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Partying at Gatsby's mansion: an immersive experience

Marie Dutaur

About the performance

- 1 *The Great Gatsby* — Immersive LDN, Mayfair, London. February 2019-August 2021. Based on *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.
Written and directed by: Alexander Wright
Featuring: Charlie Cassen, Hannah Edwards, Lizzie Grace, Jessica Hern, James Lawrence, Prince Plockey, Humphrey Sitima, Louis Sparks, Oliver Towse and Lucinda Turner.
Associate directors: Amie Burns Walker and Oliver Tilney
Designer: Casey Jay Andrews
Associate designer: Emily Bestow
Costume designer: Heledd Rees
Safeguarding, consent and inclusion coordinator: Brodie Turner
Production manager: John Rowland
Production advisor: Golfo Migos
Lighting designer: Rachel Sampley
- 2 Music supervisor and sound designer: Phil Grainger
Associate sound designer: Lara Gallagher
Resident director: Fiona Kingwell
Choreographer: Holly Beasley-Garrigan
Fight directors: Lucky 13 Action Ltd
Stage manager: Charlie Hosking
Company show manager: Preece Killick
Speakeasy manager: Maddie Houghton
Assistant stage manager: Emily Noble
Music composed and produced by: Glen Brown, Tendai Humphrey and David Sims
Arrangement and additional composition by: David Sims

Figure 1

Lucinda Turner as Daisy Buchanan and Oliver Towse as Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*
© Sam Taylor

Figure 2

James Lawrence as Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*
© Sam Taylor

Review

- 3 "My Dear Friend, The honor would be entirely mine, if you could attend my little party. You shall find all the details you require below. Yours Sincerely, J. Gatsby." This is how the immersive experience begins — no ticket, only an invitation to a party, similar to the one Nick Carraway received in the original novel. The invitation gives you entrance to the immersive experience: no tickets needed, just your name on the list. It is also important to say that for the dress code the website indicates: "1920s dress encouraged, not compulsory."¹ Participants followed this instruction and even if their clothes were not in the style of the 1920s, they were still sophisticated.
- 4 Written in 1925 by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* depicts the story of Jay Gatsby through the eyes of his neighbor, Nick Carraway, during the summer of 1922. During that summer, the protagonist tries to win back his past lover's heart by organizing parties in the hope that she will come. Alexander Wright used one of those parties as the setting for his immersive experience, inviting readers and fans of *The Great Gatsby* to the protagonist's mansion to live a night of decadence as if they were part of the story. From the beginning to the end, references to the original story were made, along with quotes from the novel — such as the incipit and the last words.
- 5 Real time and illusory time² collide in this immersive experience, and a whole summer is reduced to one evening that spectators live through with the characters in this adaptation. The adapted story takes place exclusively in the host's mansion. However, during the night there are different actions following the main storylines in three different places of the house — the drugstore, Gatsby's office and a lounge. The main characters are present, but with some differences concerning George and Myrtle Wilson who are now waiters for Mr. Gatsby. The prominent presence of Rosy Rosenthal or Lucille can also be noticed. Appearing as a nod to the novel, they become an integral part of the cast in this adaptation while in the book they were only background characters.
- 6 In the immersive experience, spectators arrive at Gatsby's mansion where Rosy Rosenthal — a security guard — is waiting for them. When the doors open, a butler checks the names on the list. As people are about to enter Gatsby's drugstore, a woman delivers a speech. The last piece of information she gives can also be read on the theatre company's website:

You may have the opportunity to follow the other guests into smaller rooms and spaces, to learn the Charleston or be able to converse with Mr. Gatsby himself, if you are so lucky! You need only interact as much as you are comfortable to – if you prefer to observe from the side-lines, nobody will mind. In fact, Mr. Gatsby often enjoys doing exactly that himself!³
- 7 Last but not least, the woman asks people to turn off their phones — which some of them seemed to have forgotten during the interval — as they did not exist during the Roaring Twenties.
- 8 When spectators enter Gatsby's drugstore, they come across a bar where they have the possibility to have a drink while wandering around the room. A note by Casey Jay Andrews, the designer, says: "When launching into an immersive show the design is a character of its own". This aptly summarizes how the setting manages to "immerse" the spectator in the Roaring Twenties. Suddenly a woman raises her voice to tell the audience that her husband is about to sing and the first notes of "Let's fall in love"

(1933) can be heard. Following this song, Nick recites the incipit of the novel to which he adds "Gatsby believed in the green light", found at the novel's end. After this introduction, spectators are invited to live out various experiences as participants in one of Gatsby's parties. It becomes possible to enter the different rooms of Gatsby's mansion, and the characters also interact with some spectators in order to make them part of the story. For the performance I attended, I experienced a moment in a lounge with Tom, Myrtle, and a part of the audience in which Myrtle launched a game of "spin the bottle", a game in which two or three members of the audience take part. When Myrtle's tragic accident happened, the audience was brought back together in the drugstore while the victim lay in another room. People understood that something had happened but only saw the body. However, when Gatsby is killed by Wilson, he was standing on a platform in front of a fountain so that everyone could witness the scene. The party ended with Nick repeating the very last lines of the novel: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning— So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." ⁴

- 9 As said previously, the first piece of music played is the jazz standard "Let's Fall in Love" (1933) that George Wilson sings in order to announce the beginning of the show. The lyrics echo the different love stories present in the plot and the way the characters idealize their own relationships. Jordan and Lucille give spectators a crash course on the Charleston to the rhythm of "Sing, Sing, Sing" by Benny Goodman, a song considered as "the anthem of the Swing Era"⁵. Even if the music was composed in 1934, ten years after the novel was published, it recalls the Big Band era and is therefore quite appropriate for the purposes of recreating one of Gatsby's lavish parties. The Foxtrot song "Ain't We Got Fun" (1921) is also performed during the course of the play, at various moments of the characters' experience. The final song is "I've been loving you too long" (1965), originally written by Otis Reading, and performed here by the whole cast. The first two songs mentioned, though somewhat anachronistic, are associated with the carefree attitude that characterized the interwar period. These songs, oscillating between blues and swing, thus fit the tone of the play. Even if "I've Been Loving You Too Long" belongs to another period, it is nonetheless representative of the love story between Gatsby and Daisy as it evokes a "love [that] is growing stronger as [the] affair grows old". This hints at their falling in love long before the moment the story takes place — even before Daisy's relationship with Tom. Finally, "Ain't We Got Fun", the only song belonging to that period, also appears in the novel. These jazz standards enable the spectator to delve further into the story.
- 10 The immersive experience makes it possible for fans of *The Great Gatsby* — and other people familiar with the story — to become part and parcel of the decadent atmosphere of Gatsby's parties. As Paula S Fass wrote in *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (1977): "Fitzgerald gave the twenties its symbols: flappers, jazz, gin." All those elements are brought together in this unusually interactive performance of *The Great Gatsby*.

NOTES

1. <https://immersivegatsby.com/event/the-great-gatsby#faq>
 2. According to *Britannica*: "Time [...] has a dual character in drama. The performer and audience exist together in chronological time. But the actor as character exists in dramatic time. Neoclassical drama of the 17th century, especially in France, endeavoured to make the duration of the performance coincide with that of the play's action. But, as a rule, drama has achieved its effects by accentuating the discrepancy between "real" and "illusory" time." <https://www.britannica.com/art/theatrical-production/Real-versus-illusory-time>
 3. <https://immersivegatsby.com/event/the-great-gatsby#faq>
 4. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925
 5. Sarah Provost. « The Dance Hall, Nazi Germany, and Hell: Accruing Meaning through Filmic Uses of Benny Goodman's "Sing Sing Sing" ». *Music and the Moving Image*, vol. 10, no 2, University of Illinois Press, 2017, p. 33-45. [doi:10.5406/musimoviimag.10.2.0033](https://doi.org/10.5406/musimoviimag.10.2.0033).
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