

They Got Dared to Write These Plays

by Eliza Bent

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In **taxdeductible theatre's** *Dare Project*, the audience tells the artists what to create

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In the very best way, **taxdeductible theatre's** *Dare Project* reminds me of a game my friends and I invented in high school.

We called it the Exciting Game. When we were crammed in a booth at our local IHOP, we would take out one sugar packet per person and draw a smiley face on the back of just one of them. The packets were placed face down, and as conversation ricocheted from gleeful gossip to heartfelt angst, we would occasionally draw packets. Whoever got the smiley face had to do something exciting. This might mean sticking your fist into your friend's ice water, squirting mustard onto your pancake and eating it or, in one famous instance, asking the waitress for her phone number.

As silly as they were, these were also exhilarating moments. They were minor acts of rebellion that required our absolute commitment.

And with *The Dare Project*, **taxdeductible theatre** has an Exciting Game all its own.

Now in its 23rd installment—performing on February 25 at the Chain Theatre in Long Island City, Queens—the project begins when audience members dream up scenarios and then “dare” playwrights to create 10-minute plays about them. These playlets, usually about five in all, are developed for several weeks by the company, then put into a single evening of theatre. (The next round of dares is typically collected at the end the performance, letting the cycle start again.)

Though it’s integral to the company now, *The Dare Project* wasn’t always part of taxdeductible’s identity. The troupe launched with a focus on restaging overlooked contemporary plays.

However, one evening in 2006, a taxdeductible member was in a festival of 10-minute plays and told the rest of the group they shouldn’t both attending. Later, the company met at a bar and discussed the problems they felt were endemic with 10-minute scripts and the festivals that showcase them (i.e., not enough rehearsal time.) Artistic director Scott Casper recalls someone saying, “I could write a 10-minute play on a dare.”

“From there we ordered a round of tequila, and we each dared each other to write a 10-minute play,” Casper says. “We didn’t want it to be an improv game or a 48-hour project. We wanted to give it time. So we decided to give ourselves a month to write and then a month to rehearse and put [the plays] up as a show.”

The project sparked something in the group. It offered them a chance to work together collaboratively on something new and wholly their own. And while they initially just dared each other with ideas, they quickly realized that inviting their audiences to give them prompts would make the project even more inclusive and exciting. Now, audience members drop their dares in a hat, and writers draw them at random. “Once the writer draws a prompt there’s typically a shot of tequila,” Casper says.

The latest round of dares range from opaque (“ride the grey horse”) to simple (create “a quixotic quest”) to incredibly daunting (“write a play with one actor playing at least 30 characters”). There are five dares in this round, which also includes connective story threads throughout the evening.

When asked how *The Dare Project*, which has now produced over 100 pieces, is different from the 10-minute play festivals that the company once bemoaned, Casper says, “We actually take time to develop these shows. There’s a sense of ownership. These aren’t sketches. We develop and work collaboratively with artists who are engaged in the project. We treat it like a conservatory process, and I believe this translates to the artist’s experience as well as the audience’s experience.”

And like the random dramatic actions of the Exciting Game, *The Dare Project* forces everyone to plunge into something without hesitation.

“We bring the company to the idea right at inception, so the writer doesn’t stay siloed,” Casper says. “In fact, we don’t like to think of *The Dare Project* as a ‘writer project’ but a project of collaborative artists. A play might be written by me, but it’s *authored* by the company.”

Eliza Bent is a writer and performer based in New York City.
Photo from Dare Project 22 by Nicholas Alexiy Moran