

Audience takes over mission control in Apollo 13 play

April 1 2010, by Madeleine Coorey

It's the stuff of a NASA nightmare -- mission control decks are left in the hands of untrained enthusiasts as astronauts rocket through space in a capsule fast running out of oxygen and power.

But in the play "Apollo 13: [Mission Control](#)", the 100 audience members manning the consoles and trying to bring the spaceship home from 200,000 miles (320,000 kilometres) above Earth are expanding the boundaries of interactive theatre.

Co-creator Kip Chapman says the play, based on the real-life events of April 1970, when a US mission to the moon was aborted and limped home on limited power, empowers an audience in an unusual way.

The play, which was first performed in New Zealand and had a short stint at Sydney's Opera House during March, puts most of the audience to work for Flight Director Gene Kranz, played by New Zealand actor Jason Whyte.

As they sit behind the specially developed consoles, they must answer phones, take messages and relay them to the cast. They are encouraged to walk around, talk to each other and watch for warning lights on the monitors.

Early on, one audience member is chosen to be an astronaut and deliver the famous line: "Houston, we've had a problem". Most others are given job titles -- such as meteorologist or video monitor -- and are expected to

respond to questions posed by Kranz and his colleagues.

As United States flags hover above, two giant screens show the astronauts in space or live crosses to [television coverage](#) of the event.

"We want them to believe in it," explains Chapman. "And we're very careful about not putting anybody on the spot. This is not about making people look like dicks."

The actors' relationship with the audience has led to some interesting theatre -- one participant once threw a glass of water at the actor playing the TV host, while another began praying for the astronauts' return.

The play was conceived by Chapman and friend Brad Knewstubb, an industrial designer, after a visit to the Cape Canaveral museum in the United States which has a replica of Apollo 8's mission control.

With the idea that it would "so awesome" if you could actually touch the equipment, the friends decided minutes after walking out of the museum they had the seeds for a play. Within a year, "Apollo 13: Mission Control" had debuted.

"We knew what we wanted to achieve, we wanted to have consoles that had flashing lights, that had TVs, and that had phones," explains Knewstubb.

"The consoles, they were designed by looking at lots of consoles from mission control rooms but they are not an exact replica because the actual ones are way bigger."

Some liberties are also taken with the story, to push the narrative through.

"Everything we've done here is just to allow the people to enjoy the story and kind of just suspend their disbelief quite easily," says Knewstubb, revealing he never used to be passionate about theatre.

"For me it's about generating new audiences that don't exist at the moment.

"There's always going to be theatre purists who want to go and see Shakespeare. But what we're interested in... is getting people who've never been to theatre before. Who are like, 'theatre is boring'."

Chapman agrees: "We've tried to make this like a rock concert or a telethon so the socialisation between the audience members, the interaction that they have between one another, is just as important as the show that's going on."

As the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 13 mission liftoff approaches on April 11, the pair are in early talks about bringing the play to the United States.

"We really want to take it around the world," says Knewstubb. "We came up with the idea in America and it seems like a good idea to go full circle and take it over there."

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