

Here's what happened when I went to an exclusive Illuminati Ball at a secluded waterfront estate



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As I stepped onto a limousine bus on the Upper East Side full of 25 or so strangers dressed in formal attire, I had almost no idea what the night ahead had in store, except that I had been promised a personal-size champagne for the ride. (Not only was champagne provided, but we also got popcorn and a magic show! Hope you're taking notes, Greyhound.) The swanky bus was shuttling us to a secluded waterfront estate where we would all be taking part in the [Illuminati Ball](#), a very entertaining new immersive theatrical experience from multi-talented writer and director [Cynthia Von Buhler](#).

Before enjoying the previously mentioned highway magic show, I was asked to complete an application for the evening that asked me things like what I most desired in the world and what I would be able to offer the "Illuminati." Apparently, a winning personality was enough, because my application was accepted. We were also asked to choose our preference between five animal affinities—pig, monkey, cow, chicken or mouse—that we'd be grouped with on various adventures throughout the night. After finding out that I was monkey, I was told that new members of the Illuminati would be chosen through various rituals taking place during an extravagant five-course meal. Whether or not I would be immediately signed by Jay Z upon acceptance into the secret society was not addressed.

The production, which runs until October 29, was inspired by the infamous Surrealist Party hosted by Baron and Baroness de Rothschild in 1972 in France. Leaked photos from the events show guests wearing animal heads and horns, and that aesthetic was definitely present as soon as we arrived at our destination, had our phones confiscated and de-boarded the bus. Our hosts, Von Buhler and her husband, Russell Farhang, greeted us before we walked onto the lawn to watch the first ritual of the evening. Three naked performers with animal masks were dancing in a circle surrounded by fire dancers. And that was all before the first course.

Photograph: Courtesy Mark Shelby Perry

After we entered the dining room and were seated next to our animal kin, the main part of the show began. Each of the animal groups had a leader, with the “host” of the evening styling himself as the “Pig King.” After the guests were introduced, aerial silk dancers dropped from the ceiling, the opera singer Katie Kat performed, we were all blindfolded and had cold swords pressed against our hands swearing us to secrecy. The first course, a slippery little thing that I guess was a date, was eaten blindfolded. (I hope it was a date.)

As a result of the aforementioned sword (and also because this show is definitely best enjoyed when you have absolutely no expectations going in) I don’t want to give away too much of the plot. But throughout the night, various intrigues and power struggles continuously interrupt your dinner and lead you to explore new, fascinating parts of the estate. (It turns out that the animal hosts don’t get along too well, and the Illuminati may not be exactly what you first expect....) Depending on a number of factors, your evening may include a dip in a milk bath, a visit to a handmade dollhouse in the forest or being led around on a leash all night! It’s quite fun.

By the end of the evening, it’s clear that the surreal influence on the production extends beyond the costume and scenery (taxidermy on the walls with crystals tears, animal masks provided to all of the guests) and to the experience itself. It becomes increasingly difficult to tell what’s real and what’s part of the show. The house is, in fact, owned by Von Buhler and Farhang, and many of the performers chat with you casually at dinner one second and then deliver a dramatic monologue the next. On top of that, the line is increasingly blurred between audience and performer. It’s a dizzying experience, and not just because of the copious amount of cocktails.