

BRANTWOOD: Canada's Largest Experiment in Immersive Theatre

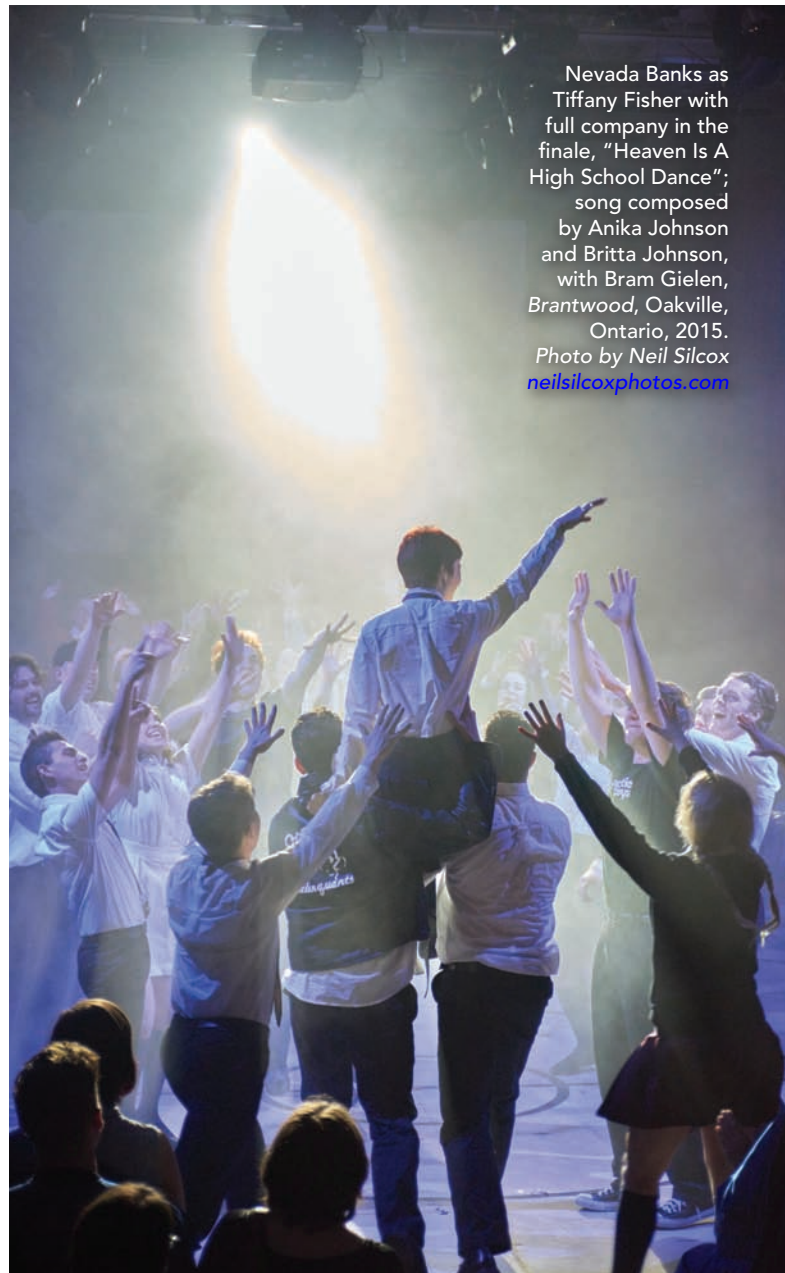
by Julie Tepperman and Mitchell Cushman

As co-creators, co-writers, co-directors, co-**EVERYTHING** of *Brantwood*, we find ourselves at a particularly challenging moment: it has been just over two years since our production at Sheridan College, and ever since we've been determined to find a long-term home for *Brantwood* to live in downtown Toronto. After obsessively pursuing a potential lease opportunity for a specific empty school building for over a year, days before finishing this article we have just received word that our plans to lease this particular building have fallen through. And so, we find ourselves at this moment back at the venue drawing board. While it is somewhat demoralizing to reflect on a process at the same time as hustling to keep the dream of its future life alive, we always knew this wasn't going to be easy. You see, we built *Brantwood* to be impossibly big, and to live far beyond its inaugural Sheridan production. Wait ... let's back up. After all, *Brantwood* is all about time travel.

How *Brantwood* Came to Be

Towards the end of 2014, Michael Rubinoff, Associate Dean of Visual and Performing Arts at Sheridan College, approached the two of us about creating an original immersive, site-specific production—the final project for the 2015 musical theatre graduating class. One of the buildings presented to us as a possible venue was Brantwood—an elementary school located in the heart of Oakville, Ontario. Brantwood had originally opened its doors in 1920, and closed them in its ninetieth year, in 2010, due to a lack of enrolment. It had since been sitting empty and was set to be demolished. But in the interim, the city of Oakville gave Sheridan permission to activate it. As immersive theatre creators, this is the kind of rare opportunity that you dream about.

The instant we toured the school, we knew it was the perfect playground. The building was bursting with theatrical possibilities. Given its identity as an educational facility, and the youthful age of the performers, our minds went straight to high school—an incredibly exciting and emotionally charged time, with universal resonance. We became excited to explore the inevitable loss of innocence that defines adolescence, and the ways in which teenagers unknowingly re-enact the same social dynamics, experiments, transgressions, and mistakes from one generation to the next, through each era's own historical lens. Also, given the triple-threat skills of the student performers, we set out to make it a musical.



Nevada Banks as Tiffany Fisher with full company in the finale, "Heaven Is A High School Dance"; song composed by Anika Johnson and Britta Johnson, with Bram Gielen, Brantwood, Oakville, Ontario, 2015. Photo by Neil Silcox neilsilcoxphotos.com



The audience boards one of six yellow school buses en route to Brantwood High in Oakville, Ontario, for the Sheridan College spring 2015 production.

Photo by John Jones, johnjones.ca

The Audience Invitation

When audiences arrived at Sheridan College, they were given: a locker to keep their belongings; a graduation gown; and an invitation to board a yellow school bus, where characters from the show shared some *Brantwood* history and “house rules” during the ten-minute drive to the venue. Upon arrival, they were welcomed by Principal Headley, along with members of Brantwood’s final graduating class.

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The premise was that, in light of Brantwood’s imminent closure, the graduating class had organized a giant alumni reunion—one last “hurrah” before the school would be re-developed into “The Chalkboard Lofts” (of which Principal Headley was becoming the CEO). As part of this welcoming ceremony, Headley surprises everyone with a newly unearthed time capsule, buried by Brantwood’s first inaugural class of 1920, with explicit instructions not to open it for one hundred years. At the last minute, Brantwood’s valedictorian Tiffany Fisher interjects, begging Principal Headley to heed these instructions, lest disaster strike. But Headley ignores her and the time capsule is opened, unleashing a cosmic explosion which hurtles the audience back in time to explore one hundred years of life at Brantwood.

Structurally, this part unfolded in two one-hour cycles, meaning all of the storylines would repeat twice in an evening (save the present-day storyline, which continued its story arc.) At the end

of the second cycle, the audience was summoned into the large gymnasium where a final plot twist was revealed, culminating in a giant finale musical number, *Heaven Is A High School Dance*. Had we not been restricted by needing to vacate the school and get the mostly out-of-town audience back onto the school buses, we would have then transitioned into a full-on high school dance party, inviting the audience to nostalgically dance into the night—one of the many items on our wish list for the next incarnation of *Brantwood*.

Initial Inspirations and Challenges

Like many immersive theatre buffs, we have been very inspired by the work of the UK company Punchdrunk, in particular *Sleep No More*, which has been running in New York City for the past seven years, produced by the innovative team Emursive. As playwrights, we were intrigued to explore how one could create a similarly voyeuristic, highly-designed exploratory experience, but driven by scripted text. We were also excited to explore the role that live, sung music could offer.¹

From the beginning, design was an integral part of the creation process. We had in our possession a building that, architecturally speaking, already looked and felt like a school, but it was empty and filthy, and needed to be imbued with the Brantwood spirit. Our incredible team of designers—Jon Grosz and Ken MacKenzie (set and props), Nick Blais (lighting), Chris Thornborrow (sound), and Nina Okens (costumes)—joined us in conjuring up a school where every nook and cranny of the building was active at all times, through action, scenic design, soundscape, and lighting. Not to mention the challenge of costuming a hundred different characters that span a century’s worth of fashion, where actors would have just a minute to transition from one character to the next, and in full view of the audience. We re-populated the school with desks, chairs, and paper props of all kinds, even bringing thousands of books to make a library; we painted the halls and stairwells maroon—Brantwood’s school colour—and affixed the “Brantwood Bulldog” emblem at the entrance. We brought in hundreds of lockers, filled trophy cases, and hung graduation photos, banners, and posters. Certain spaces were dedicated to a specific era; others were constructed so they could exist in a handful of eras. For instance, a “No Dogs or Jews” flyer from our 1930s storyline hung on a hallway bulletin board right next to present-day anti-racism and tolerance posters. The side-by-side juxtaposition was subtle, since we treated the hallways as “timeless” spaces, yet fully intentional. Anyone who caught them while chasing the 1930s storyline might be momentarily yanked out of the past; anyone who happened to see the anti-Semitic sign out of context would no doubt find it jarring, and perhaps be made curious enough to investigate why it was there.

Building Brantwood’s Bones

From discovering the school to the first day of rehearsal, we had about a year to create the show. This included two week-long workshops with the students, which allowed us to test-drive the material, both script and music, as it was being developed. This process allowed the students to invest in their characters and embrace our premise and the challenges of this unique performance



The audience enters Brantwood High in Oakville, Ontario, for the Sheridan College production of *Brantwood*.
Photo by John Jones, johnjones.ca

opportunity early on, so that by the time we began rehearsals proper, they were all in.

After we established our high school premise, we holed up in a rented apartment for four months and began inventing characters and storylines. We started by delving into the nature of high school experiences—ones that we had ourselves, stories we had heard from friends, and things that we imagined. We watched things like the *Back To The Future* trilogy, and *Freaks and Geeks* for inspiration. Wanting to reach beyond our own personal and imagined experiences, we eventually created a high school questionnaire, inviting people of all ages to tell us stories about their high school experiences: teenage firsts, bullying, favourite and least favourite teachers, embarrassing moments, experimentation with alcohol, drugs, and sex, what kind of music people were listening to, what their wardrobe consisted of, what people wish they would have done differently, and advice they would now impart to their teenaged self.

Given the task of exploring the high school experience through eleven different historical lenses, we rigorously researched significant cultural and political moments from 1920 onwards, and eventually began to assign our endless list of high school experiences to specific decades. For instance, we were curious to explore teenaged pregnancy, and decided we'd get the most creative mileage by placing it in our 1950s storyline, when women's choices were limited and abortions were still illegal in Canada and dangerous to obtain. Same-sex relationships were explored in our 1920s and 1960s storylines; racism and gender politics in the 1930s and 1940s; sexual awakenings and deviances in the 1970s; drug culture in the 1980s; transgender issues in the 1990s. It was never our goal to have *Brantwood* be an "issues" play, but rather to have the plethora of characters and relationships drive the narrative. Once we assigned every decade with a series of experiences, we began storyboarding. We invented characters and detailed plot points, and also began "song-spotting"—identifying which mo-

ments might work better told through song and what the content of said song might be.

At the forefront of our minds from day one was how the stories would unfold in relationship to the venue. We had the privilege of having access to the school early on (as opposed to inventing an idea, and then searching for a venue), and so we set out to get to know the building intimately. We toured it repeatedly, spending full days there on our own and mapping out where each moment could happen, timing how long it might take one character to get from point A to point B, while always thinking about the intimacy of the audience experience.

We attempted to fill every nook and cranny of the building, and created multiple vantage points for many of the scenes. For instance, in a scene we called "The Parallel History Class," a student in the 1980s storyline is giving a lecture about the Holocaust and Brantwood students' involvement in the Hitler Youth Movement. His slideshow, projected on the blinds of a window, reveals an old photograph of someone who looks oddly like him beating up a Jewish student who is tied to a basketball pole. Then, the actor giving the presentation pulls up the blind to reveal the actual beating unfolding on the basketball court in real time. He transforms into the boy from the photograph, revealing his Hitler Youth uniform underneath his 1980s school uniform, and leaves the classroom (with some audience members choosing to follow him) only to enter the live scene outside thirty seconds later, leaving the audience who remains in the classroom to watch the beating play out from the window. The audience who caught the scene on the basketball court will have no idea that this "parallel" scene has taken place; the audience who stayed in the classroom and watched it from the window will have an opportunity to experience it from the perspective of the basketball court in the next hour, or by returning another night.

Clockwork Precision

Because we had 42 actors playing several parts over the course of an hour filled with complex material, the logistics, timing, and precision were of the utmost importance. We created a map, first by hand with colour-coded cue-cards and symbols that we taped onto a long wall in our apartment. We then eventually transferred this matrix onto a detailed excel spreadsheet (a print out of which could be stumbled upon by the audience in a basement room of the school full of Brantwood artifacts).

This "Master Tracking Spreadsheet" (our *Brantwood* bible) listed every performer with the names of their characters down the left side, and every minute of action 0:00–0:01 – 0:59–0:60 across the top. We colour-coded each decade, and named every scene (noting anything that was a song or a 1–1 encounter in a coloured font), so that as we built each storyline, we could track every actor's journey by the minute. Because every actor played multiple characters (separated by era, not by spirit) and would transition from one character to the next often while travelling from one location to the next, this spreadsheet guided us in mapping out who was available and what action could happen when and where. We were constructing a giant puzzle, or carefully setting up a giant game of Jenga; it quickly became impossible to tweak one character's actions without toppling over other seemingly disparate characters and storylines.

	CHARACTERS	0:00-0:01	0:01-0:02	0:02-0:03	0:03-0:04	0:04-0:05	0:05-0:06	0:06-0:07	0:07-0:08	0:08-0:09	0:09-0:10
Male 1	Roger	Prophecy	Prophecy	Prophecy	Prophecy		Affair	Affair	Affair	Affair	Affair
Male 2	Seth / Max	Drama	Drama	Drama		Wares	Wares	Wares	Wares	Wounds	Wounds
Male 3	Karl / Jonathan / Steve / Curtis	Drug Play	Drug Play	Drug Play	Drug Play	Drug Play		Mae Hero	Mae Hero		Grope
Male 4	Vince / Tyler	1st Day	1st Day	1st Day			Wares	Wares	Wares		Grope
Male 5	Cliff / Tozer / Jason						Wares	Wares	Wares		Grope
Male 6	Marilyn	Rave Set	Rave	Dream	Dream	Dream	Dream	Dream	Dream		Help Line
Male 7	AV Gary / AV Jerry / AV Larry / AV Terry	Rave Set	Rave	Rave	Rave	Rave	Rave				
Male 8	Rupert / The Mule	Caught	Caught	Caught		Mascot R	Mascot R	Mascot R	Mule	Mule	Mule

A screen shot of the first ten minutes of *Brantwood's* "Master Tracking Spreadsheet" for eight male characters (out of 42 total characters) from the 2015 production. Each scene is colour-coded by decade; a "white gap" means travel time and more than two "white gaps" indicates where the playwrights will be writing new material.

Image courtesy of Julie Tepperman and Mitchell Cushman

Audience Voyeurism

From an experiential perspective, our goal has always been to take "audience voyeurism" to a whole new level. For us, that starts by giving people free rein to follow whomever they choose, to explore any space and engage with any element of the production, be it character, design, or the building itself. We are both obsessed with exploring what it means to implicate the audience in the action, to push the boundaries of intimacy between the performers and the audience, while also never losing sight of the fact that it is our job as creators to tell the story to the audience, and not the other way around.

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Working in this way together and separately for the past decade, we've come to believe that people, now more than ever, crave communal connection. We as a culture spend so much time communicating via technology that being physically immersed in a story, a new world, and being invited to role-play can be incredibly appealing. For us, exciting immersive theatre creates an environment that the audience is dropped into, a carefully chosen and intricately designed space that pushes the boundaries of intimacy, and that challenges traditional notions of how theatre and live performance can unfold. This could mean that there are no seats and that the audience is free to pursue their own vantage points, or perhaps that the audience and performers are put in very close proximity with each other, or maybe the performer breaks the fourth wall and casts the audience in a role beyond simply witness or fly on the wall.

This breaking down of the fourth wall: the close proximity of audience and actor can also make the audience feel complicit in the storytelling in ways that aren't necessarily true when witnessing a play on a stage from your seat. Even if the fourth wall is not broken, even if the audience is not cast in a role per se, the lack of barriers between actor and audience, and the fact that nobody is sitting in the dark, forces everyone in the space to be aware of each other. This complicity can become very intense in moments

of intimacy, violence, abuse, and trauma. It's a strange sensation to stand next to someone who is in pain (even if you know they are an actor portraying a character) and to not do something, not step in and help. The dilemma of "Should I intervene or will I ruin the scene?" is palpable, not dissimilar to the way a passive bystander might feel in a real-life scenario as they question whether or not they should intervene.

For instance, as far as we know, nobody ever tried to stop the beating of the Jewish student or untie him from the basketball pole. This is understandable in that the actors and the writing left very little room for participation in that scene, hardly acknowledging the audience's presence. However, in an earlier moment in that same plotline, a member of the Hitler Youth Movement has five-minutes where he walks around the school with the "No Dogs or Jews" flyers and some tape, and very politely asks individuals for help putting them up. He'd hand it to them face down so that they couldn't see the content of the flyer while he put tape on the back. Then, he'd ask them to stick it on the wall, and the horrified looks that came over people's faces as they realized what they had



Claire Calnan teaches a "Life Skills" class (present-day storyline) in *Brantwood*, Oakville, Ontario, 2015. Photo by Neil Silcox neilsilcoxphotos.com

http://ctr.utpjournals.press/doi/pdf/10.3138/ctr.173.002 - Julie Tepperman <jtepp@brantwood.com> - Thursday, January 18, 2018 11:59:22 AM - IP Address: 66.207.103.186

just hung up was astonishing. There were many instances where the audience member immediately tore it down and scolded the boy; one woman attempted to counsel him, and gave him a look into “the future,” telling him all she knew about the impending Holocaust. We observed others randomly pulling them down as they walked the halls, possibly entirely oblivious to its context for being there, other than knowing that the adventure they were on spanned a century, and so racism is inevitable. This immersive form can uniquely and unexpectedly challenge audience members to be complicit in the ugly parts of history, often without warning, all the while holding a mirror up to the present.

Immersive experiences often take place in site-specific venues, but perhaps even more often they tend to unfold in non-traditional venues that have been transformed into a fictional space conducive to creating heightened levels of engagement. This choice of space is paramount, and should never feel like a cheap gimmick. Perhaps a more effective term than “site-specific” is “site-engaging,” which combines the idea of space and activation. How does the space serve the story? How does the space enhance the audience’s experience of the play? At the end of the day, if you feel that the best place for said play is on a stage in a theatre, then do it on a stage in a theatre!

We believe that exciting immersive theatre demands engagement; it invites the audience to be an integral and active part of their theatre-going experience—not to be confused with older notions of “audience participation.” We both personally shudder at the thought of being called up on stage to participate, to be forced into the spotlight. Immersive theatre can successfully invite the audience to participate, to be an active spectator in a plethora of ways: by creating a structure where they can choose their own adventure and chase characters and stories around a space; by being invited into a one-on-one; by being cast in a role (e.g. as students in a classroom, or by having a hall monitor give them a detention slip for running); or simply by deciding the vantage point from which they witness something.

The next level up from fly-on-the-wall spectatorship is an active, task-oriented participation. The audience might be invited to help a character do something, solve a puzzle, discover an “Easter Egg,” or make decisions that impact the story. And then there are the “one-on-one encounters,” incredibly immediate and intense. When characters break the fourth wall, look you in the eyes, offer you their hand, take you into a private space, reveal a secret ... it’s as if they are holding your heart in their hands. It’s a curated form of intimacy, and if the actor is a good improviser, a good listener, a good empathizer, they can spark an unforgettable experience, for both parties.

The Power of the Spell

We are truly humbled by how many audience members returned to Oakville again and again, to experience *Brantwood* two, three, four times during our brief three-week run. One gentleman in particular came back for at least six performances. We noticed him taking notes one night and worked up the courage to ask him what he was writing—was he a reviewer, a blogger, who was he?! Turns out he was a diehard fan of immersive theatre and live roleplay experiences. He was taking notes so he could “crack our code”—in fact, at the end of the run he e-mailed us his own self-

created *Brantwood* spreadsheet, which eerily mirrored our own. We had intentionally built this possibility for deep, long-lasting engagement into *Brantwood*’s DNA—and it was so exciting for immersion-seekers like this gentleman to answer the call, and uncover some of our most deeply imbedded secrets.

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The Future of Brantwood

As we mentioned at the beginning, we built *Brantwood* to be big, and to have a future life in a more permanent, more centrally located and accessible venue. Even if we had wanted to remount it for a longer run at the school in Oakville, we couldn’t; we knew from day one that the building had a limited life before it was to be demolished. Yes, we built this version of *Brantwood* for this specific building (we even named the show after the original school), but most everything else is based in fiction, even if there are elements of real history, politics, and pop culture imbued in the storylines. With a few tweaks, *Brantwood*’s premise, themes, and the universal nostalgia that comes with the high school experience will allow it to take place in potentially any vacant school in a plethora of geographic locations. We’ve even considered certain warehouses as a potential new venue, recognizing of course that a warehouse would come with the added challenge of making it feel like a school, but also with the added advantage of having a clean slate for dreaming big design-wise. The longevity of spaces is ever the challenge when creating site-specific, site-engaging theatre; most venues are non-transferable, and so if it’s sold, or if the owners don’t want you back, etc. the piece and any dreams the creators have for a future life might die along with the venue.

We were incredibly fortunate to have the support of Sheridan’s resources to help us realize our vision for what we now refer to as our “proof of concept” run. The massive scale and scope was unprecedented, for most any theatre, let alone a learning institution. The budget was hugely subsidized by the student performers and student production crew as a result of this project being programmed into their curriculum. We have often been asked if we could scale down a professional production in order to save costs, but as noted above, if one Jenga block goes, the entire structure collapses.

We also deeply believe that it is *Brantwood*’s immense, intricate canvas that makes it worthy of further exploration. Now that we know how *Brantwood* works, we are excited not simply to repeat the experience, but to enlarge and enhance it: to build more moments where characters, stories, and histories can smash together, in an attempt to create an even more fulfilling immersive encounter for the audience, who we hope will be inspired to return again and again.



Cast members perform "The Lacrosse Ballet" as students on the "Brantwood Bulldogs" lacrosse team (from the 1986 storyline) in *Brantwood*, Oakville, Ontario, 2015.

Photo by John Jones, johnjones.ca

Note

- 1 For more insight into the challenges of site-specific musicals, see Grahame Renyk's interview with Julie Tepperman in the *CTR* 171.

About the Authors

Julie Tepperman is an actor, playwright, and Co-Artistic Director of Convergence Theatre; Mitchell Cushman is a director, playwright, and Artistic Director of Outside the March. *Brantwood's* future currently lies in wait as they search for a perfect new venue in which to cast its next spell. If you know of a building that might be suitable, in Toronto or anywhere in the world, they invite you to get in touch (mitchellandjulie@gmail.com), and perhaps one day soon we can all return to high school together!