

# Out of Body Experiments: LISA D'AMOUR AND KATIE PEARL with Erin Courtney

by Erin Courtney

Theatrical doppelgangers, Lisa D'Amour and Katie Pearl would like to invite you inside an out of body experience. They have been crafting site-specific performance together for over a decade and for their latest collaboration, *Terrible Things*, they have moved back inside a theater, PS 122, from December 4-20. In *Terrible Things*, D'Amour and Pearl encourage us to imagine that “anything is possible, and everything is happening”, as they expertly weave together storytelling, physics, spectacle, dance, alternate realities, and wrestling. While in the last week of rehearsal, Pearl and D'Amour took some time out to answer my questions about their collaborative process and their latest show.

**Erin Courtney (Rail):** Your first collaboration involved a 12-hour performance piece in a grove that the viewers experienced from passing cars. Where did the idea of a literal landscape play come from?

**Katie Pearl:** Just before we met, Lisa and I had both separately had our first major



Katie Pearl, her mother and marshmallows in *Terrible Things*.

experiences with site-specific work. Me, with a Welsh company called Brith Gof with whom I was hanging out for several months in Cardiff, and Lisa, who had just made a big piece for a bridge in Portland, Oregon. So we knew we were both interested in that. My mentor, the artistic director of Brith Gof, had taken me to a forest where they'd made a recent piece and I was captivated by it. I'd promised myself that someday I would find a forest to make a piece in as well. When I moved to Austin I didn't find a forest, but I did notice a beautiful grove of trees that was in the bend of a road of a busy north/south route through town. People sped by it every day, but I was convinced that very few people actually *noticed* it, actually *saw* it. I asked Lisa if she wanted to make a piece there with me, a piece that would be designed to make people look not at the performance, but at the place. So we spent a lot of time trying to figure out the right level of "interesting"—if a tableau was too interesting, people would only notice the performers. If it wasn't interesting enough, no one would turn his/her head to look.

**Lisa D'Amour:** And I have this great memory of me planning a bunch of events for the piece when Katie was out of town. They were kind of spectacle focused, like a big game of baseball or something? And when Katie heard about it she was like, "No no no! Those are terrible ideas! We need to think more carefully about how the grove can be seen, not the performance."

**Pearl:** It's also interesting that even in this first piece, we were collaborating across distance. We started developing the piece and then I went away for two months to assistant direct in Chicago, and Lisa was in Austin working alone. That was hard. Also, it was in The Grove that the Blue Dress Lady made her first appearance, and that character formed the spine of our work for the following decade—all the way up through *Bird Eye Blue Print* at the World Financial Center last year.

**D'Amour:** We were worried about not having enough material for the 12 hours of the grove and I said, "oh well I have this great blue dress, maybe when we need filler I can walk through the grove in the blue dress carrying a red umbrella?" And I did. And the character became an obsession for me.

**Rail:** Tell me about *Terrible Things*. What inspired it, how have you built it and how did the idea of wrestlers come into the piece?

**Pearl:** *Terrible Things* is the beginning of a new phase—where we move from the literal landscapes of groves and basements and atriums and office suites back into a theater. So *Terrible Things* began by us musing about times we felt “out of body”—when we’ve received news of a close relative’s sudden death, for example, or when we’ve been in the midst of breaking up with someone and hurting them terribly, or (conversely) when we’ve received FANTASTIC news—being cast in a role that you feel will change your life. In all of these moments, there is both a psychic and physical sensation of separating from yourself. What is actually happening in those moments, we wondered? What kind of transformation is taking place? The beginning of the exploration happened over e-mail and Google docs (like always, we were living in two cities). Lisa began “interviewing” me about different times in my life and she became sort of perversely fascinated with these stories of my growing up in a small town in Oklahoma. At the same time, we started doing a lot of reading into macro-physics—the kind of physics that merges into the mystical, because it tries to get at these impossible realities: parallel worlds, what is the soul, the fact that anything is possible at any moment in time. So she started framing all the stories I was sending her within this context of physics—and also within this notion that in a theater, anything is possible. Right? So one of the reasons theater is useful, as a creative form, is that we use it to create realities.

We were at Voice and Vision at Bard doing development on the piece. We knew from the beginning that marshmallows were going to be part of the piece—they represented something to us about molecules and structuring/restructuring, boundaries dissolving and changing, assembling/disassembling. And we were working to understand how the physicality of the performers might be in conversation with the marshmallows—we’d done a lot of fun and silly experiments with movement and body position. So one day we’d been assigned a rehearsal room in the gym on the Bard campus, and after rehearsal we were walking by these glass-fronted courts and there were two huge guys on these mats, and they were holding each other in the most amazing way—they were kind of curled together in one shape, but they were utterly still, utterly held, and utterly alive. They had an attentiveness that felt exactly right. So we kind of

stopped, and looked at each other (this was with our choreographer, Emily Johnson), and I just knocked on the wall and went inside and said, “Hey, sorry to interrupt, but what are you doing, and can you teach us to do it?” And they did. And so every city we’ve worked in since, we find a couple jiu jitsu guys to work with us. And they’re always the sweetest people around.

**D’Amour:** Oh and also—all the showings of the piece up to that point were performed by Katie with five female performers, who were (for all intents and purposes) her doppelganger selves and the piece contained all of this mother–daughter material, and all this stuff about Katie and her history with ballet training, and breaking up with ex girlfriends. And it was really easy to think like, oh, wow, this is a solo performance about growing up a girl in Oklahoma and becoming a lesbian. But the show ultimately is not that—in many ways the show is not about Katie or her mom, it is about the way we all fit inside/wrestle against the narrative that we are living in this life (as opposed to all of our parallel lives that are apparently out there). And so I was really looking for a way to shake up that perception that this was a solo show about Katie, and when they told me about the wrestlers, I thought “Aha! That’s one way to throw a delicious monkey wrench into this whole thing!” The piece really needed a left turn, structurally, at that point in its development, and the wrestlers were the key to opening that door. And I can say that we’ve now worked with five different wrestlers and each one of them has been the most amazing, engaged, energized person. So game to be a part of our big experiment. It is really exciting.

*Terrible Things* runs Dec. 4-20 at P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. For more information, please visit [ps122.org](http://ps122.org).