

## Theatre

### 'Will we be blindfolded and led to a shallow grave?': Alter by Kamchàtka takes immersive theatre to next level

The experimental collective bus us into unknown woodland at night, where we stumble across mysterious characters and slowly become part of a fugitive community



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The audience exudes nervous excitement ... Kamchàtka's Alter.

**W**e have been instructed to turn up at a Milton Keynes car park at dusk and wait to board a bus that will take us to an undisclosed location. The scenario feels quite crime noir - will we be blindfolded and led to a shallow grave? But actually, this is next-level, site-specific theatre that unfolds over 90 minutes in gathering darkness. The audience around me exudes nervous excitement as the bus stops and we are directed to a dirt track leading into woodland.

We are in the hands of the artist collective Kamchàtka, who began life performing group improvisations on the streets of Barcelona in 2006 and which, under the artistic direction of Adrian Schwarzstein, and now use immersive and experiential theatre to explore the subject of immigration. The company has played acclaimed shows around the world, from the eponymous Kamchàtka in 2007 to Alter, this latest, fourth production set in a nocturnal and rural environment, performed in the UK as part of [IF: Milton Keynes international festival](#).

There are 11 creators for this show, with Lluís Petit and Prisca Villa as artistic coordinators and the event takes us into unknown territory: we know next to nothing about what will happen once inside the woods. "We want you to feel the nervousness, anticipation and surprise," says Petit. "And we want you to feel you belong to a group, that this theatre experience is real and immediate, with the actors looking you directly in the eyes."



Real and immediate ...  
Kamchàtka's Alter. Photograph:  
Michael Cardow

The focus of *Alter*, which was created in 2021, is the question of what led the eight characters we meet to be here, with suitcases in hand. Our walk is no gentle amble - it is rugged terrain and some of us are given sacks to carry. It feels like the theatre of a forest at night, full of shadows and darkness. We gradually stumble across characters (played by Cristina Aguirre, Maïka Eggericx, Andrea Lorenzetti, Judit Ortiz, Santi Rovira, Gary Shochat, as well as Petit and Villa). One woman emerges laden with lanterns and looks at us with apprehension before handing us the lights. A man is buried chest-deep in earth. He looks Beckettian, like Winnie in *Happy Days*, and we feel his desolation before we haul him out of the ground. He is shocked at first and then reluctant to be dragged - saved - from his hole.

Others join us and suddenly we are a group - a fugitive community - communing in the night but with no words, only small, subtle gestures from the actors. We are also instructed to remain silent and begin speaking in body language too. "The idea is to express your feelings through action, not dialogue," says Petit. "We want the audience to feel that these characters are giving us a

secret that they will keep."

There's a primal, ancient quality to proceedings as we break bread and drink from the same cup as, slowly, characters reveal their backstories through projected film images (video production by Lluís de Sola). These are filled with trauma and shame, as well as whimsy and nostalgia. The silence brings an intensity but there are bursts of delightful music from wind-up boxes, composed by *La Fausse Compagnie* and *Le Chant des Pavillons*. This gradually brings a celebratory, almost bacchanalian, spirit to the night as we find ourselves on our feet, dancing in choreography that builds to a frenzy.

These site-responsive shows take years to mount. *Alter* took two years, says Shochat, one of the collective's founders. The company spends a lot of time exploring potential spaces in which to stage a show. "Four or five of us are specialised in reading spaces where a theatrical event happens. It's about movement around that space, and you always move, you are never in one static space."

This show is staged at night, he adds, to capitalise on the natural drama that darkness brings, as well as that provided by ritual gathering: "It's really enticing to work in the night with no electricity as well. We have different forms of lighting and projecting apparatus but these use self-sufficient forms of energy."

Stars gleam above us as we walk and our lanterns twinkle a path of light amid the darkness. We absorb the night and it is peaceful - but there is also a potent sense of being part of a hidden community, surreptitious and outside society. It is just what the company wants us to feel, says Petit, explaining that it was founded on the conceit of encountering the displaced "Kamchàtka people" from a faraway land. Here, in this wood, we could be one of them.