

A 1959 radio stunt inspires Untitled Peter Tripp Project's descent into exhaustion

Secret location to be announced.

Published May 03, 2023 • Last updated May 03, 2023 • 3 minute read

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From left, Lee Henderson, Jayden Pfeifer and Johanna Bundon perform the Untitled Peter Tripp Project from May 4-6 at a secret location (TBA a week before the show). Lee Henderson

Untitled Peter Tripp Project

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Where: Secret location to be announced

Tickets: \$25 at pitheatre.com

In 1959, D.J. Peter Tripp broadcast for 201 hours straight from a glass booth in Times Square. The effects of the stunt, the legend that grew up around it, and the relationship between exhaustion and performance are themes running through The Untitled Peter Tripp Project.

In the theatre piece, Regina artists Johanna Bundon, Jayden Pfeifer and Toronto-based Lee Henderson use movement, improvised and written text, image projection, radio frequency programming, and the fracturing/looping of sound recordings to conjure the kind of hallucination, fugue states and doppelgänger-paranoia that accompany eight days without sleep.

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We talked to Henderson about the show:

Q: How did you become aware of Tripp's story? And what made you want to do this piece about him?

A: Jayden heard about him first, many years ago, maybe during a theatre

class. He was researching stuff that could be imagined as a monologue. And it stayed with him. He found out about the publicity stunt and then the urban legend around it that said that Peter Tripp lost his mind and never recovered. And I think (illusionist) David Blaine made reference to it in 2007 when he was attempting to beat the record for staying awake. But we were much less interested in that idea of permanent harm or permanent change happening than in the exhaustion of the act itself and how the performer uses exhaustion as a kind of collaborator. We contacted Tripp's daughter through Facebook and she said that he was fine afterwards, he just slept a bunch and then was fine.

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Q: And are there any recordings of those 200 hours that he did?

A: We haven't found any. There's a set of black-and-white photographs in Life Magazine of him in the DJ booth yawning, and at one point his wife, or maybe a nurse, is walking him around outside the booth to get some exercise. And a toga party found his booth, so there's a photo from inside looking out at all these college students in togas. But that's it. We've found a recording from the following year of his weekly DJ show, and we've included a few snippets of that. And we've taught ourselves the cadence of the late-1950s' DJ through those clips and some others.

Q: According to your bio, your interests are installation art, media and robotics. How does this piece fit in with those interests?

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A: There are a lot of custom electronics interfaces. We found that a lot of what we wanted to do wasn't necessarily conducive to or reliant on

traditional theatrical infrastructures, like a big lighting grid and a co-ordinated sound system. I've built these systems that let each of us, as performers, interface with the technology, like using light to control the position of sound in a room. It's more flexible and fluid and improvisational.

Q: Did exploring this radio stunt from 1959 let you see today's media landscape any differently?

A: We all grew up alongside the World Wide Web, Jayden and I just a little bit before. We still remember quite fondly terrestrial media. When I started working in video it was all analog, and there was a sense that the medium was bound to an object in some way. In some sense, when we started doing Zoom performances of this show, it was like the medium itself wanted to be more like broadcasts. You're not recording to tape or onto any kind of format; it's just in the ether, it happens and then it's smoke. If you were there, great, if you weren't, well, you missed it. On an audience level, I think there has always been this sense that those approaches are still viable and compelling, especially when we're so used to everything being immediately streamable and on-demand. It becomes a little bit of a radical act to have something that's not containable that same way.

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