

Strangers in the Night

After the bar scene and the Internet, a resort to game theory. BY AMY SOHN

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK on a mild Tuesday night, I ring a buzzer on Rivington Street and trudge up a flight of stairs, an orange hood pulled over my head. At the top of the stairs, a white-hooded man with a sprig by his ear hands me a slip of paper that reads, "Become familiar with the areas in the room. Stop to examine the other people thoroughly without words or touching . . . When you have a sufficient understanding of the person, grunt and start an elaborate greeting ritual. When the ritual ends, move on to the next person." As I step into the large loft, I see a dozen other hooded souls moving around like orangutans and chickadees, making weird noises. Who knew this was the new frontier of New York socializing?

The event is called "Session," and its organizer—or, as he prefers to be called, "director of behavior"—is Michael Portnoy (the man with the sprig), 32, an artist, choreographer, and Vassar grad. Until now, he was probably best known as Soy Bomb, the hired extra who rushed to the front of the stage and danced wildly during Bob Dylan's performance at the Grammys in 1998. I met him in 1995 when we both performed at an open mike on the Lower East Side, and I hit on him repeatedly but was re-

buffed, I am convinced, for not being weird enough.

Tall, thin, and pale, Portnoy says he finds the rituals of meeting people in New York "unimaginative and uninspiring." (To counter this, for a time he would sit in the washroom of Schiller's Liquor Bar at a table with a bottle of wine, food, and some empty glasses and invite strangers to have a drink with him.) So this summer, with a friend, he started Session—regular, structured evenings of stranger games "to fill a big black hole in social life in New York. I'm always very interested in strangers, often more so than in my friends. Instead of people just exchanging information, I want them to exchange ideas." His influences include the happenings of the sixties and his extensive theater and dance training. Session is free, although some have suggested donations, and people can sign up through his Website, sessionplace.org. Each one is different, and anyone can propose an idea for a Session.

Our group includes a man with a shock of white hair; a twentysomething with thick, opaque glasses; a doe-eyed Jesus look-alike with a beard halfway down his chest; several tall women; and a petite girl in Seven jeans who looks like she got lost on her way to Capitale. Over the course of the

two-hour Session, we engage in a series of games: partnered object chess (rearranging random objects), whispered confidences about what's been on our minds lately, developing a social project, a group dance, a concept storm (three-person idea-generating), and a ten-minute nap. Portnoy calls it "an after-school program for adults," but to me it's more like an orgy without the sex—an oddly intimate, organized grouping of total strangers.

For the object chess, my partner is a slender woman with glasses, and after silently shifting around a lightbulb, a pair of scissors, and a piece of chain mail for a few minutes, she shows me a bruise on her nail. I nod my sympathy, and she bursts out with something in Russian or maybe Hungarian, explaining how she injured herself. I am startled; I've known her for five minutes but had no idea she wasn't American.

Later, I partner with the bearded guy, Kyle, a cell biologist and married father of two. For our social project, we wind up devising an Academy for Bad Parenting, where a parent would be put in a room with ten screaming toddlers and then ranked on his ability to stay calm. It's goofy and in jest, but the experience is strangely bonding, and at the end of the night, I feel like I know him.

After Session, half the group goes down the street to La Caverna. It turns out the white-haired guy is a cartoonist, and the girl in the Seven jeans writes for Gawker. I wish we could have stayed mysterious.

Portnoy came up with the idea for Session after attending too many art openings at P.S. 1 where the people seemed interesting but no one knew how to talk to each other. "You have all these creative people in New York, but you are restricted from socializing with strangers," he theorizes. "These bars are stifling in their limitations. This is an attempt to change that, to bring imagination and fantasy into social introductions. I want people to enter these different states of being, which I call 'hoods,' within a short period of time."

Whether it takes off remains to be seen, but it has already pushed a few buttons. At a few Sessions, there was a room for Trauma Playtime, where partners would write accounts of fictitious injuries and then bandage each other up. Some people started making out instead. So far, Portnoy hasn't gotten wind of any matches, but when I leave the bar, there are still four people left, talking excitedly, some still wearing their hoods.

