

THE RIVER

four monologues on a ride for one

“The River” invites audiences for a solo journey on a rowing boat upon the Spree river at sunset. Conceptualized by Aimé C. Songe alias Clément Layes and presented by Sophienseale throughout summer of 2022, the experience brings one to be guided by any one of five performers, into the waters near Treptower Park in Berlin. Each guide wades shapes the journey in a unique way and with a different story. On this chance evening, Asaf Aharonson, happened to be Parvathi Ramanathan’s boat-rider. Thence, a few monologues were uttered, real and imagined.

two monologues together

Solitary, I walk past the groups of people celebrating their Saturday evening at Berlin's Treptower Park. The European summer energy buzzes around me, and I question what life choices lead me here alone on a weekend. Will the River Spree keep me company?

Mild anxiety plagues me for being late after changing 2 buses, 1 tram and 1 S-Bahn to get here, all in order to remind myself about how relaxing and therapeutic the city's water can be. The irony is not lost on me. But my delay is not fussed over by the host who meets me at the agreed upon location. He and I understand: the waters of this great city of Berlin, sometimes stall too.

The host hands me a pair of headphones and we begin our walk towards the river bank. Through the headphones, a gentle voice welcomes me again. I carry its whispers in my ears to the waiting boat. A boat in which I am to be the lone passenger.

The boat-rider is waiting. I give him a shy smile, flattered to have this special treatment all to myself. It isn't every day that one is rowed in a boat for leisure, merely to be taken up and down the river at sunset. I slide onto the boat now distracted by all the elements inside the boat and beyond. My eyes are drawn to the dancing water and ears are filled with the same gentle voice again. She is singing an ode to the river, both joyous and melancholic. The river carries me...I hear her hum, and the boat-rider pushes us off, to be carried by her – The Spree.



voice of the river

all winter, my quiet waters were stirred by their visits. when my own edges ran thick against the sandy soil, they began to poke around my banks. they came often, with their questions about themselves and the movement of their own lives. sometimes i would feel their churning mind in how they moved through me. i had no answers and all the answers – both at once.

i could also feel the stillness of their mind. those minds were monumental enough, sometimes, to even still me. here, i, the river, became a meeting point. not just a boundary to divide, not something

to overcome to reach the other shore, i am now a meeting point. through the summer now, they meet me at sunset. each day they bring someone along. i carry them. run through them. i sense them, grateful and thankless – both at once.



The boat-rider cleaves us through the water, the vessel now nodding along with the river's gentle waves. The changed perspective of looking at the land from my floating island offers me a beautiful distance. Yet, at first, I struggle with leaning into it. Everything I look at seems to open a running commentary in my chattering mind. Ah! that party looks like a movie set – I wonder if they do this all the time? That church and cemetery on the banks – what must it mean for the losing materiality of the body if one is buried along a river. Oh, and there is the path I had rushed down from only ten minutes ago!

But I was here now on this floating piece of wood. So I draw myself away from the busy land and descend into my body. I lay horizontal and ascend my eyes up to the sky. I draw away from my busy mind and listen to the boat-rider – he is now speaking into my ear. From five feet afar, not even looking at me, he is speaking into my ear.

Throughout the next hour, he tells me a few tales – about things that matter to him, about people that may matter to him. I will not tell you his tales, for those are his to tell. But I will tell you this: His words put a spell on how I lay my eyes on the water, how I lay my eyes on the sky, on the city ahead, on snatches of the past and of the present.

The sky is a broad tongue of pale blue. But the river doesn't reflect it. She has too much going on. She is a shredded mirror reflecting more than the sky. She reflects passing boats in every size and colour. She pulses and dances along to the music that each boat plays. Far away, in a faint glint, she reflects Berlin's skyscrapers. When the sun begins to set and the sky is tinged by an orange-purple, the river swallows those shades. With the boat-rider's voice in my ear, none of these carry me away.

I am able to be here – in the present and also with him in his story. The river accompanies him and me.



voice of the boat

They treat me like a quaint and cosy ride for one, Pshaw, but I have my rough edges too! The metal twines welded onto me are sculptured like the river's flow. They tied fabrics on me, so now I look like a Berlin hipster. To add to that, I am a row boat. Can you believe the bonus points you get for riding with me?! Not some oil-spitting inorganic ass in the water! You better get this into your head, anyone who enters my domain is one lucky ignoramus. The rugs and blankets that are laid on me are weighed by the memories of too many hands. But I do a mighty good job of carrying them all! This boat-rider fellow – sometimes he leans against my front arc, too assured that I will bear him. He places his feet squarely on the floor, a few inches of wood dividing them from the water beneath. I do a mighty good job at bearing them too! What do you ask, if I miss the land when I am floating in the middle of the water? AAaaacccKKkk thhoooo! Nincompoop, I think you should return to listening to the river!



When he doesn't speak through the earphones anymore, I can hear the murmuring sound of the river. The schhhhhuuursshhh sound of the boat's oar, wielded by the boat-rider, diving into the river and surfacing again. I am taken by how the oar moves and for the first time I turn towards the boat-rider. We smile at one another but don't exchange any words. He continues with another tale in my ear. In a while, we begin heading back towards the shore. Later when we reach solid ground, I see that he can move on land, too.

Darkness is beginning to fall and I notice that today the river is inky. Does it always look this way? I don't know, I never noticed before. I never really noticed it. Not here. I have always lived near waterbodies. I was born in a city by the sea and grew up near another sea. Summers were spent with daily morning baths in a tepid river that seemed generous to me. Those water bodies sustained me. Now as they shrink and the seas retreat, I find my own relationship with these waters of Berlin rather absent. A faint line on the map, it barely features in my life beyond huffing my bicycle up the bridge crossing the river at Jannowitzbrücke.

Perhaps, that will all change with this evening, on the river.