sublime** production ... touches the deep wellsprings of our attraction to theater. In the course of just an hour, the audience's immersion in t**his wordless dance- theater piece creates a feeling of quiet but intense intimacy, and even a shivery sense of reverence for the communal experience not just of theater, but of life itself"**

– *New York Times* , Charles Isherwood

THE **PERFORMERS**

Each new iteration of THE RECORD in each city is performed by a new collection of individuals.

Click here to see every person who has performed in The Record worldwide.



"**The Record** explores the nature of being human, of being at all, moving and interacting with hundreds of others just like, but not quite like, us. To touch, to feel, to breathe, to see: it is an intense moment of being present and of being in this all together."

– *Exeunt Magazine*

PRODUCTION **HISTORY**

January 2017
Bristol, UK - Bristol Old Vic/In Between Time

November 2016
Athens, Greece - Onassis Cultural Centre

September 2016
Adelaide, Australia - OzAsia Festival

July 2015
Hannover, Germany - FestivalTheaterformen

March 2015
Paris, France - Parc de la Villette & Centre Pompidou

August 2014
Groningen, Netherlands - Noorderzon Festival

January 2014
NYC, NY - The Public Theater / Under the Radar

February 2013
Brooklyn, NY - The Invisible Dog Art Center











The New York Times

THEATER | THEATER REVIEW

An Assembly of Quietly Moving Parts

‘The Record’ Creates Intimacy Without Words

NYT Critics' Pick

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD JAN. 10, 2014



Aaron Adlam-Ferguson, center, in "The Record," at the Public Theater.
Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

The stars of “The Record” — all 45 of them — do not really do much. They stand stock still on a bare stage, strike some funny poses then walk around a bit. They do a little running, too, and assemble in groups and sometimes stretch out on the floor. Just now and then, one will extend a hand to touch another, or a young woman will fall backward into a man’s arms, in a moment of connection that registers with soft surprise.

And yet this simple but sublime production from the troupe called 600 Highwaymen, part of the Under the Radar festival at the Public Theater, touches the deep wellsprings of our attraction to theater. In the course of just an hour, the audience’s immersion in this wordless dance-theater piece creates a feeling of quiet but intense intimacy, and even a shivery sense of reverence for the communal experience not just of theater, but of life itself.

Directed by Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone, “The Record” sounds pancake flat when its mundane details are described. On a wide expanse of unvarnished wood, under a white canvas through which light falls gently — moving from bright to dim to brighter, suggesting clouds slowly moving across the sun — a collection of people gathers and disperses. First, just one man enters, walks to a precise point on the platform, stands still for a minute or so then slowly turns and bends his knees, lifting his arms at the same time.

He’s later joined by a companion, then a few more. The performers are dressed in everyday clothing, presumably their own, as if they’ve just been pulled off the street and hustled into the theater: jeans and sweaters, leggings and boots, the odd hipster hat. One grizzled-looking old fellow wears a headset for the duration. For the most part, the performers do not acknowledge one another’s presence, although sometimes they move in tandem. Slowly, they will step forward a few paces at the same time, or put their fists up in a vaguely pugilistic stance or wave their arms gently in the air.

Time ticks by. In the background, Fjola Evans saws mournfully away on a cello that’s electronically amplified, while Brandon Wolcott, who composed the music with Emil Abramyan (a snippet of Piatti’s Caprice No. 2 is included), fiddles away at a MacBook Pro, presiding over the progress of the ambient noises — a chorus of murmurs, some rhythmic thumping, an occasional symphonic crescendo — that supply a kind of sonic dance floor for the movement taking place in front of them. (CONT.)

The New York Times

As they enact their quirky little rituals, the men, women and children onstage — the age range looks roughly from 5 to 65 — almost always rest their gaze on the audience. It takes a while for the oddity of this to register, since they look upon us with a blankness almost cleansed of emotion. Perhaps there is a little benevolence flickering in the eyes of one, a studied curiosity in another. They are contemplating us, as we are contemplating them.

The steady gaze of strangers is, at the theater as in life, initially unsettling. Think of a ride on the subway, and how studiously we avoid looking into our fellow travelers' eyes, as if to meet another's gaze would somehow be an invasion of privacy. (In a marvelous phrase, the playwright Sarah Ruhl once called a subway car "a tomb for people's eyes.") This piece collapses that distance: We are here, the performers' unflinching looks tell us, and you are here, too. What can we make of this?



Directed by Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone, "The Record," at the Public, wordlessly calls attention to the theatrical experience and the interactions among performers and audience. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

In its unhurried way, "The Record" makes something wonderful and beautiful of it. The show alerts us to the awesome strangeness, and the utter ordinariness, too, of being alive in the here and now. As we watch the performers watching us, we are startled into an awareness of the moment-by-moment progress of life, and reminded that this awareness is a rare experience. While we study the men and women onstage, we are also awakened to the news — that's how it feels, really, since you don't often wander around pondering these things — that we are sharing the gift of life with millions of other souls, all but a few handfuls unknown to us, never to be known to us.

When, as the show moved toward a conclusion, the great mass of performers began to leave the auditorium in groups, I have to confess I found myself shaken by a confused mixture of loss and joy — and reminded sadly that while loss is inevitable, joy can be elusive. Like theater, life is transitory: a few poses, a few walks, a rest here and there, some meaningful connections, many more missed ones. And then we all have to leave the auditorium.

The Record

By 600 Highwaymen; directed by Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone; music by Brandon Wolcott with Emil Abramyan; design by Chris Morris and Eric Southern; production manager, Chris Batstone; assistant director, Cassandra Sachs-Michaels; creative technology by Federico Rodriguez; associate producer, Andrew Kircher; festival production manager, Jon Grenay; festival stage manager, Ruth Sternberg. Presented by the Public Theater, Oskar Eustis, artistic director; Patrick Willingham, executive director; Mark Russell and Meiyin Wang, festival co-directors; as part of the Under the Radar festival. At the Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, at Astor Place, East Village; 212-967-7555; undertheradarfestival.com. Through Saturday. Running time: 1 hour.

A version of this review appears in print on January 14, 2014, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: An Assembly of Quietly Moving Parts. Order Reprints|Today's Paper|Subscribe



THE FEVER BY 600 HIGHWAYMEN

A performance built from our dependence on one another. The Fever is a public convergence for today, asking how we assemble, organize, and care for the bodies around us.

Originally commissioned by The Public Theater. World premiere 2017 at The Public Theater in NYC and subsequently performed over 200 times in over 25 cities around the world.



ABOUT **THE FEVER**

The Fever, the latest work by 600 HIGHWAYMEN, tests the limits of individual and collective responsibility, and our willingness to be there for one another. Performed in complete collaboration with the audience, **The Fever** examines how we assemble, organize and care for the bodies around us. Who will you be when our eyes are on you? What will we see when we all look your way?

> **"a lovely, haunting meditation on human connection, and disconnection … a poetic evocation of our mostly unspoken — and un-called-upon — dependence on one another."**
> ***- The New York Times***



"Bold and daring … a ritual that taps the sacred and the profane, the essence of human existence." — *Exeunt Magazine*

"Explore the age-old relationship between performer and audience with an intensity and focus that is quite unlike anything I ever have seen." — *Chicago Tribune*






EXIT











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

SEP 7–
SEP 10

600 HIGHWAYMEN
THE FEVER



REHEARSING EMPATHY IN 600 HIGHWAYMEN'S *FEVER*

Photos: Maria Baranova

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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600 HIGHWAYMEN

A THOUSAND WAYS

PARTS ONE, TWO, & THREE



“Splendid. Funny and sweet and unexpectedly moving.”
– The New York Times

“The single most remarkable work of 2022”
-Culturebot

“For an hour, I forgot the world around me as I pieced together a blurry picture of a stranger from the clues in her voice and the breadcrumbs of her backstory. Sitting in the dark, I came as close to a theater experience as I’ve had in a long time.”
– Crosscut

A THOUSAND WAYS is an evocative triyptych of performances created during and for pandemic times about communion, performance, distance, and reconnection.

With just two people — connected first by telephone, then across a table — and finally within a public gathering, a new type of theater emerges, one in which the most intimate assembly becomes profoundly radical.

Using a series of prompts, questions, and directives, strangers build enthralling performances for one another.

PART ONE

Over a simple phone call, two strangers take a journey together over the course of an hour, guided by a spellbinding set of directives and the sound of a stranger's voice.

PART TWO

Two strangers meet across a bare table. With a stack of cards and a few objects, what begins as a simple exercise of working together becomes an experience of profound connection with another person across a small distance.

PART THREE

A small assembly of 16 people, this unique theatrical event tests the ways we arrange ourselves after so much time apart.

A THOUSAND WAYS is a map for finding one another through distance, for remembering what makes us human. Each installment is a transporting and potent performance that binds strangers together in the most unexpected ways. This is theater in its purest form.



Everything we need is already here — just you and me.

PROJECT ARC

Developed across numerous trials in Brooklyn, the project has become newly necessary and apt for the current moment of social distancing and isolation.

A THOUSAND WAYS uses the limitations of the moment to redefine performance for this rapidly-evolving era. The performance's three-part structure tracks our journey in real-time, from current isolation to the return of communal assembly. The project is a hopeful beacon, with each part moving incrementally towards togetherness.

Leading its audience through a re-entry of sorts for pandemic times, A THOUSAND WAYS fosters the reconnection that everyone is craving, providing tested tools for navigating this new world together.

A performance that relies on all of us.



A THOUSAND WAYS has been translated into 7 languages and has been presented by over 35 theaters around the world including:

The Arts Centre (Abu Dhabi, UAE), Carolina Performing Arts (Chapel Hill, NC), Canadian Stage (Toronto), Dublin Theatre Festival (Dublin, IR), Homo Novus Festival (Riga, LV), La Jolla Playhouse (La Jolla, CA), Lókal International Theatre Festival (Reykjavik, IC), Norfolk & Norwich Festival (Norwich, UK), On the Boards (Seattle, WA), The Public Theater (NYC), Singapore Int'l Festival of Arts (Singapore), Stanford Live (Stanford, CA), Walker Arts Center (Minneapolis, MN), Volkstheater Wien (Vienna, AU)

"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"
– MCA Magazine



































“One of the things that makes A Thousand Ways, Part 3: An Assembly so remarkable is that it not only encourages to see the world, and each other, in a new way, it creates the space for us to actually be in the world in a new way – to try it out, together … What makes A Thousand Ways, Part 3: An Assembly such a remarkable work is that it not only eschews didacticism, it almost entirely elides all the conventions of theater to achieve the theater’s ends. One can imagine multitudinous incarnations of this performance across multiple geographies, with numerous, diverse publics, each temporary micro-community invited to co-create, even if only for a brief moment in time, a collective story that becomes a shared history. After all is said and done, even if they never see each other again, everyone who was there will be able to look back and say “This was our story, this is what we did and this is who we became.”

– *Culturebot*

THE NEW YORKER

THE THEATRE NOVEMBER 2, 2020 ISSUE

EXPERIMENTS IN AUDIO THEATRE, RADICAL AND RETRO

"A Thousand Ways" and "Shipwreck" suggest a vast realm of possibility available to playwrights making new work in the COVID era.

By Alexandra Schwartz

October 26, 2020



Illustration by Raphaelle Macaron

"Look with thine ears," Lear tells poor blind Gloucester, and that is exactly what the rest of us should do now we know that the majority of New York theatres will not open their doors until, at the most optimistic guesstimate, the middle of next year. Zoom fatigue set in months ago, but audio is stepping into the breach to take us places that glazed screen-gazing can't. The eyes tend toward the literal, while what we only hear can bloom, the way a novel does, in the privacy of the mind, as is the case with two new productions—one radical, one retro—that use audio to light a path forward for performance in the covid era and beyond.

"A Thousand Ways" (produced by the Brooklyn-based ArKtype) was created by the duo Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone, who go by the moniker 600 Highwaymen and are known for devising inventive, sincere theatre of a kind that makes urbane audiences fatted on cynicism feel wonder afresh. In "This Great Country," from 2012, seventeen performers, some experienced, some green, acted out scenes from "Death of a Salesman," transforming that classic into something rich and strange; "Employee of the Year," staged in 2014, had five girls under the age of eleven tell the story of one woman's adulthood. Browde and Silverstone, who are partners in life as well as in theatre, insist that they hate audience participation, which is a little like Elmer Fudd saying that he hates hunting wabbits. "The Fever," which premièred in New York in 2017, is described, by its creators, as "a public convergence," and involves much communal writhing and laying on of hands; people who attended the show describe it as if they had gone to an ordinary church service and left speaking in tongues.

The term "experimental" tends to signal an ambition to flaunt difficulty and occlude meaning, but 600 Highwaymen's experiments with theatrical form are distinctly generous. That is the case with "A Thousand Ways," which

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takes a simple premise and turns it into magic. The piece is designed to be staged, ultimately, in three parts, the latter of which will involve physical encounters, safety permitting. Part 1 is being rolled out virtually, by fourteen theatres around the globe, from Toronto to Dublin to Singapore. It consists of an hour-long phone call between two strangers, mediated by a friendly female-sounding robot. I participated in a performance "at" Williams College, where my ticket confirmation came with instructions reminiscent of those you'd receive when pledging a secret society or delivering a ransom. At the stroke of eight, I was to call a number and be introduced to my partner; I should be in "a quiet, interruption-free indoor space," with a fully charged phone. (In fact, I used a landline. Have you heard of them? They're fantastic—no news alerts, and you can't lose hours of your life to Instagram.) And there my partner was—a male voice, nameless, as I was to him. We were asked, by the robot, to say hello, and then to decide which of us would be Person A and which Person B. This accomplished, we were prompted to describe, in simple, specific terms, aspects of the rooms we were in, and to put our hands on our cheeks, grounding ourselves in the physical.

It's amazing what a voice conveys, and what it doesn't. Person A, I decided right away, was a retiree who'd figured he might as well try something new. Wrong! Prompted by the robot, my partner revealed that he was born in 1988. I, meanwhile, was asked merely to say if I was alive then; he would never know that I was only a year older than he was. The deliberately asymmetrical titration of information is integral to the mystery and pleasure of "A Thousand Ways." It eliminates the polite "and you?" reflex. How novel, and relaxing, to give up conversational control—to feel interest without needing to perform it for the sake of social lubrication, to abandon the instinct to convince or entertain. I learned that my partner was gay and proud of it ("I do, in a very positive way, have limp wrists," he said, when asked to describe a physical mannerism), and that he was a painter. He learned that my ancestors, whom I was asked to describe in three words, were poor Ashkenazi Jews. He found out that I have never shot a gun, and that I know how to train a dog. (Well, sort of.) The robot asked A to tell me if he had inherited money; she asked me to describe a quality from childhood that I wished I could recover. What we were doing was dancing, using only our voices, learning each other's rhythms as the steps were called, the random and the banal grapevining with the profound.

There was a story, of a sort, woven through all this choreographed talk. The robot asked us to imagine that we were in a car that had broken down in a desert; by the end, we were camping together by a fire under the stars, disaster averted. Something here touched on the twee. Nonetheless, when the Person A in my own life walked through the door and accidentally destroyed my desert by turning on the lights, I waved him wildly out. I wanted to stay on that frequency, with that stranger, until we were severed by the robot's brusque "goodbye," leaving me with that best and rarest of feelings—wanting more.

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Alexandra Schwartz has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2016.

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The New York Times

Strangers on a Phone, Theatrically Speaking

Social distance has left us rusty when it comes to connecting with strangers. The latest piece by 600 Highwaymen aims to help us practice — starting with a call.



Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone make up 600 Highwaymen, the theater troupe unspooling a related trio of shows under the title "A Thousand Ways." Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times



By Laura Collins-Hughes

Nov. 11, 2020, 10:00 a.m. ET

In the lockdown days of early spring, after they'd left New York City for their house in a village upstate, Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone — better known as the experimental theater duo 600 Highwaymen — were as eager as any other drama aficionados to dig into the bounty of archived productions that were suddenly, mercifully online.

It wasn't as much fun as expected.

“I’m sitting in my living room,” Silverstone recalled by phone recently, “and I’ve got my dog in my lap and I’m watching this Peter Brook show, but something isn’t right about this.”

The not-rightness had nothing to do with Brook, the pioneering stage director, and everything to do with the nagging awareness — familiar to those of us who have struggled to adjust to screened theater — that the audience, so vital to the live dynamic, is superfluous to performances unfolding on camera.



“All of our shows are always in some way about the body, and everything that comes with the body,” said Silverstone, who lives and works with Browde. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

“I don’t feel —” Silverstone broke off.

“Needed,” Browde supplied, because they are the kind of couple that finishes each other’s sentences.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m going to get up and, like, go get a cookie, and this thing is going to keep happening.”

But frustration can breed inspiration, in this case to refreshing effect. The latest I-dare-you show from 600 Highwaymen, “A Thousand Ways,” is a triptych whose first part, “A Phone Call,” is both a product of that digital alienation and the reason I wanted to speak with them.

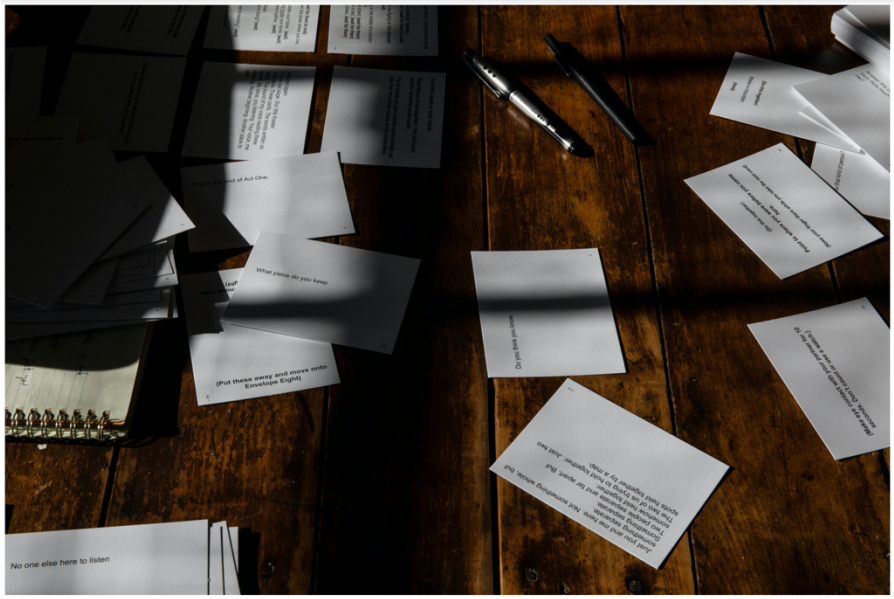
Mark Russell, the director of the Under the Radar festival at the Public Theater, will present “A Phone Call” from Dec. 21 through Jan. 17, first as a prelude to the annual festival, then as a part of it — continuing a relationship that started when he presented 600 Highwaymen’s “The Record” in 2014.

“I always say that Under the Radar is about ‘Why make theater now?’” Russell said. “And they are sort of the prime example of that, because they make the theater moment. They crack it open to its

essence. It's surprising, it puts you off, it's challenging, but when you walk away from one of those things, you will have feelings."

It sounds odd to describe an hourlong telephone chat, which is what "A Phone Call" is, as a work of theater, and I'm not even sure that it qualifies. Yet the performance, which requires two anonymous strangers and one automated voice to guide them through a structured conversation, employs the tools of theater. And it achieves more goals of theater — telling stories, triggering imagination, nurturing empathy, fostering connection — than nearly any other show I have experienced since pre-pandemic days.

There are actual stakes to it. As a confirmation email from the host venue warned before the call I took part in last month: "This experience is between you and one other person. It cannot occur without your presence."



Notecards with instructions to guide the in-person conversation between strangers that is the second part of the triptych. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

We are the performers, we are also the audience, and we could hardly be more necessary — or more socially distanced. I did "A Phone Call" by way of the Arts Center at N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi, matched with a student ending her Saturday in her dorm there as I started mine in my apartment in Manhattan.

I didn't learn her name or much about her beyond what kind of a child she remembers being, growing up in India; a few details about her family; and which professor advised her, kindly, to fail more. But I do know the sound of her overcoming nervousness to hum a tune, because the electronic voice asked her to, and of her saying, "Spooky!" when it instructed us to turn out our lights. I got a sense, too, of what makes her laugh.

In this time of widespread social isolation and fragmentation, our compassion has gotten rusty. It is not nothing, then, to make even a momentary connection — to spend an hour revealing pieces of oneself and imagining the complexity of someone else's humanity.

The prompts in the script elicited only bits of us, but they were enough. Near the finish, our robotic guide (not a human but rather a computer-coded, feminine simulation) told us to ask each other, rhetorically: "Can you see me out there in the world?" Then: "Have I come into focus?"

My unspoken answer, more certain than I'd have expected, was yes. There is a person out there whom I will probably never meet, but because of that call I am quietly cheering her on.

Following the pandemic's arc

The most striking thing about "A Thousand Ways" — which is produced by ArKtype and is not yet complete; Browde and Silverstone are still making the third part — is how its progress follows the arc of the pandemic and our response to it.

That first part (currently presented by Canadian Stage in Toronto, Arizona Arts Live in Tucson and the Singapore International Festival of Arts) is entirely distanced. As with online performance, people can get tickets to participate in "A Phone Call" from anywhere. In Browde's words, "You, the audience member, have to bring your own theater, you have to bring your own chair and you have to bring your own life."

The second part, "An Encounter" — which Russell hopes to present at the Public in January, ifstate regulations allow — takes place in person, but it, too, depends on the audience to enact it. Two strangers at a time, different pairs than in "A Phone Call," meet for 60 minutes at a table across a pane of plexiglass. With no audience to watch them, each follows prompts on a stack of index cards, but this part of the triptych is about looking, not listening. In a series of guided narratives, participants use visual information to imagine — the way we so often do with strangers — who the person on the other side might be.



Wolfram Sander and Lena Lappat meet with a pane of glass between them in the world premiere of the second part of the show, in Germany. Andres Greiner-Napp/Festival Theaterformen

"An Encounter" premiered in July at the Festival Theaterformen in Germany, where pandemic adjustments — a glass barrier and having just a single pair do the piece at a time — allowed a show already planned for this summer to go on. There, people were allowed to remove their masks once they were behind the partition. The piece is now at On the Boards in Seattle, taking place indoors with participants masked throughout. The artistic director, Rachel Cook, said each stack of cards is set aside for 24 hours after a single performance before being reused.

Only with its third part, "An Assembly," will "A Thousand Ways" return — once it's safe — to a more conventional form of theater involving a crowd. Because of the pandemic, it has no firm performance dates set anywhere, but Browde and Silverstone envision it as a gathering of about 80 people, sharing space, reading aloud.

For 600 Highwaymen, the triptych's time-wedded storytelling trajectory is new, and retrofitted. They were already working on "An Encounter" when the pandemic struck; the idea of complementing it with pieces at more extreme points on the social-distancing spectrum arose only when it was clear that there was no quick path back to live theater.



It feels like a long time ago: Audience members carry an actor across the length of the stage in the 600 Highwaymen's 2016 play "The Fever." Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

It is strange for them not to be present for performances of their work — to have, with part one, no control over crucial elements like a bad phone line or participants who just don't click. Even with part two, they feel, as Silverstone put it, like a "visual artist who ships something to a museum."

"All of our shows are always in some way about the body, and everything that comes with the body," he said. "And there is a perverse thing going on with bodies right now, which is that they are ill: We are sick, and we are spreading it. And so I don't know what that's going to do for our work."

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"I'm thinking," Browde said, "about another show of ours called 'The Fever,' where it's performed by the audience and it's 70 people in the room and you're very close to one another — even moments of physical contact between audience members. I can't even reconcile in my head what it would be like to ever get to do that show again."

In the four years before the pandemic, 600 Highwaymen were on the road more often than not. When they headed upstate in March, they welcomed the break. And like so many people far from their families, they picked up the telephone.

"The phone is a way that I can hold my mother right now," Silverstone said. "I can sit here on the couch, and I can look out the window, and I know she is halfway across the country and she is old and she is frail and she is scared, but I can listen to her voice and somehow in both of our fear, together, we can connect."

In that old-fashioned method of communication, he and Browde recognized theatrical utility. It's a form that suits their work much better than Zoom, which she said is "not as vulnerable of a space" as the phone, where you can "hear the moment when someone's voice cracks, or the moment when they pause, even, and don't say anything at all."

In "A Phone Call," the electronic voice asks us to imagine we're together in a car that breaks down in the desert.

"We were having so much fun a minute ago," it says.

As were we all, relatively, before the virus came and stopped so many things.

In the show, night falls, and someone makes a fire. We bed down under the stars and tell a story.

Like 600 Highwaymen in a pandemic, we use what simple tools we have. We make the best of it.

'The Awesome Strangeness of Being Alive'
The plays of 600 Highwaymen.

Review: 'The Fever' Finds That Friendliness Can Be Contagious Jan. 5, 2017



Review: A Woman Grows Up in 'Employee of the Year' Jan. 12, 2016



An Assembly of Quietly Moving Parts Jan. 10, 2014



Willy Loman With an iPhone, Fit for the 21st Century July 12, 2013



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600 HIGHWAYMEN
Abigail Browde & Michael Silverstone





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