

## ARTFORUM

By Tom Seller, April, 2016

PERFORMANCE

## SPEECH ACT

### Tom Sellar on Forced Entertainment

**MOST ARTISTIC COLLABORATION** is ad hoc and short-lived. But what happens when it goes on for decades, and yet takes place within the most ephemeral of genres, live performance? This probably wasn't the question a group of University of Exeter drama graduates set out to answer in 1984 when founding a company that was not quite traditional artists' collective and not quite traditional theater group. They called themselves Forced Entertainment, and led by artistic director Tim Etchells, the group's current members (Etchells, Robin Arthur, Richard Lowdon, Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden, and Terry O'Connor) have won fresh recognition for altering the parameters of theatrical form through thrilling marathon performances alongside installations, video, and digital works.

Above all, it is the group's embrace of wordplay that sets them apart from their contemporaries in performance. While experimental theater in the 1980s began tearing apart dramatic texts and replacing them with image-saturated choreography, Forced Entertainment has increasingly embraced generative writing processes: making lists, collecting the language of pop-culture detritus, echoing quiz-show questions, and seizing on the unexpected when it surfaces in improvisation. The ensemble has put expressive, nonnarrative language—its creation, display, and spoken embodiment—at the center of stirring shows while reinventing its functions for the contemporary stage and screen.

In February, a two-week series based at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago that was part of the IN>TIME festival offered a glimpse into the company's mature aesthetic. With remountings of their iconic projects alongside newer works, the minifestival was perhaps the most ambitious US roundup of Forced Entertainment's oeuvre and took place at the very moment that the company found out about several international honors: Etchells received the 2016 Spalding Gray Award, and the ensemble also learned it will receive Oslo's stately International Ibsen Award in September in recognition of their contributions to world theater.

This extraordinary currency is perhaps best demonstrated by Forced Entertainment's 1994 breakthrough, *Speak Bitterness*, which remains a compelling ritual. A virtuosic display of stamina, the six-hour event involves six performers behind microphones at a long table, making confessions in the first-person plural. By turns fanciful, mournful, and chilling, these confessions (which are frequently updated) catalogue a vast scale of human folly and misdeeds, from subtle violations of Twitter etiquette to human rights atrocities. Over time, with performers reading alone and in tandem, these incantations become a kind of elegiac aria, full of arpeggios and crescendos.



Forced Entertainment, (*In*) *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*, 2016. Performance view, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, February 25, 2016. Robin Arthur. Photo: Nathan Keay.

The actors—guided by a semi-improvisational structure—leverage emotions against words, generating additional meanings. “We missed episode two,” laments one speaker with immense gravitas; moments later, in a breezier inflection, she adds, “We buried our past in shallow graves.” Although created before social-media feeds, the piece has absorbed their confluence of high and low information, intertwining personal, philosophical, and political data in a continuous stream.

*Broken Red Balloon Dog*, titled after a shattered Jeff Koons sculpture, consisted of a one-evening convening of the Institute of Failure, Etchells's longtime collaborative platform with Chicago-based artist Matthew Goulish. The Web-based think tank had invited local writers with the same first names as Forced Entertainment members to contribute “adoxographical” monologues praising useless things with disproportionate language. These paeans were read “cold,” on the stage of the Chicago Cultural Center by performers who had never seen the texts. These spontaneous live encounters turned sublimely theatrical because the outcome was so undetermined.

*The Notebook*, which premiered in 2014, hews closely to Ágota Kristóf's 1986 World War II-set novel, and shows the way in which the group can find new possibilities in an existing text. Two actors (Arthur and Lowdon) voice the narrative, sometimes in unison, telling of twin boys who learn to survive as outcasts in wartime; they embody the speech act, reading off the page but letting their precisely rhythmic words rebound in the darkened auditorium. Kristóf's pared-down writing, like Etchells's own, stresses circumstance and fac-

tual statements over emotion, while allowing a sense of encroaching moral darkness to accrue. Arthur and Lowdon describe patricide, blackmail, looting, and rape with unsettling telegraphic stoicism; the piece lands in familiar Forced Entertainment territory, reflecting on inverted social values and the actions that expose them.

The final project in the Chicago series, (*In*) *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*, 2016, abbreviated the group's new marathon production of all thirty-six Shakespeare dramas, each rescaled to fit on the horizontal surface of a small table and featuring ordinary objects as characters. (The MCA showed twelve plays over three evenings.) For each work, a single performer gently recounts the narrative events, speaking softly and intimately in contemporary language, summarizing the original dramas while manipulating bottles of hot sauce, plastic cups, and other items representing the characters. Shakespeare's epics, of course, put the ensemble's minimalist inflections to a lively test: Here the company positions quotidian words and things against the elaborate verse they replace, and pits the diminutive scale of the tabletop “stage” against the massive event's overall duration.

A welcome reminder of the group's dimensions and depth, the Chicago program left me wondering about the form of future presentations. The durational aspect of Forced Entertainment's organization and oeuvre seems ripe for a longer retrospective, one that, whether onstage, on exhibit, or streaming on-screen, will be exhilaratingly live. □

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