

Step by Step -- Theater on the Town

An application for mobile phones, exploring theater for public spaces

Conceived by : Christophe Huysman, Cyril Thomas

Design and interface : Charlotte Depin, Nicolas Zinovieff

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The application "Step by Step," developed by theater artist Christophe Huysman, throws open the stage door and brings the play out to meet the public : to the streets and squares of the cities of Europe. At once literary sound-walk and treasure hunt, the application allows people of all ages and all walks of life to participate in the creation of a unique work of theater.

"Step by Step" is available online at the Apple Store.

Contact

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Step by Step

Conceived by : Christophe Huysman, Cyril Thomas

Design and Interface : Charlotte Depin, Nicolas Zinovieff

Photographs and Text : Christophe Huysman

Illustrations : Guillaume Mpia Esenge

Sound Design : Parisson studio / Jean-Philippe Renoult

With the Voice of : Christophe Huysman

Production : Compagnie Les Hommes Penchés

Coproduction : Le Phénix, Scène Nationale Valenciennes, France.

Special Thanks to : Thibault Verdet, Helen Solere, Agnès de Cayeux, Estelle Senay

This project received a grant from the French Ministry of Culture for developing “innovative cultural projects using digital technology,” and from the city of Paris.

The launch of “Step by Step” in June 2013 concluded three years that Christophe Huysman spent as an artist in residence at the Phénix Theatre, in Valenciennes, France.

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Letter of Intention -- First Steps

I wish to explore a new form of playwriting, to create, across France, a kind of poetic cartography. Inspired by towns and cities, and by the many theaters that have hosted me over the years, I hope to offer the audience a new and different experience of the “play”. A play that takes place off-stage, in “real life,” a play that transmits memories.

My memories.

Memories of a city’s inhabitants, with whom I meet, share meals, and whose conversations I record. These meals furnish me with a collection of words that I shape into a finished text. I first began to experiment with this method of writing by recording my own walks. It led to a more spontaneous form : words fell into tempo with my footsteps...

Memories of places. Places that I photograph and transform into digital post-cards, and that I illuminate with a short text or two.

Memories of wanderings.

These places -- streets, monuments, squares, theaters -- and these collected images give birth to stories. And little by little, these stories and images coalesce to form a piece of theater that is memorable, contemporary and absolutely unique.

I have always worked both as a writer and as a visual artist.

In the 1990s I began to document my life with the help of polaroids. Annotated, scratched, abused, often manipulated during the development process, these hundreds images remain the departure point for my artistic, theatrical and literary universe. (The polaroids

are at the heart of the play “This Man is Named HYC,” published by *Solitaires Intempestifs* in 2001 and performed at the Festival of Avignon in 2002.) Writing and creating theater is a way to rescue these fragile pieces of ephemera, these fragments of (auto) destruction. To bring them back to life.

Today I am beginning a new set of images. Digital photography (often using my cell phone) has replaced my polaroid camera ; and digital rendering has replaced my graffiti. My physical imprint. If the human body was resolutely at the center of my polaroids, it is now more discreet, allowing center stage to be inhabited by a landscape, a city, a monument. These “post-cards,” are often nostalgic in feeling and give the viewer the sense of staring into a false past. As if our future were written in past tense. A building, a posture, an accessory, a piece of clothing makes it clear that these images are not, in fact, “vintage” : they are, to the contrary, resolutely contemporary. The old-fashioned format of the “post-card” is inscribed in our deepest memory. Receiving and reading a “post-card” on a smartphone only troubles further this confusing, confounding, anachronism.

6.

The Application

Set to the rhythm of a leisurely stroll, text and photographs form the basis of the application “Step by Step.” Via his or her smartphone, the user has access to a virtual play -- the guided walks -- a treasure hunt following the “post-cards”, and to the repertoire of the company, *Les Hommes Penchés...*

The Walks

Guided by Christophe Huysman’s voice and a lush soundscape, the city becomes the backdrop of a new kind of theatrical experience: the street is the set, the actors’ bodies have given way to a single voice, little by little the creative universe is revealed : exterior sounds and visual elements (buildings, monuments, chance meetings) come together to create a “fragmented theatrical landscape” in which each audience member creates a personal and unique experience, and in which each is both actor and spectator. This is pointillist theater, created with dashes and dots of sumptuous images and text.

The walk will come to an end, of course. But the words and images remain. The “audience member” can re-visit the play in new surroundings -- at home, in a particular public place-- and perhaps this change of scenery will confer new interpretations, new impressions...

7.

The Application

The Post-Cards

A city-wide “treasure hunt”...

On a map of the city appear markers corresponding to “post-cards” created by Christophe Huysman. Walking through the city to find them, the user will discover -- or rediscover -- both the physical place, and its artistic interpretation. When the user arrives at an indicated marker, the “post-card” magically appears on the screen, along with a message : fragments of conversations, unpublished writings or lines of text from the theatrical repertory of *Les Hommes Penchés*.

These virtual “post-cards” invite the user into both Christophe Huysman’s poetic universe and the city’s cultural heritage. They unlock the door to hidden aspects of the city’s history, and create an unexpected link between the past and the present.

The Application

The Repertoire

The texts, cities and images that make up the “Step by Step” project are born of the theater of Christophe Huysman and his company, *Les Hommes Penchés*. A link allows the user to discover the production that their walk is based on, and provides information for further exploration : title, performance history, images, video, etc... This “step” of the experience features illustrations by Guillaume Mpia Esenge, inspired by the archives of the company.

The Very First “Step”

“Step by Step” launched in the summer of 2013 with eleven walks (two in Valenciennes, four in Paris, three in Avignon and two in Reims).

The project continues to evolve and is actively looking for interested partners (theaters, cultural institutions, heritage sites, tourist offices...) to join us in developing “Step by Step” further : exploring

new and innovative forms of writing, new ways of using the public space and interacting with the city's inhabitants, new ideas for promoting the heritage and the future urban development of the city.

11.

Crossed Paths

Cyril Thomas is an art critic and independent curator. He has written extensively on new forms in art and architecture and is particularly interested in exploring new modalities for exhibitions and publishing. He is the director of research for the CNAC (National Center for Circus Arts) in Châlons-en-Champagne, France.

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Nicolas Zinovieff is a software developer who has worked on applications for both Apple and Android platforms. After years working at Apple, he today has a varied career that includes teaching information technology, working in cinema, and as a technical director for conventions and other major events.

Charlotte Depin is a graphic and interface designer. She received her diploma from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle in 2010 and has worked for the agency Attoma in Paris since. Projects include : Schneider Electric, Thales, Voyages SNCF, Transdev and Keolis. She has particular expertise in interface design for software, web applications and the internet.

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La Compagnie Les Hommes Penchés

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