



Q&A: Thomas Riccio

The man behind Dead White Zombies talks about his concepts of theater and the group's latest immersive production *DP92*.

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Dallas — In the shadow of the enormous Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge, the great white connector between downtown Dallas and its older, gruffer, western neighbor Trinity Groves, sits an ancient building with a small sign on the outside wall that simply reads “**Dead White Zombies.**” A former icehouse and now current home to Thomas Riccio’s theater/art/performance mashup collective, where his latest creation ***DP92*** opens this weekend, the building is a time capsule of a Dallas long forgotten. It has the feel of part industrial warehouse space, part dungeon, and part art studio.



Photo: Courtesy
Thomas Riccio

Thomas Riccio would have it no other way.

Riccio is a full-time professor at the University of Texas at Dallas as well as artist and creator of Dead White Zombies. He calls his work with the theater company, and to a larger extent, his recent collaboration with younger theater and movement companies, PrismCo, and Upstart Productions, a “civic project.” Riccio is well connected with Trinity Groves and West Dallas developers, especially Butch McGregor. He also has experience with real estate development, having transformed a building of his own in Chicago into a desirable storefront during his stint as artistic director of Organic Theater Company. ([Read our recent story](#) about the groups using the Trinity Groves warehouses; PrismCo's *Persephone* opens this weekend too.)

Riccio is not one to stay in any one place past his welcome, and once that work felt too administrative and less artistic to him, he took off for a position at the University of Alaska developing native theater.

Wherever Riccio goes he brings an eagerness to acquiesce to the environment around him. When he arrived at the job at the University of Alaska he was asked to save a program based on Native Alaskan Performance. He knew he was ill equipped for that job and took the department budget to create a massive research project by traveling to literally every native village in the state. Only then was he ready for such a task. He is a big believer in “found art” as well. His vision is about adaptation and development. His extensive work with indigenous groups all over the world have given him a very laid back approach to theater, one that is experience based, absorbed through the immersion of placement. (In 2010, he wrote a series of essays for TheaterJones about creating an original theater piece in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; the third of those is [here](#), which links to the other two).

Dead White Zombies has been housed in several Trinity Groves warehouses and spaces for several years now. DWZ's 2013 *T.N.B.* was set in a literal crack house. Experience is authenticity for Riccio. This weekend sees the premiere of its latest work *DP92*, a metaphysical sci-fi “experience.” Riccio is hesitant to place any sort of overt label on the work DWZ does. It is not strictly theater, though it is a performance. Riccio wants *DP92* to be experienced, not observed.

Riccio's dream and vision for the performance space, and Trinity Groves in general, is a place to “be.” As it stands, Riccio sees the only reason one would come west of Dallas is for the restaurants, “But what do you do after dinner?” he says, “Go have dessert? What if there was something else to do, a play to see, art to see, music to hear?” This is the vision: to transform the growing collective of artists he's merging with into something long term and sustainable. A reason to travel across the bridge.

Riccio thinks about gentrification quite a bit, but it's an uncontrollable unknown to him. "It's ongoing. The best we can do is live in the moment and hope that the art we're creating will transform the area we're in. Not the other way around."

Part of this hope stems from Riccio's background. He is very interested in "found art" and using the resources he's given. Most of what audiences see at *DP92* already existed when *DWZ* took up residence in the building. He has a strong technical knowledge that gives him the confidence to know that what he's using will work.

Riccio is the son of an Italian immigrant. His father was a postal worker and he grew up in a very working class family. He attended a technical high school and his knowledge of machinery is extensive. This gives Riccio the skill to transform the spaces he uses into something meaningful, purposeful. An ancient icehouse full of desk chairs and technical drawings can suddenly become an immersive found art spectacle; a basement room becomes a beach scene. By using the space and resources he's given Riccio can create something real, beyond just performance. This is what drew him to Dallas in the first place: an unfinished art scene with great potential to keep growing.

Riccio sat down with TheaterJones to talk about *DP92*, his work with indigenous groups, and his hopes for developing an authentic art, theater, and music presence in Trinity Groves. If he builds it, maybe the people will come.



Photo: Alisa Eykilis
DP92 from *Dead White Zombies*

TheaterJones: What is the idea behind creating something so “vague” in a way? Without any sort of label to describe it?

Thomas Riccio: The idea is to attract audiences who have given up on theater. The form is meant to be experiential.

Have you given up on theater?

I like to think I have evolved as an artist beyond the passive body toward the illuminated mind. I feel too confined by a proscenium. It is not natural to sit in a theater and watch something happen. It’s something the audience should be participating in. Our phones, devices, we are constantly engaging with something, participating in something. It’s nonlinear. You probably thought about 25 different things on your drive today, none of them in order. Life is fragmentary.

Do you worry about overstimulation, or engagement, with devices and phones?

I worry about the narcissism of it for sure. Especially in younger people. The only thing I can hope is that they can experience something real, not processed. So much of what we experience is artifact. I only want artifact when that’s its intention.

How does that translate to a performance where the audience engages instead of sitting passively?

They experience it by moving through it. Everything they see has the potential to impact them. Something can happen in the moment that a person has to react to. It’s more natural. It’s about being in the moment you’re in.

Specifically for *DP92* how do you anticipate this happening?

No one member of the audience can experience the entire piece. The audience will be separated into groups and brought to different areas of the house. They will see what they need to see, and they will hear the other scenes happening at the same time. It will be a unique experience no matter where the audience happens to be at any given time.

Can you talk about the plot?

It’s a bit tongue in cheek—there isn’t a linear story—but the basic idea is that the audience is visiting an institution, with the potential to become inmates themselves. One of the inmates, “DP92” escapes. They all come from the central being, “The Mollusk.” All life has evolved from this being. It’s the origins of life, there’s a bit of a “sea” theme going on at parts. It has a lot to do with a sense of self and rights. That’s a huge issue right now.



Photo: Robert Hart/TheaterJones

From left: Thomas Riccio; Katy Tye and Jeffrey Colangelo of PrismCo; and David Denson of Upstart Productions in Trinity Groves

It sounds perfect for Halloween.

Someone mentioned that. I had no idea Halloween was coming up. I'm not a Halloween person.

Where does this idea come from?

I love the old 1950s sci-fi movies, big monsters. They feel theatrical.

Is this what you watch at home? Do you watch TV or movies?

I didn't own a TV for a long time, but then I would find myself traveling and staying in a hotel with one. I would stand, transfixed, in front of the TV for hours. I love watching things that show people in real life, interacting with each other. I love odd videos and documentaries. It's fascinating to me.

How has your work with indigenous people informed your work at DWZ or your vision for the future of West Dallas?

It's changed the way I approach the idea of performance. Performance begins with ritual- this is how I teach my theater classes. This is the origin of what we understand as theater. In these African, Alaskan, Asian cultures there is ritual. The performance begins this way and then evolves. We haven't even gotten to Western theater in my classes yet. In many of these cultures *chance* is how the spirits speak. The performance continues and the group reacts to what is happening. It is very natural, experiential. It's about being in the moment. Another theme I constantly encountered with these groups was the idea that true wealth is how much you can give away, not how much you have. This is the testament of one's life. The older I get the less interested I am in being led by what sells. I'm interested in the intimacy of the work. **TJ**