Abigail Browde and Michael Taylor, co-founders of the performance group 600 HIGHWAYMEN, make theater that depends on the conditions of live performance. Their work involves less like a theatrical production than like a carefully orchestrated convergence. The Record (2018), for instance, was a movement sequence for forty-five people that only came together in performance. The performance of Empire Gilj (2011) attempted to enact an old recording of a family outing in real time while constantly switching roles. These performances affirm live theater’s essential sufficiency. Everything we need is already there. This is theater for lean times, art to survive the death of arts funding, experimental performance built to preserve and nurture a humane seed of communal cohesion for such time as the not-so-distant future when it will be most needed.

I saw 600 HIGHWAYMEN’s newest work, The Fever, as part of the Under the Radar Festival earlier this year at the Bushwick Theater in New York. The performance begins as a tabula rasa, as close to nothing as it can get—just an empty space, not even a theater, with a single row of closely set chairs arranged in a rectangle around the edges. Then, without indication that the performance has begun, someone in one of the chairs starts speaking. She asks the rest of us to do something simple—make a wave with our hands, touch another person’s shoulder—and we do. Another wave emerges, the beginnings of a story about a party in a village. Individuals are called out of their chairs to take on roles. These will be a play of sorts, then, we think. It will be like This Great Country, 600 HIGHWAYMEN’s 2012 choral reconstruction of Death of a Salesman performed in a Texas bingo hall. But then the village recedes, too, and we are left again with no apparent material to work from. Still more voices announce themselves from our midst. They ask us to perform actions, both abstract and pragmatic: one at a time, in small groups, sometimes all together. At certain moments a tipping point is reached, and no one has to be asked to do anything. We just spring into action. We are all dependent on one another and The Fever is dependent on us; we must each keep agreeing to continue in order to keep it going. We are practicing being ready to help each other. We might be asked to hold another person up, lift them in the air, catch them as they fall. And we do.

For all of its sincerity and unsentimental good-heartedness, however, 600 HIGHWAYMEN’s makeshift utopia is not without its dark corners. Early on, while still at that party in that small village, someone remarks how wonderful it would be if the friends gathered that night were the only people in the world. The moral community that The Fever enacts also models the limits community requires: someone must always be excluded.

WE GIVE OURSELVES OVER TO A COLLECTIVE WILL

The Fever was imagined long before our most recent election, but it points to the danger and possibility of this moment. 600 HIGHWAYMEN is using the tools of group mobilization to stage a rehearsal for greater empathy.