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THURSDAY, AUGUST 6, 2015

DANCE / REVIEWS

Performance review: Drowning, arson and other enchanting dangers in the debut Trust the Bus

Posted by **Brian Howe** on Thu, Aug 6, 2015 at 9:14 AM

Trust the Bus

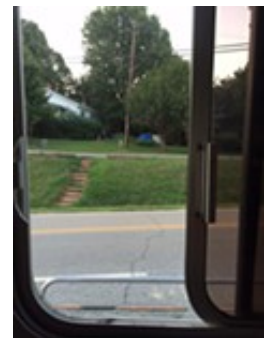
Private residence of Mary Harwood and Lori Oshrain, Orange County
8:15, Saturday, Aug. 1

A cheer goes up on the Blue Bird bus as it pulls away from the Saxapahaw General Store. It's almost dusk. Families with kids in dripping swimsuits wave from the roadside when the bus rolls by, as if it were embarking on a foreign voyage. And in fact, it is, if you measure the term by its quotient of mystery rather than distance.

No one knows where the bus is going or what's in store there. In boarding, they've accepted **Culture Mill's** invitation—or is it a dare?—to “Trust the Bus” (see the **INDY's recent story**). In the new performance series, which continues for the next three Saturdays, you reserve a seat knowing only the names of the performers, who have collaborated on a site-specific experience.

Tonight's lineup is **Direwolf** (the DJ moniker of composer Alex Kotch), **ICE violinist Jennifer Curtis** and Culture Mill directors Tommy Noonan and Murielle Elizéon, who are dance artists. Several dozen people are on the bus, with Curtis sitting in their midst, inconspicuous save for the mandolin she cradles. Driver Mark Dragon is at the wheel. But Noonan and Elizéon are nowhere to be seen.

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crappy phone photos
by Brian Howe

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As the bus rumbles through the countryside, Curtis starts strumming the mandolin and singing a hymn in a pure, woody voice. The singing spreads through the bus. The hymn, aptly, is “I'll Fly Away,” and the words seem to speed us out of the known as the sky dims and the suspense builds.

After 10 or 15 minutes, the bus stops at a nondescript roadside spot seven miles outside of Saxapahaw. As the passengers disembark, tour guide Ginger Wagg presses a finger to her lips, requesting silence. They enter the woods,

winding through a trail marked by paper lanterns. Around one bend, Noonan leans against a tree with a dejected air, dressed in a dark suit.

Elizéon leads the procession, wearing a spectral white gown that passes for a wedding dress—an impression strengthened by the fact that she's married to Noonan. She finally stops, smiling like a wax figure, inside a wooden gate that leads into a small yard. Walking past her eerie gaze and a low table set for a romantic dinner for two, the spectators sit in a group, as if in a theater—and naturally so. Spread out before them in the gathering twilight are a sand pit, a wooden dock and a pond with lights floating on its surface, like a huge open-air stage projecting from the cloistered seating.

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On the porch of the house, Direwolf plays watery, gently propulsive sounds that appear to have been captured at this site. Reality melts as they blend into the natural soundscape of crickets, frogs and what might be ducks, somewhere in the dark. Next to Direwolf, Curtis improvises sinuous lines of delayed violin; little flares and ripples that emulate the surface of the pond.

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From opposite directions, Noonan and Elizéon walk to the edge of the dock and fall, seemingly just at the moment night does, face first into the pond. After remaining out of sight for an almost alarming period, they rise from the pond by uncertain means, as if a very slow and steady elevator had been installed underwater. The effect adds another ring to the uncanny halo of the experience.

Disheveled in their formal clothes, Noonan and Elizéon struggle to stand, pushing and pulling each other up and down. Plastered to the dock as though its gravity were too strong, they bang body parts on it in frustration, adding

percussive accents to the ambient sound, which responds in kind. Their interactions resemble a brutish style of contact improv, and by the time they make it to the sand, they are nearly wrestling. Her affect has a tinge of gothic horror-movie madness: dark muttering, an unfocused but intense gaze and pliable limbs. He plays the slightly aloof caretaker and soother. Efforts to help and hinder become an indistinguishable blur of pressure and control.

When they rise from their tangled embraces, they walk to the dinner setting, exuding ennui. They light somehow post-coital cigarettes and throw their matches under the table, which rests on a base of foliage, igniting it. They smoke pensively and stare into the flames devouring the plates and champagne flutes. By the time the fire goes out and they walk away into the dark, a transformation has been enacted, tuned to the precise frequency of day becoming night.

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The spectators file back to the bus with flashlights and then ride to the General Store in almost pitch darkness, in a quieter mood now. The content of the performance had been creepy and beautiful, but **as Elizéon explained to the INDY**, the context will linger even more strongly. Trust the Bus created a unique slice of experience, set apart from the everyday, as ambiguous and indelible as the memory of an almost full moon, tinged with red, hanging in a bus window. Catching **one of the next three shows**, which will be completely different from this one, is highly recommended.

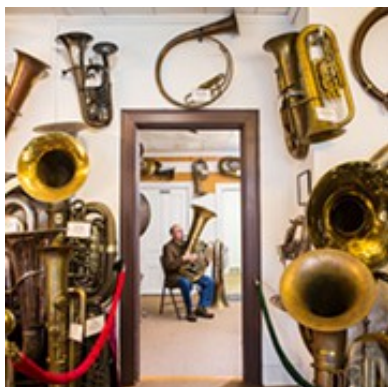
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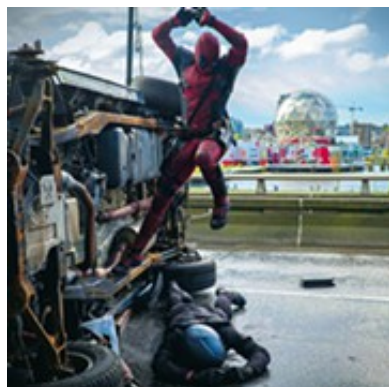
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