

THE

GAUNTLET



The Gauntlet

A haunted adventure game
for winners and losers





You know this story: It's the epic tale of our hero leaving home for adventure, hitting the road on a quest riddled with trials, and then arriving on the other side as the same hero, but transformed in some way.

In any monomythic hero's journey, we are asked to invest ourselves in the story's protagonist, be it Odysseus or Lancelot, Dorothy Gale or Bilbo Baggins, Luke Skywalker or Harry Potter, we sit on the sidelines rooting for them, feeling the cathartic pangs of their foils and the fist-pumping glory of their victories.

And after they slay the dragon, blow up the Death Star, then make it back to Kansas where they inherit Mr. Wonka's Chocolate Factory, their win and their wisdom is ours, even though we did little more than turn the pages or watch frames flicker by.

Daniel Park (foreground) as the childish "No. 2" contends with the dastardly "29" (played by Mal Cherifi in the back on previous page opposite).

But what if you don't trust the hero? Maybe the hero is incredibly annoying, or prone to making mistakes, or perhaps a more suitable hero comes along. What if you could intervene and say, “Stand aside Luke—Leia is taking your place!” That was the premise for *THE GAUNTLET*, a hero's journey turned on its head and performed in two very different locations: first at a 40-room mansion in a tiny town, and then at a modest row home in a big city. In both locales the Medium Theatre Company offered not one, but *ten* different heroes to the 500 people who came to see the show, and every room presented new challenges not for the *hero*, but for the *audience* to answer for: How long can you wait? Who is the biggest loser? What's behind that door? And do you like this particular hero enough to keep them in your story?



41 (Alanna Bozman), 61 (Paloma Irizarry) and 23 (Dani Solomon) pathetically await their entry as Contestants for *THE GAUNTLET*.



THE GAUNTLET was born in part from the Mediums' 2014 Halloween show, *ALCHEMY*, a true hero's journey in which the audience assists a young alchemist in bringing her twin sister back from the dead. On her way she is helped and hindered by various colleagues, and at one point I wondered, "Why do we trust her over the others? Just because she got to us first?"



Above: Sebastian Cummings and Dana Haberern face off as rival alchemists. They will both ask the audience for help, and the audience will side with Dana.

Left: 37 (Monica Wiles) reads rules to a game in which 23 (Eliza Leighton) must answer questions about which door leads to safety. If the audience picks the right door, they keep 37, otherwise they'll go with 23.

Gregory McGuire posed a similar question in his 1995 novel, *Wicked*, which looks at the Land of Oz through the eyes of the green-skinned Witch of the West instead of rosy-cheeked Dorothy Gale. In Lyman Frank Baum's original *Oz* story from a century earlier and its ubiquitous 1939 Hollywood adaptation, we (through Dorothy) put our trust in the "good" witch Galinda—But why? Because she's young and blond and claims to be good, while the only other witch in sight is lying around dead under a house, unable to give her version of things. Our other adopted allies, the Munchkinlanders, are cute and hospitable enough for us to overlook their zest for nationalism, witch-hunting, and racial purity. *ALCHEMY* had fed its audience similar tropes, and looking toward our 2015 Halloween show, I wanted to frustrate that by removing the hero/villain dichotomy and invite the audience to choose whom their protagonist would be. Again, and again.



Another ingredient for *THE GAUNTLET* came from a living installation by dancer Elizabeth Weinstein. At an event in Philadelphia in early 2015, Liz stood entwined in red thread, holding a ball of yarn in one hand and a knife in the other. For the price of a token, she'd either cut a single strand of yarn from her body or entwine herself twice more. As her friend I felt obliged to free her, and quickly spent all my tokens in the knife bucket to little avail. As an audience we lacked a common goal: some people wanted to wrap, others to cut, and many just dropped tokens to see what would happen. But what if we were all bound together to make the choice: freedom or further entrapment? And what would the reward or penalty be for choosing one over the other?

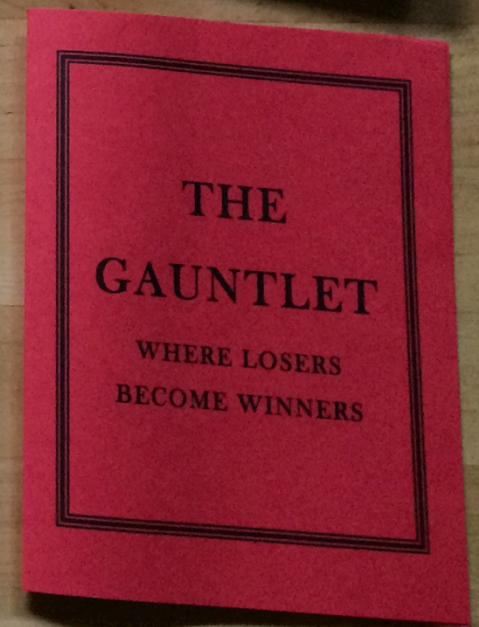
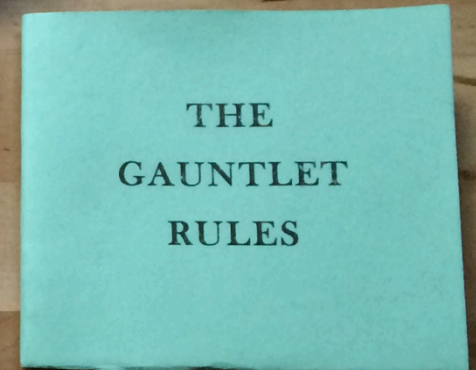


Top left: Elizabeth Weinstein wordlessly offers a choice at Almanac Circus Dance Theatre's event, *THE FLEECING*.

Bottom left: Contestant 41 (Alanna Bozman) makes a case for freedom in *THE GAUNTLET*,

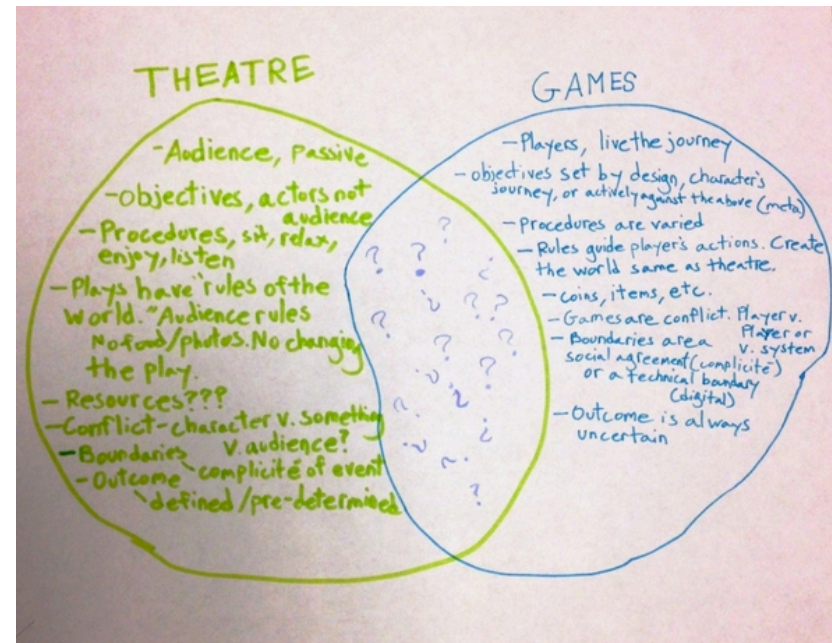
Right: The Chair Beast (Austin Kelley) contemplates its next move. Yarn, wig, faux-fur, and colander secured with bicycle innertube.





Other aspects of *THE GAUNTLET* drew from more little shows I'd seen at the Philly Fringe Festival. Mal Cherifi and Paloma Irizarry collected an assemblage of spacious interactive happenings called *Capacity for Veracity* that culminated in their pitting each half of the audience against the other. Daniel Park did a thing called *You Are The Hero*, which overlayed Joseph Campbell's ideas on "the hero's journey" with some deep game theory as an audience-driven live-action video game in a busy downtown café. I invited all of these artists and their ideas into a 13-person team of performer-creators who looked at maps, played lots of games, and spun stories about a purgatorian institution that transformed those who had been losers in life into winners of death. This un-hero's journey became a rat race of gadget-laden contestants vying to finish first, relying entirely on the audience to complete each trial.

Above right: Daniel Park's mapping the Venn diagram of games and theatre.
 Right: Mal Cherifi double-crosses their collaborators in *Capacity for Veracity*.



Left: Contestants' equipment for *THE GAUNTLET*—headlamp, stamp and pad, half-dollar coins, stopwatch, padlock and keys, passport and rulebook, all needed for completing various trials.



In one room the group had to determine which door to open by asking the right questions. In another, they worked together to outwit a weary monster. There were tests of observation and logic, and also ethics as we recreated Liz's yarn-and-knife game as a web where the group decided who would stay and who would go. Liz herself played a Cerberus-like secretary, beginning the show by exchanging people's humanity and names for the anonymity of numbers. And she ended the show by determining if one's loserdom in life could be traded in for success in death.

THE GAUNTLET was a tall order both for its performers to make (a meta-gauntlet to be sure) and also for the audience to win. They lost many contests, swapped their protagonists, sometimes in the final trial, upsetting the trope trained into us by hundreds of heroes and their journeys over the ages. Other times they managed to get their contestant from start to finish, possibly through the advent of bribery. While the contestant-guides were bound by the rules bestowed by a mysterious Rule-Maker who held their fates in the grip of said rubric, the audience often realized the moral of the story: that rules can be either obeyed or broken, that there is a time and a place for both, and that notions of losing and winning are subjective. Though everyone chose a different path, all made it through *THE GAUNTLET* victorious and perhaps a bit wiser for doing more than turning pages of predictability and watching frames flicker by.



Above: Contestant 17 (Eli Preston) gets their name back and bids it farewell after completing *THE GAUNTLET*.

Opposite: Alternate showcard for *THE GAUNTLET*.
Papercut, spraypaint, coin, hardwood floor, digital text.