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The Night Shift: Dare Night Lockdown, a teenage dream

We hang out with The Torontonians, a teenage performance art collective and hosts of last weekend's Dare Night Lockdown, a 15-hour sleepover at the Gladstone Hotel.

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I wasn't allowed to go to sleepovers as a child because my parents couldn't control their imaginations, or rather they were worried my friends and I would go totally out of control. Anyway. When I saw this poster advertising a sleepover—nine kids huddled together with flashlights creating an eerie mash-up of *Goosebumps*, *Are You Afraid of The Dark?*

and *Children of the Corn*, (a.k.a. my childhood)—at The Gladstone Hotel, dubbed Dare Night Lockdown (tagline: “a sleepover with one eye open”), I raised an eyebrow and an iPhone for a little investigation.

Somehow, I couldn’t shake the idea of taking part in this spooky little set-up. One Google search and a few [YouTube videos](#) later, I was introduced to [The Torontonians](#), an originally Parkdale-based performance/youth collective that has recently begun to go 416-wide. The 11-member group, mostly made up of 16-year-old students from Parkdale C.I., is responsible for producing various events around the community, most notably at west-end art galleries with their Dare Night series, a new version of the wonderful, age-old game where you’re given a random task and have to comply with socially-frightening consequences (like, say, sniff a stranger’s shoe). In their own words, they also: “walk around England, give lectures, shoot videos, dance on the street, start fights with drunk guys, take pics, scour the internet, check cell phones, sing songs, take the TTC, ride bmx, wear pajamas in restaurants and vomit in airports.” You know, average teen stuff.

So, what exactly goes down at a teen sleepover these days that also doubles as, well, performance art? When we walk into the Gladstone Ballroom, the lights are low, candles are flickering, and oodles of sleeping bags are piled up in the corner. Flashlights are everywhere. What a turnout—but watch your step!—there are rows of kids lying on blue tarps. (*Dexter*realness.) It’s also part pizza party. What we’re currently bearing witness to is not a mass murder, but a round of something called “Choke Threat,” one of those Halloween-y party games where you have to guess what’s being fed to you. Instead of grapes-as-eyeballs, The Torontonians are serving up something called “Amazonian Frog Testes.” (“Frog Balls!” yells out Sanjay, one of tonight’s two mini-emcees. The other is Nerupa, who is dressed like a mini-Blossom.)

The Torontonians are mentored by Darren O’Donnell and his team at [Mammalian Diving Reflex](#), a “research-art atelier dedicated to investigating the social sphere” that aims to create “entertainment rich in content, intellectually challenging and engaging with language, ideas and information.” The teenage Torontonians are the grown-up kids who connected with O’Donnell years ago through a previous project, [Haircuts by Children](#), which saw students from Parkdale Public School trained as stylists and provide the public free haircuts in salons across Toronto. This particular program became widely successful, was adapted globally from Dublin to Italy, and pioneered Mammalian’s “youth wing.”

After Choke Threat, it’s time for ghost stories. It’s an audio-visual-sensory experience, with crickets in the background and a fake fire pit with logs and ashes that looks *awesome*. And more flashlights. Kids are wearing glow sticks because, duh, it’s all back in vogue now like I’ve been telling you [since forever](#). The storytelling is animated with werewolf howls and another startling sound effect: cussing.

“I can swear?” asks one of the ghost story-ers, sounding relieved not to have to hide the real from the show. “Fuck yeah.” There are stories about rabid dogs, a creepy doll, and people being cut up into pieces. Someone mentions the Gladstone’s own murder mystery and hopes to sense or see a ghost. (All I can sense/see is that weird flirty hormonal teen tension.) Another kid talks about this guy he liked on a trip to the Middle East: “Moral of the story is to ask him out before he gets stuck in quicksand.” The next story starts with, “A year ago, I lived in Calgary unfortunately...” Sounds like it should stop right about there: I’m spooked. Another one types

out his story to be read, it begins: “I was in love with this girl...” Exactly, the scariest stories are the saddest ones. I’ve got one more for you. It goes: “We had the best sex ever, and he never called me *againnnnnn*.” (Muaahaha. Screams.)

Friday’s Dare Night Lockdown sleepover session is the culmination of The Producers of Parkdale, a year-long initiative between Mammalian, the Gladstone and The Torontonians. The teens were “artists-in-residence” under the tutelage of some of Toronto’s top arts talent. They had their own dedicated space at the West Queen West hotel, where they spent every afternoon this summer, plus time during the school year, learning about promotions, marketing, curation, arts management, budgeting, hospitality, and tech skills. Guest speakers included Luminato’s vice-president of programming Chris Lorway, and Julian Sleath and Harold Mah from Nuit Blanche, who tackled both the creative and logistical intersections of arts events. They were also able to create the promo videos of O’Donnell abducting each Torontonian to promote the night. The residency became a fully immersive, completely interactive experience.

And it’s so important to create these kinds of innovative outlets for teenagers because, frankly, Toronto doesn’t have enough of them. According to O’Donnell, he’s intent on using culture as a way to engage youth and as a way not only to develop the community, but also to develop jobs within it. “Often people talk about youth empowerment, and they don’t often register that economic empowerment is the one that really matters. Empowerment usually comes down to confidence building through drama exercises, or mural paintings or [dance]. Stuff [like that], other than, ‘How can we get you guys paid?’”

Teenage life is “crazy,” says Torontonian member Kiam Lam-Bellissimo, which is why there’s a strong need for more of these projects and events. “We want kids to get together more, to talk more, and be more interested in just meeting new people. We think there are too many cliques, too much hesitation, and too many social boundaries. So we try to knock that stuff down by doing events like this.”

For any real sustainability and change to occur, O’Donnell thinks it’s a question of long-term artistic intervention. If more programs like this are going to pop-up, they need to treat teens and participants as colleagues. “I’m concerned [that so many of these programs] don’t do enough. Sure, you teach them some skills, but unless you’re going to teach the kids some skills and introduce them to your professional network and make it so that the work you’re doing with them is as important to your career as it is to their career, then it’s meaningless.”

Before I go, I have to complete a dare. So far, people have eaten bananas seductively, or licked peanut butter off someone’s neck, or licked a stick of deodorant, or doing something that looks like a body shot. “Fine, I’ll do one,” I say to Nerupa. “But I’m not licking or sucking anything off a teenager.” My pick: get mummified in toilet paper and stay like that for the rest of the night. And so, instead of dancing under the disco ball, I let three teenagers wrap me from head to toe in toilet paper. And there’s photographic evidence.

As for The Torontonians: “We have another project starting in September called The Presenters of Parkdale,” says Lam-Bellissimo. “We’ll produce and fund other teens’ ideas, so they’ll make their own events similar to Dare Night Lockdown, and we’ll become their curators and producers.” I’m looking forward to it because it will likely beat reading *The Baby-Sitters Club Super Special #11*, the closest thing I ever had to a slumber party. And then I slip out the back door for a glass of wine at the Melody Bar because, duh, I’m an adult now. Apparently.