



## GUEST POST: BRIEF EXQUISITE ENCOUNTERS

*Through my own fault, this is appearing a bit late, but please enjoy this lovely essay by friend-of-Zoilus **Jane Wells**, a teacher and actor (Number Eleven Theatre) and gem of a woman. Jane's reflections on her participation in [Nuit Blanche Toronto](#) open up into broader thoughts about art and intimacy and experience in general well worth reading whether you live here or not. Have a nice weekend, everyone. - Carl*

**by Jane Wells**



**Considerable grumbling** has rolled around the city since Nuit Blanche, and not just in the media, or among the art crowd. Most of the teenagers and adolescents I know say "it sucked" and was "too hyped." I agreed, and was increasingly cranky as I biked around town in the few hours I had before midnight, when my own involvement in the thing was due to start. I did love the crowds, and the delight of bumping into so many people felt like Paris in the Thirties. Nonetheless much of the art work felt ill-considered, the waste of a rare and glorious 12-hour window of possibility, and waste is always galling.

**My shindig** was called Slow Dance with Teacher, an event conceived by [Darren O'Donnell](#), for the Great

Hall at Hart House at the University of Toronto. I had agreed to be, from midnight to 5 am, one of 12 teachers slow dancing with audience members; I thought the idea was funny, and curious, and posed a peculiar combination of stamina and intimacy that appealed to me.

**We were** separated from the audience by red velvet cordons, manned by security guards, and with each change of song we were to approach the audience clustered on the other side of the ropes and invite someone to dance. Darren's initial idea was for us to talk as little as possible while dancing, which I concurred with, but when our shift came on, in fact everyone in the first shift found the talking quite essential. [...]

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**My first** partner was a lovely young musician from Peterborough, very relaxed and pleasant. My second partner was older, had a long goofy face, and carried a bright yellow satchel over his shoulder. He had a geeky look about him, almost clown-like, and his face lit up beautifully when I asked him to dance. We began to dance to Cyndi Lauper, "Time after Time," and suddenly he cut loose and began to spin me about, expertly. He was a fantastic dancer, and I was thrilled, beaming and laughing at all the spinning and dipping and jiving. He was too. We were the happiest couple in the world. When the song ended, he kissed my hand, and said thank you, and walked off. He was the only man all night with whom I had no conversation and did not exchange names. Maybe this dance set me up for joy, because the night became exquisitely joyful.

**The majority** of the other dances were the basic shambling waltz, my left hand on his shoulder, his right hand at my waist, our other hands holding together to the side. Most of the men apologized for not being good dancers, but I immediately assured them I was not either. We would begin our dance, I would initiate conversation, and chatting would ensue. But I began to feel distinctly a subtle pulse, a current running between our simple get-to-know-you conversation and our hands on each other's bodies. Even dancing with the men with the lightest, shyest touch, barely holding my waist, I felt the pulse. Maybe it was the pulse of possibility, but it changed something in the way we were speaking. People talk to you differently when they are touching you.

**I was also** trying to project a charming but authentic presence, something on the edge of flirtation, just enough to draw the men out but not overwhelm them, a little pull to step forward into a moment of mutual revelation. Revelation not of information, but the tacit awareness of the intimate possibility that we held between us. I danced with upwards of forty men, some clumsy in their mild discomfort, but receptive to warmth and curiosity, a couple saucy and raring to go, some just happy to dance, and in all of that jumble, I felt that I glimpsed each of them, once, utterly themselves.

**Throughout** the night these thoughts, and the effort to describe why it was so exhilarating, kept surfacing, and I wrote a bunch of things down before I went to sleep at 6:30 am. But I didn't actually identify until late the next day the one thing of which I was most manifestly aware - smell. As the night wore on, my sense of smell became a rising current beneath the waves of these encounters, the thing to which I was purely responsive - what this man had to drink, whether or not that one had smoked a little that evening, his sweat, mixed in with subtler smells. Amazingly, thankfully, none of it was unpleasant - all the smells were singular and of this person. How often do we smell a stranger so specifically?

**The work** I had seen earlier in the evening was more promotional than experiential, to do with bank logos, and signs, and cables and metal barriers and the inevitable trappings of the safe city. It had missed the opportunity to transform public space, to give people a unique memory of, a rare encounter with some piece of the city, which they will think of always when they pass through it.

**Many years** ago, in Winnipeg, I worked on a vast winter parade for First Night, the New Year's Eve celebration. For two months, with 150 volunteers, we built puppets, gargoyles, stilts, an enormous dragon; and on New Year's, in minus-30 C, we remade a portion of downtown, pulled it out of unrelieved concrete and brick. I like to think that every now and again a Winnipegger passes the Archives' parking garage and remembers the 15-foot, furred and golden dragon that emerged from its depths at midnight.

**If there is** one experience I want to offer, and be given, in art, it is the act of transformation. It is the key to political change, to personal change, it is the seditious and seductive whisper in your ear that another way is possible. Men asked me what was the point of this piece as we swayed back and forth, and I had little more than a light answer to offer. But in the three or four minutes of each dance, we were transformed from strangers into intimates, an intimacy unique to that moment.

**In that night** of the masses, of art as accessory, of crowds roaming in search of surprise, I lucked out, and found the inversion of what I had been seeking, found instead, in each tiny encounter, the transformation of private space.

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