The Fever

600 HIGHWAYMEN

WHEN:
WEDNESDAY,
FEBRUARY 14 &
THURSDAY,
FEBRUARY 15
8:00 PM

FRIDAY,
FEBRUARY 16
7:00 PM & 9:00 PM

VENUE:
BING
CONCERT HALL
STUDIO

Written and directed by Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone
Created in collaboration with Brandon Wolcott, Emil Abramyan, Eric Southern

Original Music: Brandon Wolcott and Emil Abramyan
Production Design: Eric Southern
Sound Design: Brandon Wolcott
Production Manager: Olivia Edery

With Tommer Peterson, Nile Harris, and Jax Jackson

The Fever was commissioned by The Public Theater and made possible with funding by
the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Theater Project, with lead funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation,
The Program

Rehearsing Empathy in
600 HIGHWAYMEN’s The Fever

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 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. 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?

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.

—Ira S. Murfin, Interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Theater and Drama, Northwestern University. This article was originally published in MCA Members’ Magazine, summer 2017.

600 HIGHWAYMEN

600 HIGHWAYMEN is the moniker for theater artists Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone. The duo has created eight original works since 2009, with presentations at many national and international venues, including Under The Radar (The Public Theater), Crossing the Line (French Institute Alliance Française), River to River (Lower Manhattan Cultural Council), Abrons Arts Center, Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, OH), On The Boards (Seattle, WA), Centre Pompidou and Parc de la Villette (France), Festival Theaterformen (Germany), Noorderzon Festival (The Netherlands), Zürcher Theater Spektakel (Switzerland), Onassis Cultural Centre (Greece), In BetweenTime International Festival (UK), OzAsia Festival (Australia), Salzburg Festival (Austria), and many others. The group received an Obie Award in 2014 and Zurich’s ZKB Patronage Prize in 2015. In 2016, Browde and Silverstone were named artist fellows by the New York Foundation for the Arts. They are currently working on a new project in collaboration with David Byrne.