



THEATRE AS DELIVERY SYSTEM:

# NEW PARADISE LABORATORIES' FATEBOOK

By Charlotte Stoudt

## The always-on part. That's what everyone wants a piece of.

—Whit MacLaughlin, Artistic Director, New Paradise Laboratories

Off a quiet street in a transitional neighborhood, the audience enters a massive brick building through a loading dock. Inside, a blonde femme fatale on a giant screen greets everyone via webcam. She invites us into an industrial space divided up by 10 projection screens and five muslin scrim— a labyrinth of “rooms” for performance and viewing. Cue lights and sound: suddenly there’s action on-screen and live in front of you. And behind you. Actors and audience occupy the same space. Where to look first? Something’s happening in every direction.

Welcome to Wonderland, Philadelphia-style: FATEBOOK, the latest creation by New Paradise Laboratories (NPL) premiered as part of the city’s 2009 Live Arts Festival and Philly Fringe. Created to explore the difference between real

space and cyberspace, FATEBOOK began online in July 2009, when 13 Philadelphia-area twenty-somethings assumed fictional identities on Facebook. Those characters generated relationships and stories on the social network that culminated in the live show in September. Part installation, part web soap, and all head trip, the groundbreaking seventy-minute show mesmerized and bewildered audiences. One local critic called it a cross between MTV’s *The Hills* and David Lynch.

From the beginning, FATEBOOK director and NPL artistic director Whit MacLaughlin hoped the project would blur boundaries among artists, advertising, and audience. “Theatre is still used to creating a product, a thing, a production, and then hiring marketers, who shape the ‘story’ of that thing and try to sell it to the public,” observes MacLaughlin in an [online interview](#).

Photo: Performer Emily Letts as Anita Prowler and audience members. Photo by Jacques-Jean Tiziou / [www.jjtiziou.net](http://www.jjtiziou.net)



**Take your average 20-year-old who doesn't go to see theatre on a regular basis. You could offer them two free tickets, a limo ride to the show, and 100 bucks. And they still wouldn't come.** —Whit MacLaughlin

"But in cyberspace, that relationship is begging to be up-ended." In a show about social networking, he argues, shouldn't the artists be in direct contact with their audience? "I saw an opportunity to build a community, where the marketing of the piece was indistinguishable from its content. I began to say things like 'its marketing is its content,' which some people found disturbing, as if that couldn't be the content of a theatre piece."

MacLaughlin is accustomed to confounding people with his unorthodox approach to theatre. A former Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble member, he founded NPL with a group of Virginia Tech graduates in 1996. They quickly became known for provocative physical theatre pieces inspired by history, anthropology and utopian ideals: PROM set the high school rite on an Astroturf football field; THE FAB FOUR AT THE PEARLY GATES sent the Beatles to the afterworld; PLANETARY ENZYME BLUES toured progressive movements gone awry in 1960s Philadelphia.

NPL's shows play more like installations than drama, but FATEBOOK took that style to a new level of complexity. MacLaughlin describes the show as "all the scenes of a movie... played simultaneously in a 3-D projector." The set, designed by NPL ensemble member Matt Saunders, is a maze of 15 rectangular screens made of muslin or sharkstooth scrim. The smallest is 6-by-9 feet; the largest is 12-by-18. Performers interact with projected scenes, with the audience, and with each other. Their stories are elliptical: a disintegrating love affair, a career crisis, a drug deal. The video, shot by Jorge Cousineau, is a moody Philadelphia at night, a collage of alleys, dive bars, rumbled beds. The characters are all heading for a party—and a catastrophe.

The events of the show—compressed into one 10-minute sequence—are replayed five times. By (literally) following different characters around the space during each repeating loop, the

audience pieces together narrative clues. The configuration of the audience, the actors, and the story constantly changes. A man gets punched out by an on-screen rival. Two actors face each other, silent, unable to speak directly; as they type on cell phones, their texts appear on the screen above them. A woman races frantically in slow motion, pursued by three smiling Fates in club wear. Watching a particular actor just inches away, you can also see other audience members watching other performers. FATEBOOK makes you keenly aware of having just one perspective on a show with multiple points of view.

More a state of being than a story, FATEBOOK evokes the uncanny intimacy and simultaneity of cyberspace. Standing inside of the production feels like stepping into Facebook's world of 24-7 connectivity. "We used to sit in a room and read a book and think, 'What am I going to do?'" said MacLaughlin at a March 2009 Wallace Foundation conference on engaging audiences. "Now you go into your room and access a million people who are thinking like you. You can look in a camera and be in the room with whoever is out there. As marketers, we go, 'Got to get me some of that.' As artists we go, 'The paradigm is shifting.' And as people thinking about the future, we go, 'What does this mean? What is this doing to us?'"

FATEBOOK explores whether theatre can reinvent itself alongside Web 2.0. Can the stage offer a more enticing profile to generations raised in cyberspace? What exactly is our status update?

FATEBOOK was first conceived in partnership with the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis (CTC), where NPL's PROM was staged in 2004 and again in 2006. MacLaughlin was struck by a marked difference in the two young casts. Then he realized the 2006 group had entered teenhood on social

*Top left photo: Director Whit MacLaughlin. Top right photo: Performers David Greene as Logan Souers and Kevin Greene as Mysterious Man (on film) and audience members. Photos by Jacques-Jean Tiziou /www.jjtiziou.net*

networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. "They didn't care as much about being awkward in each other's presence," he recalls. "There wasn't such a burning need to develop a smooth persona in relation to how desperately weirded out they felt around other human beings."

He also noticed the intimacy with which the teens communicated to each other in cyberspace. "The overall tenor of online 'conversation' was really close to the atmosphere of pillow talk. It was bedroom-to-bedroom. I started to think about a piece that would look at the difference between cyberspace and real space, where we're here smelling each other, being unhappily close."

MacLaughlin imagined FATEBOOK as an ensemble piece for high school students, with both an online and onstage component. Performers would create fictional selves on Facebook and friend in their real-life acquaintances to follow their characters in cyberspace. The audience would "attend" the show online long before opening night—perhaps even impacting the plot. And CTC would gain email access to a whole group of young people who hadn't previously been on their radar. "FATEBOOK felt like the only piece of theatre we could actually learn something from," remembers Cody Braudt, 17, who was part of the CTC cast.

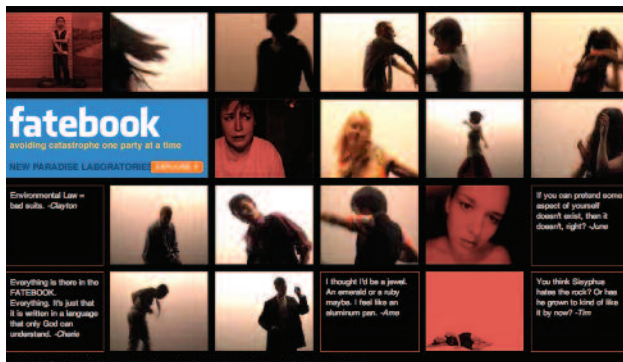
FATEBOOK's stage set would consist of six bedrooms where the characters engaged in cyberspace relationships. At the end of the show, the walls would disappear and the characters would be present together in a contiguous real-space performance. The story revolved around a friend's sudden disappearance, with certain echoes of *MACBETH*. The scale and technological demands of FATEBOOK were daunting, but "we were madly in love with the project," says CTC Artistic Director Peter Brosius. "It's what our audience is living and doing every day."

But in Fall 2008, the recession hit CTC hard. The theatre had to withdraw from the project for financial reasons. MacLaughlin scrambled to regroup. "There wasn't time to develop connections with high schools in Philadelphia. But I realized I had all these inroads with colleges in the area because I've done residencies." He reconceived the show around the idea of people in their twenties facing down early adulthood. The shift to older characters, he says, "freed us in terms of subject matter. With a younger cast, the show was people reaching out from behind their parents' moat. They were still dreaming of their future lives. So the piece became less about Plato's cave and more about the dangers of the outside world."



Photo: Performers Alex Bechtel as Tim Drexel and Cindy Spitko as Julia Zelda Taylor. Photo by Jacques-Jean Tiziou / [www.jjtiziou.net](http://www.jjtiziou.net)





Then he started making calls to colleges and universities. The Philadelphia Live Arts Festival and Philly Fringe, which has presented NPL shows in the past, stepped up with more support. Through The University of the Arts, NPL hooked up with website designer Jeremy Beaudry. “I found I had many ports in a storm,” says MacLaughlin. “We had two choices: throw in the towel or do it on our own. And we chose the latter.”

In early January 2009, MacLaughlin posted an audition notice for performers between the ages of 18 and 23 on the website of the Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia. He heard from over 300 people and asked each to create a one-minute video audition on YouTube. **120 people posted.** NPL invited all of them to participate in two days of workshop auditions in mid-January. MacLaughlin expected to cast six people but ended up with fifteen; he invited everyone else to participate online. (Two core cast members eventually dropped out.)

Later that month, the core cast met twice in person. At their first meeting, MacLaughlin handed out pens and paper and asked them to come up with a name and a brief biography for their FATEBOOK alter ego. “It was intuitive,” he says. “Off the top of their heads. Most built fictional persona roughly based on who they wanted to be.”

For the next six months, NPL built a play without knowing the set design, the plot, or even who the characters were yet. From February to early July, “rehearsal” consisted of the cast interacting online. MacLaughlin nudged them into certain relationships. “I would message someone and say, ‘Hit on this person as your character.’”

Cindy Spitko, aka Julia Zelda Taylor, says MacLaughlin’s initial low-key approach worked, though it took her awhile to embrace being someone else. At first Spitko would check her real Facebook page and then look at Julia’s. But as rehearsals went on, something changed. “Pretty soon I would just go straight to Julia’s. I was much more compelled by my fictional life. Being Julia was so liberating. I could say things as Julia that I would never, never say, even think, as myself.” The cast met in person again once in March. By then, the alter egos had taken hold. “Everyone—including me—now knew each other’s characters much better than they knew the real person,” says MacLaughlin.

Over two weeks in April, Jorge Cousineau shot video portraits of the cast, both for the website and the show. (He used a Sony EX-1, the best commercially available camera for slow-motion work.) Inspired by the work of Bill Viola and conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader, these portraits showed each performer dancing, jumping, crying, or just gazing into the camera—a way of revealing character in purely physical terms. “We would say, ‘Jump like you’re going to die if you can’t jump anymore’ and wouldn’t give them any time to think about it,” says Cousineau. “So it became an existential jump.”

The images also captured what MacLaughlin finds so fascinating about internet intimacy: The physical safety of cyberspace makes possible an emotional vulnerability unlike anything in three-dimensional social interaction. “If the show is a party before a catastrophe, we thought of these portraits as being filmed after the disaster,” explains Cousineau. “They say a lot with very little. There’s a darkness there. Also, the sheer number of people being filmed had its own impact. The footage became no longer about individuals but a whole group of people undergoing a story. You wanted to see more.”

While the cast discovered their cyberselves, MacLaughlin, Cousineau, and Saunders tried to figure out the right three-

**Everybody’s watching but nobody’s there. It feels like the most private space, because it’s your bedroom... but it’s also quite possibly the most public space on the planet.**

—Digital anthropologist [Michael Wesch on webcams](#)

dimensional space to play out their experiment. Without CTC’s support, the design budget had shrunk. And NPL doesn’t have its own theatre. The Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, which hosts approximately 20 curated theatre and dance productions each fall—as well as a large Fringe Festival—offered NPL the chance to stage FATEBOOK in the warehouse portion of the Festival’s offices. There were no pre-existing drawings for the 2,000-foot cavern. Saunders spent hours measuring and photographing the warehouse to create an accurate scale model. “We had no idea what the structure of the evening would be,” he remembers. “The number of screens and projectors needed would depend on the number of perspectives we were going to show. We played with the model for weeks. I cut out little screens and chairs, and we moved them around the model, creating different configurations. As the actors started to generate story, locations emerged: a hospital, a bar, a park. It wasn’t until rather late in the rehearsal and writing process with that we settled on the final design.”

Since the very beginning of the project, the team had known the show’s locations would be projected on screen, but they

had struggled with how the audience would interact with all the stories. “We knew the space had to be interactive—we didn’t want the audience to sit down,” says Saunders. “So it became all about traffic flow and changing perspective. With FATEBOOK, the primary design concern wasn’t so much ‘the look’ of it. The screens are where they are primarily because that’s where they need to be for the storytelling and shifts in perspective to work properly.”

As the design progressed, MacLaughlin realized his cast now needed more specific direction. On vacation in Norway in June, he scoured everyone’s Facebook accounts and compiled all of each character’s messages and status updates. He distilled the material and rewrote it as six weeks’ worth of status updates for each character; these 140-character posts would be the “script” that would run online six weeks before the live show, as if the events were unfolding in real time. The final status updates referred to a party all the characters planned on attending.

On July 8, the show went up online and cyber-audiences could friend in and follow the story. The online portal, [www.fatebooktheshow.com](http://www.fatebooktheshow.com), has since attracted over 6,400 individual visitors, representing over 9,000 total visits, with an average visit time of almost three minutes.

Roughly 2,000 people friended the FATEBOOK characters. Some were only voyeurs, but others talked back. About 50 people, including a few artists who had been involved in Minneapolis, assumed fictional FACEBOOK identities to interact with the cast online. Kate Brennan, who played Zoe Ex, developed a strong cyber-rapport with one friend. “His posts were darker, edgier than most. After several months of interaction, I found that Zoe was getting darker in her point of view. Almost a little evil. He definitely influenced who she became.”

Via the website and Twitter, MacLaughlin fostered an interest in the show that reached as far as Brazil and Russia. He was **interviewed by German radio** and by a London theatre blogger who discovered the show from a **tweet**. “I also wrote about 1,400 individual emails discussing FATEBOOK,” MacLaughlin explains. “It was never explicitly about selling tickets.” As NPL General Manager Inger Hatlen points out, “Some people [were] having a ball interacting online but will never see the live performance.”

Full-on live rehearsals began in July. “We were all a little bit thrown once we saw each other in three dimensions again,” remembers Brennan. “It was an entirely different experience than the cyberspace element. We thought we knew each other online, but it’s different when you’re touching and looking into each other’s eyes. In the Facebook world, there’s no real time. You respond when you want, at your leisure, 24 hours a day. But people are unpredictable in real space. You can craft things online, but things are raw when they’re right in front of you.”

Using NPL’s movement training techniques, MacLaughlin and the cast built a gestural vocabulary that would give the show a coherent physical style. One sticky morning in early August,



the cast wandered the unfinished set in bare feet, shorts and tank tops. MacLaughlin led his notorious warm-ups—an intense 30 minutes of yoga-style moves and stretches. There was no air conditioning, and everyone broke a sweat in minutes. The morning’s work was blocking the end of the show. MacLaughlin wanted to play with slow motion. He started with bad pantomime that looked like the worst parts of DANCES WITH WOLVES.

“Don’t think of it as slow motion,” he said, “just highly attenuated action. Your torso leads. At this speed, space gets thicker. Express less, take in more. You should be permeable, soft, and active.” People walked by themselves, then in pairs. Feet wobbled as the actors tried to stay balanced. Eventually everyone dropped into a similar tempo. Like a dance company, they achieved a gestural unity that felt extremely intimate. The density of the piece, its ambitions, its otherworldly aura, were emerging.

After rehearsals, Cousineau and MacLaughlin shot hours of site-specific video material that the performers would interact with during the live show. Cousineau edited each segment of video to match up with the other dozen that would run during each 10-minute loop. “Everything had to line up, especially the sound. The performers needed to hear their cues clearly because most of the time they couldn’t see what was happening onscreen.” To sync all the cues, NPL relied heavily on Isadora, video-projection software that “allows you to project onto multiple screens simultaneously, to send images around the room at instant command,” explains Cousineau.

FATEBOOK offered choreographed live performance-video interactions reminiscent of the Wooster Group, but with the immersion level of gaming. Yet this extraordinarily innovative environment was achieved on a fraction of the budget spent by better-funded multimedia companies. NPL has only two full-time staff members. MacLaughlin estimates the show’s cost to the company over a two-year period at about \$182,000.

FATEBOOK is part of an emerging wave of theatre with online and interactive components. The offbeat Broadway hit NEXT

TO NORMAL has been serialized on Twitter. In TerraNova's FEEDER, the story of a man who pushes his lover to obesity, characters vlog about their fetishes long before the piece is staged live. Eisenhower Dance Ensemble's FEEDBACKING will develop performances based on online interaction between artist and audience. But none of these shows puts theatregoers into the same zone as the actors.

The live component of FATEBOOK premiered on September 5, 2009 and ran for 17 performances. Audiences were dazzled

## Party tonight, bitches! Gonna let loose. Let me out of my cage!

—FATEBOOK character Tim Drexel, Sept. 5 status update

by the multimedia environment and fascinated to share space with the actors. "At first, the presentation seemed a bit overwhelming, with all of the screens, visuals, and characters. I enjoyed it more once I started to follow the story lines and learned about each character," said audience member Catherine McCormick, who planned to bring her Facebook-obsessed teens back to the show. Above all, McCormick responded to the immersive aspect: "No sitting and observing. You're part of the action." A performer buying drugs shared his score with anyone who would take a pill. Another character, reacting to seeing his own ghost at an ATM, dropped his wallet. Someone always bent down to help him pick up the cards that had fallen out.

Reaction to the run varied wildly. Some people were eager to meet the characters they'd followed on Facebook. Others found the noirish storyline, about a credit-card scam and a gun-wielding thug, a little banal. But virtually everyone agreed with theatregoer Pedro Davila: "It's like nothing I've ever seen before." For attendee Rosalie Bochansky, FATEBOOK successfully recreated "that sense of searching for related details in this sea of simultaneously-delivered information; that's what makes social networking so addictive, and [the show] got that." Bochansky liked the idea of "being able to show up at the theatre having a real relationship with a fictional character. I expect this piece will spawn others. I wouldn't mind Tolstoy getting the FATEBOOK treatment."

Ticket sales were slightly lower than projected, but "we were successful in finding new audiences and reaching our target age group," reports MacLaughlin. "There are 50,000 college

graduates in our area, most of whom are tremendously sophisticated," says the Live Arts Festival's producing director, Nick Stuccio. But very few of them attend Live Arts, where the mean audience age is 42. This year, ticket buyers under 25 accounted for 19% of the Live Arts Festival's overall sales. For FATEBOOK, that number was 40%.

"Distinctive to this show was the breadth of buzz that began months before the Festival began," says Live Arts' Marketing Director, Robin Barnes. She's speaking of the FATEBOOK website but also about the guerilla marketing. NPL's advertising included the use of 1,700 "throwies": single LEDs taped to nickel-sized magnets, with the FATEBOOK web address attached like the paper plume on a Hershey's kiss. The throwies were stuck on the sides of buses, buildings and bike stands for the curious to investigate. "One FATEBOOK cast member came home to find their housemate waving one of the throwies around," laughs Barnes. "The person had no idea it was related to his friend's latest theatre project. He found it stuck to a parked car and thought it looked really cool."

Barnes believes some of NPL's strategies can be applied to any production: "The earlier in the season we can provide online content about an artist or show, the better we can prepare audiences for what they're going to experience. This gives audiences the information they need to feel comfortable committing to a ticket purchase."

A new set of audiences will likely encounter FATEBOOK 2.0 in the near future. MacLaughlin is talking with producers in Boston and Virginia about devising the show for a different setting. He's already envisioning changes. "I'd increase the audience interaction, online and in performance." The plot that ends in a gunshot would disappear. "I'd look for a story line or situation that doesn't require specific urban imagery. I want to be less precious about FATEBOOK being a play and more about it being a delivery system. It's about being in this machine, in a movie that's spatial." Cousineau agrees: "To me it's more about the surface of our lives than a murder mystery. It's more effective as a portrait of the unsolvable than a whodunit."

Designer Matt Saunders considers FATEBOOK an early prototype of a form with great possibilities. "To me, the show feels like a hybrid of theatre, cinema, and visual art. I don't know if we nailed it, but I think this hybrid has the potential to be a new theatrical form. I'm excited to explore it further."