

WILDING THE CITY

by Parvathi Ramanathan

‘WILD ACCESS Lichtenberg’ by Beatrix Joyce takes the audience on a walking route through Fennpfuhlpark on a balmy autumn night. In the dark depths of this Berlin park, the performance offers a flight of imagination and a poetic encounter with another possible inhabitant of our planet. For Parvathi Ramanathan, who was invited to come along and write about her impressions, the performance was also a reflection of how we—as humans and urban dwellers—interact with our ecosystem.

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Under a cloud-capped night sky and with Lichtenberg's skyscrapers as witnesses, we deliver ourselves into the hands of Beatrix Joyce, who will lead us into an exploration of this pocket of Berlin. Our guide for the evening dons a functional jacket with a plethora of pockets, a walkie-talkie and torchlights. The audience members are handed out futuristic-looking headphones beaming a blue light. When we put them on, we complete the look: urban tourists on a wild expedition. It's time for the briefing. Joyce speaks mysteriously of nocturnal creatures that mark this landscape. There have been sightings, she says. One creature in particular, of which there are two. Perhaps they are kin. They appear on some nights. Maybe we will see them today? Hopefully. Armed with speculations and hopes, we set off from the edge of Anton-Saefkow-Platz into the gentle slopes of Fennpfuhlpark.



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We learn that there is another group led by a second guide, Michela Filzi, who are meeting elsewhere in the park. They will go on a different route in order to cover more ground during this exploration, but we will be in touch with them through the guides' walkie-talkies.

Our group, led by Joyce, plods along the gravel path towards a pond in the middle of Fennpfuhlpark. There are shadows of humans passing by, but the sounds coming into our ears through the headphones create an immersive world of nocturnal bird calls, hoots and cries. A consistent chorus of chirping insects is punctuated with distant, unidentifiable thuds and croaks. Our guide continues to tell us the little they have observed about the creatures. But we can't yet be sure where the creature may appear and many questions remain. Are they tree-dwellers? Do they swim? One never knows what is around the corner here. Joyce shines the torchlight along the trees, shrubs and stones that line our path. The cone of light pierces the darkness and throws up constantly shifting shadows. The trees and their foliage, dwindling in the October autumn, stride along with us for a moment before their shadow falls away.

The first sighting is sudden and unexpected. Joyce's gasp matches our own surprise, before our human eyes recognize the shape of something familiar but new. The creature in the distance has glowing lines that spread like a web across their body. The one we see near a clump of trees appears to be absorbed in their own movement. Their limbs stretch in a taut, yawning tension towards the trees. For me this sudden sighting evokes a sense of child-like wonder and awe, much like watching twinkling fireflies. I sense a fleeting giddiness – being slightly spooked and thrilled at encountering something unknown. The creatures don't seem to be fully aware of us as spectators, but neither do we seem to be fully aware of ourselves. When the creature runs away, we just allow ourselves to be led. We follow them with an automated immediacy, a mixture of curiosity and reticence on our heels.

During a conversation with Joyce a few weeks later, I gather that this corporeal sensation may also be by design. By creating *WILD ACCESS Lichtenberg* as a performance to be experienced in darkness, the makers sought to bring audiences to an intuitive and heightened connection within their bodies. She shares that her interest lay in transmitting to the participating audience that sensation of encountering uncharted and unknown spaces: the edge of discomfort and awe in the face of a powerful force of nature, those

butterflies in the stomach felt when gazing over a precipice—something close to perhaps what people experience in extreme sports.



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Back in Fennpfuhlpark, we traverse the unknown in pursuit of the creatures, as Joyce and Filzi keep up their whispered conversation on the walkie-talkie line. They speak in hushed, urgent tones, updating each other on locations and sightings. Filzi's garbled electronic voice, reaching us intermittently through the headphones, creates a sense of suspense. Sometimes we spot one of the creatures near us, and another in the distance. On one occasion, while watching them, I find my eyes travelling further, through a gap in the trees, to a BVG Tram snaking past. That everyday mode of transport evokes an uncanny feeling. It heightens my perception of the present moment, of this uncanny experience on this dark night in the familiar space of a Berlin park.

After successive encounters with the two creatures, it appears as though it isn't us chasing them. It is them who are beckoning.

Following one of them, we end up joining the other group of visitors who don green-haloed headphones. The creatures come slightly closer, hinting at communication. Without any torchlights, we see them in the natural darkness under a bruised black night sky. They weave gracefully, delicately, through the tight bundle of stiff bodies huddled together. Their movements continue to be slow and meditative, making swaying arcs with their limbs as they slide through the gaps among us.



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I am struck by this relationship with the environment and the new creatures that *WILD ACCESS Lichtenberg* creates, akin to the Indigenous approach to the ecosystem that Potawatomi Scientist Professor Robin Wall Kimmerer shares in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. In the beginning, we as a group appear to be making incisions into our surroundings, maximising our area, noting observations about the creatures and demanding, “What is this?” Watching the creatures unfurl in movement, however, the sensitivity of their contact with us and their gestures together, changes my

perception and my question. I now ask them: “Who are you?”
Soon they show us.

The creatures’ discovery of each other seems to activate them. Moving much faster now, they mirror one another. When one throws their arm up in the air and jerks backwards, the other follows suit in a domino-like motion. They sprint together, and find pauses in other pockets of Fennpfuhlpark to continue their swarming dance. And so sprinting onward, they lead us to the square at Anton-Saefkow-Platz. On a tiny raised platform lit by bright shafts of light, their relationship transforms further. Under the towering buildings in the square, it appears to me as though these nocturnal creatures of the green park are endangered here. Perhaps they are the last of their species? They shift briskly from one edge of the platform to another, sometimes on the verge of falling off the precipice. Their limbs stretch out to protect the other in gestures of care and cooperation.



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My anthropomorphic gaze is only able to describe their movements by inscribing it with human body parts like head, back, neck and limbs. But when the creatures go sprinting again into the

distant darkness, the glowing lines of their bodies retrieve that wonder of first encountering them.

Looking back at my text, I realise how much it is peppered with the words ‘us’, ‘them’ and ‘each other’. The group awareness that came with being assigned headphones of a certain colour and having a shared experience, of feeling corporeally different from the nocturnal creatures, was highlighted in *WILD ACCESS Lichtenberg*. I wonder how we as a group of urban tourists/audience members may have been perceived by the regular visitors of Fennpfuhlpark. Were we also the strange creatures, “the other”? On discussing the impact of the on-site work, Joyce confirms that the team did have many interactions with curious locals during rehearsals. Some of them also joined to become participants in the experience or watched the show from their balconies. For those unsuspecting onlookers, perhaps we were the strange blue-and-green-haloed creatures, wilding the city.

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