

The Tale in Torbay: the site-specific festival where art walks on the wild side

Ingri Fiksdal's Diorama for Shoalstone Pool. Photo: Briony Campbell

Features

by Amber Massie-Blomfield - Sep 14, 2017

[TWEET THIS](#)

[SHARE NOW](#)

*During the course of two weekends, 10 miles of South Devon coast is being transformed by several site-specific performances. **Amber Massie-Blomfield** explores *The Tale* and how it is bringing the arts to the great outdoors*

It is 6.30am, and, at Meadfoot Bay on the outskirts of Torquay, I'm swimming with nature writer Philip Hoare. As the sun rises above the headland, we make our way out through the still, sky-bright water in the direction of East Shag Rock.

Hoare tells tales of the historic figures that haunt these shores: Oscar Wilde, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Wilfred Owen, who swam here as a teenager more than a century ago. It's a remarkable, if bracing, way to begin an arts experience.

Torbay, the deep bay that stretches from Torquay to Brixham, is like a "proscenium arch, overlaid with cultural and natural stories", Hoare adds.



Philip Hoare at the Torbay Museum, from where The Tale starts. Photo: Paul Blakemore

The perfect setting, then, for *The Tale*, a major new outdoor arts event created by Situations, the Bristol-based group dedicated to producing work inspired by place.

Throughout the day – or during a weekend, for those who prefer a more leisurely pace – audiences follow a trail of nine specially commissioned performances, experiences and installations by internationally renowned artists, staged along this 10-mile stretch of South Devon coast.

Inspired by Hoare’s essay that explores the history of the area, Situations’ director Claire Doherty says: “*The Tale* is both for people to discover this place, but also for residents to find a new relationship with where they live.”

The enterprise came about when Doherty and her team were invited by English Riviera Geopark to create a proposal for a large-scale arts project for Torbay, which was developed with funding from an Arts Council Ambition for Excellence Award.

While *The Tale*, like all of Situations’ projects, is a one-off, it is intended that the partnerships, ambition and investment of hundreds of locals will lead to further cultural activity locally.

Hoare says: “I would like people to think – especially the young, but anyone – that culture is not an add-on. It’s essential to human experience.

In times like these, it's crucial that you can express your humanity and values. That's what theatre does. Because people will close down your world. Lots of people are knocked back by life. I will not hold with this idea it's some kind of leisure activity."

Rather than bringing a new narrative to Torbay, the aim has been to draw out an array of stories from the area, and Situations has worked with 15 local partner organisations to create the project. "There is a strong politics about the different voices of a place," Doherty says.

Five Companies Making Work Outdoors

The National Theatre Wales

Why bother having a building when an entire country could be your theatre? National Theatre of Wales has presented plays on beaches, mountains and town squares. *We're Still Here* runs September 15-30 in Port Talbot's disused steel works.

Slunglow

Slunglow's epic, year-long show, *The Flood*, is partly staged in Hull's Victoria Dock, and features a cast of 58, four boats and a 35-foot petrol explosion. Part Four takes place September 26-29.

WildWorks

Cornish-based WildWorks has presented shows around the world, from harbour walls in Newcastle to castles in Belgium. It spends months developing projects in situ, firmly rooting work in the local community.

Artichoke

Artichoke's hugely ambitious public artworks includes *The Sultan's Elephant* – which shut down central London for four days while a giant, puppet elephant passed through, witnessed by more than one million people.

Simone Kenyon

Simone Kenyon's *Into The Mountain* takes inspiration from the writing of iconic mountaineer Nan Shepherd, investigating overlooked stories of women in the outdoors through dance and performance taking place in the Cairngorms.

There have been several recent arts-led regeneration enterprises on the English coast, bringing new vitality to long-neglected seaside resorts like Margate and Hastings. Yet, some of these projects have been accused of failing to benefit the local populations or work with local artists.

The Tale has sought to avoid these pitfalls. Melbourne-based theatre company *One Step at a Time Like This* has collaborated with a group of young locals to consider the distinct perceptions of Torquay held by summertime visitors and the community that calls it home.



One Step at a Time Like This' Immergence. Photo: Paul Blakemore

The result is Immergence, an immersive theatre tour that leads its participants, via audio guide, to the grubby corners hidden from tourists: a desolate car park, a back alley plastered in graffiti.

Proposing the whole world as a potential site for artistic, theatrical encounters invites audiences to respond to everyday things with an attention normally reserved for the gallery or the auditorium, its organisers say.

Julian Rickert, co-founder of One Step at a Time Like This, says: “When you’re at a theatre, when the lights go down on the audience and up on stage, you know everything that is lit is significant. What if we could bring that quality to the world outside? So that piece of rubbish, you think, what does it mean? You think who is that person, are they part of the show?”

Artistic associate Andy Field, who worked on The Tale during its early inception, believes that staging theatre and performance outside can bring a unique perspective to rural landscapes. “We tend to have very pictorial relationship with locations like this which can negate the community, the violence, the complexity. Performance can animate the hidden richness of place,” he says.

Situations’ work has been influenced by pioneers of outdoor arts, Doherty says, including the “scattered site exhibitions” of Mary Jane Jacob. The American curator’s 1991 exhibition Places With A Past treated the entire city of Chicago as a gallery, with 17 new pieces from artists

including Anthony Gormley and David Hammons, responding to local history.

Doherty also cites theatre director Robert Wilson's *Walking* at the 2012 Norfolk and Norwich Festival. Its audience, stripped of watches and mobile phones, traversed a three-mile stretch of Norfolk countryside at an unhurried pace of just one mile per hour, taking in installations and absorbing the landscape around them.

Making my way along the coast by foot and by ferry, I visit Paignton's grand, disused picture house. It is the backdrop for Britt Hatzius' *In Order Not To Be There*, where we sit in the pitch dark and listen the words of local primary school children describing an imagined film.

Later, I clamber down a steep track to an abandoned quarry on the cusp of the ocean. Lying on my back in the grass, I'm surrounded by a soundscape created by BAFTA-winning wildlife recordist Chris Watson. The song of orca whales echoes, eerily amplified by the vast shell of carved-out stone.

Creating art work in a landscape that is, at points, inhospitable, presents significant challenges in terms of ensuring the widest possible audience can engage.

Situations has partnered with Unlimited, a support programme for disabled artists, and British Sign Language-led tours and audio-described tours take place throughout the run.



Claire Cunningham makes a spine-like structure from crutches. Photo:

Paul Blakemore

It has also inspired creative reflection on the question of who has access to these types of environment. Claire Cunningham is a disabled choreographer who has typically presented work in 'traditional' performance spaces where, she says, "I can control how I'm perceived". But

collaborating on *The Tale* has led her to think about what it means “to step into a public space where I have to let go of that control”.

On the beach at Brixham, *Beyond the Breakwater* is a choreographic piece, in which, for two hours, Cunningham crafts a spine-like structure from crutches. The shifting pebbles are unsteady underfoot – with the audience struggling to keep its balance. “There’s a little bit of myself that I recognise in the way people move,” the choreographer says. “Everyone has to slow down and pay attention to where they’re walking.”

Later, we take our places in a row of deckchairs along the edge of Brixham’s saltwater lido for Ingri Fiksdal’s *Diorama for Shoalstone Pool*, a meditative performance that reflects on human evolution from the sea. As the sun sets, a group of figures progress across the poolside, their hypnotic, swaying movements reminiscent of the insistent roll of the tide. Clad in dazzling sequinned capes that pick up and reflect the colours of the landscape, they seem simultaneously alien, and entirely of this place.

Hoare will be leading dawn swims for audience members in Meadfoot Bay’s bracing waters on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the run. He speaks of the experience as a “baptism... it suddenly changes things, you are physically charged by it: it’s joining the water, being part of that greater environment”.

It’s the perfect introduction to an experience like *The Tale*: a symbolic immersion, and a joyous expression of what it feels like to belong to the world.

Philip Hoare’s book *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR*, drawing on themes from *The Tale*, is published by Fourth Estate. *The Tale* runs in Torquay, Paignton and Brixham on September 15-17 and September 22-24

Aged 17-30?

D/deaf or disabled?

**Interested in a career
in theatre, either
on stage or off?**



Amber Massie-Blomfield

Amber Massie-Blomfield is executive director of Camden People's Theatre

Get in touch

[Subscribe](#)
[About The Stage](#)
[Contact us](#)
[Advertising enquiries](#)
[Where to buy The Stage](#)
[Subscriptions FAQ](#)
[Scholarships FAQ](#)
[Press Centre](#)
[Login](#)
[Logout](#)

Awards

[The Stage Awards](#)
[The Stage Debut Awards](#)
[The Stage Edinburgh Awards](#)
[UK Theatre Awards](#)
[SMA Awards](#)

Legal

[Cookies](#)
[Terms and conditions](#)
[Advertising terms and conditions](#)
[Contributor agreement](#)
[Privacy policy](#)
[House rules](#)

Editorial

[Home](#)
[News](#)
[Reviews](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Features](#)
[Advice](#)
[Edinburgh](#)

More from The Stage

[Training](#)
[Archive](#)
[Directory](#)
[Castings](#)
[Jobs](#)
[Tickets](#)
[Dating](#)
[Digital edition](#)
[Mobile apps](#)

Social media

[Facebook](#)
[Twitter](#)
[Instagram](#)
[LinkedIn](#)
[Pinterest](#)
[Google+](#)
[YouTube](#)
[52 Stages](#)