

X Marks the Spot: Rick Miller Finds Perspective

Where did the concept of BOOM originate?

BOOM started with a desire to tie the evolution of rock and roll to the politics of the 50s and 60s, and to 'perform' this history in a multimedia time capsule. I then started collecting stories from my father, who grew up during World War II in Vienna, Austria. His story of actually having a Nazi flag in his Grade 2 classroom really woke me up to the diversity of lives lived during the baby boom years. This prompted me to gather stories from my mother, and the people who shaped her life as she came of age in Canada. In the end, the documentary format seemed most compelling way to combine personal stories with the larger stories of politics, culture and music.

Did you always see it as part of a trilogy?

Yes, from a very early stage, I saw BOOM as a trilogy of shows that would collectively document 75 years of history, as told through the stories of 3 generations: Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials. There was a structural symmetry to the concept that appealed to me: 25 years, 100 minutes, 100 characters for each show. From a personal perspective, I was also able to draw connections between my own experience and the experiences of my parents and my children.

You recently premiered BOOM X at Theatre Calgary. How long have you been working on this second installment? How is premiering a new work different from performing an established one?

I started conceptualizing BOOM X during the Canadian tour of BOOM in 2015-16. I had a hunch that if BOOM was mostly expressed through circles, cycles and cylinders, BOOM X would have a harder edge to it: walls, surfaces, planes...

Research began in Banff in March of 2017, right around the time that Stafford Arima commissioned the show to premiere as part of his first season at Theatre Calgary. That set the gears in motion, and our creative team spent much of 2017 and 2018 developing the play in Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City, Calgary and Banff.

I've been developing new work for over 20 years now and have become quite used to the unique challenges that come with it. My architecture background leads me to

think of my shows as 'buildings' under construction. You're not dealing with another author's words or imagery, so everything is always under question, and no show ever feels truly 'complete'. That may sound frustrating – it is, at times – but the key for me is channel that frustration into fuel and keep driving forward.

How does incorporating music help in telling these stories?

Like many of us, I was deeply influenced by the music I listened to in my youth, and those songs carry a lot of emotional weight. Like the time I first heard Queen and David Bowie's Under Pressure coming out of my clock radio on CHOM-FM - the song still gives me chills! Music was what first drew me into performance, as it reaches beyond words, and taps into the deeper recesses of our brain and our collective experience.

In BOOM, I felt it important to capture the music of the time, but also the political, cultural and technological influences behind each song. The same principle applies to BOOM X, but on a more personal level. At a very young age, I was able to imitate popular singers, and found the biggest payoff was to parody them... even though I secretly wanted to be one of them! By the end of BOOM X, just as a generation found its voice through music, I also found a voice of my own.

Was there anything about your personal history that you discovered while researching BOOM or BOOM X?

In BOOM, I was able to relive the stories of my parents, and as such, found a great deal of myself in them. No surprise – one of the show's themes is that history is more cyclical than we think, and we become our parents whether we like it or not!

In BOOM X, it was a bit harder to get perspective, as it was my own generation, and there were so many contrasting expressions within it. That's why I find the personal stories so important to the show. There's something universal to every coming-of-age story, no matter where (and when) you come from.

Personally, I've begun to understand the impact of growing up with network television, and the advertising that made it possible. It led to an escapism that at first drove my imagination, but later came crashing down to the harsh reality of a recession, unemployment, and 1990s anxiety. One of the main stories in BOOM X is of a privileged, middle-class white kid waking up to a world of chaos and complexity and struggling to find his place within it.

What are the pros and cons of performing a one-man show?

Pros: no auditions. Cons: no cast parties. ;)

When you write, direct, and perform a solo show on tour, solitude is a given. You have to accept it, take advantage of it, and then appreciate the times when you're back home with your family.

Though many people know me for my solo work, I spend much of my time collaborating on multi-actor shows with my Kidoons creative partner Craig Francis. Each show is an entirely unique experience but working collaboratively is always a refreshing change from the obsessive introspection of a one-man show.

That said, theatre, even a solo theatre piece, is a deeply collaborative art, and there's always a team around you to help achieve a collective vision. Ultimately, when the audience experiences the work, it becomes even more collaborative. I don't know if theatregoers appreciate the role they play in the creative process. It's a constant exchange of information and energy, especially in shows like BOOM X, where I speak directly to the people in the room.

Would the BOOM trilogy be better served with a larger cast? I don't think so; it's a personal quest to understand history by immersing myself in it and drawing conclusions from it. If BOOM X had a cast of 12, it would be an entirely different experience, and not nearly as 'impressive'. I think creating an impression on the audience is crucial to the future of live theatre. If we're going to draw people away from the terrific content they can get for free on their devices at home, we need to create an experience that leaves an impression, and that needs to be experienced live in order to fully appreciate it.

How would you describe and introduce BOOM X, especially to those that may have not seen BOOM?

The most frequent comment we heard after BOOM was that it was unlike anything people had ever seen before, and I think BOOM X will provoke similar reactions to anyone who comes at it for the first time.

Here's my best take: BOOM X is a solo multimedia performance in which I give voice to over 100 characters, trying to capture the defining moments of "Generation X". It

moves chronologically through 1970 to 1995, mixing personal stories of several GenX characters with the big stories in music, culture and politics. It's got amazing musical performances: about 30 songs that cover prog rock, punk, disco, new wave and grunge. It's got incredible multimedia, mixing high tech and low tech in very playful ways. It's funny, it's moving, and I think you should bring your parents and your kids. I guarantee you'll understand each other better and have an explosively good time. BOOM!

What is your favourite era? Why?

BOOM made me very curious about the late 1960s, and how it must have felt to experience that unique explosion of creativity and counter-cultural resistance. But to answer your question, I don't have a favourite era, although I naturally have a fondness for the 1980s... the era in which I came of age. That's when I developed an emotional connection to historical and cultural events, especially to music. I grew up with MuchMusic and MTV, played Pac-Man and Dungeons and Dragons, and was victim to some of the worst fashion trends in modern history! But I also loved my life, and I look back not with nostalgia or regret (both are pointless, in my opinion), but with an ever-present hope that we can learn from the past to build a better future.

Are there any challenges in trying to tell this story on stage to younger audiences when so much is readily available online in this technological age? Or, do you find younger audiences are more familiar with historical facts and musical references?

I believe the challenge is not to bring young people into the theatre, but to get them to keep coming back. Young people derive so much meaning from their screens, that to ask them to find meaning in a stage show can be a hard sell. But if you create an experience that is uniquely theatrical, and that blends creativity, playfulness, humour and intelligence, you can engage audiences of all ages, and make a lasting impression.

Kids have become increasingly good at making connections, just like the internet that they grew up with. So shows like BOOM and BOOM X, which are all about big picture connections, have a natural appeal to young people. They also bring generations together. We realize how similar we all are at the core, and how seeing those connections can deepen our relationships, and give us a bigger perspective when we feel lost or cynical – which is a trait common to all generations.

Any predictions for future generations?

As I begin to conceive the third show in the trilogy – BOOM Z – it's tempting (and daunting) to speculate about where we're heading. Having immersed myself in stories from the last 75 years, I see developing patterns, and alarming trends.

In my opinion, all the major conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s had their roots in World War II. And today's renewed nationalism and brutal political discourse had seeds planted in the 70s, sprouted in the 80s, and erupted in the 1990s. Everything seems connected, and nothing seems new. That sentiment is both cynical and hopeful. Cynical in that we'll never break out of vicious cycles, hopeful in that we can transform them into virtuous cycles.

I'm neither a historian nor a futurist. I'm a storyteller, and I humbly hope that our theatrical 'construction' can play a role in that transformation. Let's keep telling stories in darkened rooms, and celebrate what we have in common, instead of dwelling on our divisions.

Interview by Jamie Tymchuck. Our thanks to Jamie and Theatre Calgary.