

forced entertainment





The Thrill of It All is the dark, hilarious and brazenly chaotic new performance from contemporary theatre company Forced Entertainment.

This pack aims to give you an introduction to this unique theatre piece, allow you to find out more about the company and how they work, and will hopefully add to your enjoyment of watching the show.

Watch the introductory video

We have also made a short film which we'd love you to watch before you come. No plot spoilers, just the company talking and their working practice and how the performance developed.

You can find this film and much of the information in this pack at www.forcedentertainment.com Simply go to the 'Projects' section and select 'The Thrill of It All'.

Or if you need to go full screen then find it on our youtube channel:
www.youtube.com/forcedentertainment

Firstly, here's a little bit about *The Thrill of It All*:

It's bright under the lights, and hot, and frightening. Nine performers in grubby tuxedos and tarnished sequins play out a comical and disconcerting vaudeville to the strains of Japanese lounge music.

After the minimalism of *Spectacular* and the animated graphic novel of *Void Story*, internationally renowned innovators Forced Entertainment return with a large cast on a big stage, filled with ragged dances and distorted voices.

Deranged dancing girls swirl, giggle, bicker and stray ever further from the point. Shabby comperes compete for the microphone and the audience's laughter as the show itself slowly starts to unravel. Dances end in fights, jokes end in confusion and sentimental stories end in arguments in this unsettling and extraordinary performance.



About Us

We are a group of six artists.

We started working together in 1984 and in the many projects we've created we've tried to explore what theatre and performance can mean in contemporary life. In doing so we've made lists, played games, spoken gibberish, stayed silent, made a mess, dressed up, stripped down, confessed to it all, performed magic tricks, told jokes, clowned around, played dead, got drunk, told stories and performed for six, twelve and even 24 hours at a stretch.

The work we make is always a kind of conversation or negotiation. We're interested in making performances that excite, frustrate, challenge, question and entertain. We're interested in confusion as well as laughter.

It's seriously playful work and we're still trying to answer our questions about theatre and performance - about what those things might be for us and what kinds of dialogue they can open with contemporary audiences.

As well as performance works, we've made gallery installations, site-specific pieces, books, photographic collaborations, videos and even a mischievous guided bus tour.

We're based in Sheffield but we present the work we make all over the world.

How We Work

As six people who have worked together more or less continually for over 25 years we share a big history and a lot of skills, conversations and ideas. We also share input into and responsibility for the work we produce.

Since we also like new approaches and ideas we often invite other creative people to work with us. With a few exceptions we don't work with a ready-made text so making a show starts with us in a rehearsal room - discussing ideas, raiding the dressing-up box, trying a line of dialogue, playing a soundtrack, improvising a scene until something starts to stick. Then we keep developing the material - we experiment with it, debate it, videotape it, watch it, adapt and edit it before trying it on an audience which can open up a whole new set of questions.

For more information about the company and how they work visit the 'About Us' section of the website at www.forcedentertainment.com

You can also find a full index of all our projects from the last 26 years on the website in the 'Projects' section.



Artistic Director Tim Etchells wrote a diary piece for the Guardian website while rehearsing *The Thrill of It All*. This was first published on 21 December 2009

For some Forced Entertainment shows, the early rehearsals are slow and mostly talk, which means that the performers only rarely make it on to their feet to improvise. During these exploratory rehearsals, each new idea is interrogated thoroughly (in circles, ad infinitum) before it's tried. It can be a frustrating journey - one step forwards, two steps back - but over the years of working together we've become inured to the fact that sometimes this slow and picky progress is how it has to be.

There are other ways, of course. In early rehearsals for our new work, *The Thrill of It All*, which opens in Brussels next May, things have happened very differently. There's less talk, and more energy for doing and trying things. We're not pinning ideas down quite so quickly, but trying to open up space, letting the material move and breathe, make shapes of its own. In our windowless underground bunker of a studio, with no discernible heating, we seem to have spent the past six weeks tumbling from one scene or fragment to another. We've mostly gained momentum, talking a bit for orientation, but never stopping so long as to get stuck, freeze or over-theorise. The biggest factor, and the only important one, is that we're mostly on our feet; thinking by doing.

When it comes to improvising, a good half of what we do is useless - misplaced people, silly costumes, tangled-up texts, ideas that don't come to anything. It's a matter (as we say, rather drily) of "eliminating things from our inquiries". We're knocking on doors, a lot of them, and asking stupid questions. The rest of our work is spadework. Every now and then there's a nice exchange, or line of text, or a sudden temperature change, that makes me sit forward and think: "OK, we're getting somewhere."

What we're all really waiting for, though, is the inspired 5% or so of improvisations that can make a project start to sing. The first week of rehearsals in late October was full of such moments. A drought followed, then there was another splutter of inspiration. Last Wednesday was a good example. Looking back at the video - we film all our rehearsals in the studio - I see we're working very hard and yet, strangely, hardly working at all, as if the world we've sketched on stage were somehow doing its own thing. It's not, of course. When the action starts, what you see is 50 minutes of the performers gliding and stuttering through great decisions, inspired reactions and odd lunges, jumping from one fragment of material to another in ways that any amount of our talking could never have predicted. And if you watch closely, you'll see that I'm running in and out of the stage, too, whispering suggestions, waving yes or no to people who only sometimes notice, trying to sculpt the fog as it warps and weaves in front of me.

It's watching this small fraction of inspired improvisations (maybe 3% would be more accurate) that reminds me how lucky I am to work with performers who can do this - this very strange combination of tuning and turning, doing and waiting, acting and not acting, pretending, playing, inventing, insisting, listening and taking chances. It might be an odd thing for a sometime writer like me to say, but watching this kind of rehearsal, when the group is on a roll, and being lucky enough to nudge it into shape a bit, reconfirms so many of my doubts about the singularity of authorship that many plays demand. I really do prefer the making by doing, the group effort, its multiple directions and endless live negotiations. Even the cold of the bunker, and the ever-present threat of an eight-hour circular discussion, can't keep me away.

Read more in the 'Tim Etchells on Performance' series at www.guardian.co.uk/stage/series/tim-etchells-on-performance



In *The Thrill of It All* the performers' voices are distorted via a sound desk with the women's voices turned up high and squeaky and the men's low and lumbering. Performer and founder member of Forced Entertainment Terry O'Connor writes here about how a fascination with voice distortion began with the show *Void Story* and how it has been pursued in *The Thrill of It All*. This was published in the Forced Entertainment website notebook on 9 April 2010.

Like kids at Christmas, when we first started using the vocal effects at the start of working on *Void Story*, they never failed to thrill. An audio hall of mirrors, the effects box with its high-pitched kid's voice and the super low 'giant' voice especially, transformed any utterance, sound or breath beyond recognition.

Pretty soon on *Void Story*, the sound of these treated voices started to suggest their own timbres and layers of identity. It wasn't enough that the kid's voice stated the obvious like kids do, or switched mood from one line to the next. We soon found that the most fun you could get from this high pitched naivety was to make it a brittle veneer barely covering a whole foundation of spite, cynicism and manipulative confidence. For the 'giant', a whole semantic debate emerged, as though the slow, deep, steady voice wanted to unpick its own being.

We've gone back to the voice toys for *The Thrill of it All*, feeling there was still more fun to be had from them. So in rehearsals all eight performers speak this way; the women high and infantile, the men low and ponderous and the costumes play to the same gender extremes. Watching the men improvise around a text idea, early on in this rehearsal process, their wigs over their eyes, their mics in front of their mouths, the confusion around just who was talking was giddy fun; your eyes always a few seconds behind the pass.

Watching our individual versions of these effects-box-identities squabble and undermine one another through amplified back-chat, (all men reduced to a low and self-important grumble, all women barbed and squeaky), we blur, merge and weave on the small screen of the rehearsal video playback, a plastic-brutal cartoon of sexed identity. Like a twisted set of Ken and Barbie Dolls.... like late-stage Elvis and Dolly-without the Americana, the songs, the hips or the tits.

You can learn more about *Void Story* and other current and past projects at www.forcedentertainment.com



A conversation about *The Thrill of It All* between director Tim Etchells and choreographic advisor Kate McIntosh, Sheffield, March 2010.

TE: I wanted to ask about your first impressions coming into early rehearsals last year - what seemed to be happening?

KM: I was struck immediately by the movement, by the chaos rising and receding in the movement - it was very exciting. And it seemed to be a lot about poolings of energies, energy. I remember trying to follow individuals in the dances. Sitting so close, as you are in the studio, it was a bit like being in the eye of the storm. It was pretty overwhelming to have these bodies flying around all over the place in varying degrees of control of what they were doing (laughs). And that felt very exuberant, that everyone in the room was testing stuff out...



The other big impression I had was bodies in space but also bodies in collision because there were a lot of fights. It felt quite visceral - people's bodies were being shoved into the floor and pushed around, they were getting jumped on or jostled. For me, there was a nice mix of energies between something being presented as a dance because it's got music behind it, but feeling that actually it might just be a fight masquerading as a dance. So I could feel the people very strongly through the dancing - it didn't feel like the dance was a mask covering them at all. Seeing people's choices inside it in that way meant the dance wasn't a formal thing imposed on them, it was a thing that they were somehow gaming with.

TE: I'm always a bit doubting whether it's even okay to call what we're doing dance. (laughs) But, OK, how does what you're describing relate to the way that dance as 'Dance' might more usually be organised?

KM: I think the emphasis is shifted, in that I really got the feeling it was the people I was watching. They were in various states of misusing the dance, or of coping with it or of enjoying it for themselves. It's strange - even though there's so much focus towards me as a watcher in the work, it never really felt that what's presented was completely for my enjoyment - there's always a sense of another purpose.

TE: It's funny - I remember a conversation with Richard [Lowdon] after early rehearsals about how exhausting the piece was for the performers. And we were laughing a lot about making this show now when people are in their mid to late forties! We should have made it when we were twentysomething, it would have been so much easier. But of course we realise that a good part of the interest comes because people are on a certain edge of being able to cope with things. There's a gap I suppose, or a friction, between the performers and the task, which produces a failing or a falling short - which has its comic and its tragic aspects!



What I like is that as performers the group are not defensive of themselves. As bodies, and as people they have a certain weight, a set of histories and experiences that comes with time. And I guess now after all the shows that we've done, I think everybody onstage knows that they will often look ridiculous. There's a kind of openness as they throw themselves into something, without protection. There's something joyous in that, even as it's absurd.

KM: What starting points were there from the beginning? I'm assuming that movement was one of those?

TE: Yeah. A desire to move was definitely there from the start. As a group we tend to flipflop between chaotic, quite physical shows and rather more conceptual text-based approaches. So we came to this one in a reaction to the last two works [Spectacular and Void Story], which had been quite minimal.

Another starting point was the music - right now in rehearsals we're playing a lot of Japanese songs from the 60s, amongst other things. The attraction for me is partly not understanding the words - the music can function as texture, with all those emotional tones and qualities you get from voice, from singing, but at the same time part of it remains absent for me, missing, blank. I also like that much of what we're using arises already from an act of appropriation - it's Japanese pop-cultural reworking of American pop culture. So it feels like we're borrowing and reworking something that has already borrowed and reworked.

The other big starting point was the decision to alter the performers voices. This began with the previous project - Void Story - in which, for the first time we used a lot of treatments on the vocal sounds.

What interests me is that after twenty-odd years using the voice as a kind of sincerity, we're suddenly using it as a mask. Void Story broke the pattern - the voices became costumes in fact - and I think with The Thrill of it All we wanted to take that impulse much further - as if the performers could be larger than life in every direction.

KM: How did you start thinking about the body in relation to those voices? It seemed like you went through a few phases of thinking about how the body rises to, or occupies, that voice.

TE: Yeah, that's been one of the big questions of the project - connections and disconnections of voice and body.



KM: It always seemed interesting to me in the early rehearsals I saw there was so much physicality before you ever even heard a voice. So as a viewer you got very familiar with the quite extreme physicalisation of the space before any of the performers say a word.

The Thrill of It All Voices & Bodies



The other big impression I got from the voices though, was how the way you're using them has polarised the genders. That in itself has a physical aspect. It's even tricky to divide things up because once you get used to the voices it has quite a strong effect on your vision. The voice shifts how you actually see the people. It's, like you say, they're actually quite masked by the voices.

TE: In Stephen Connor's book about ventriloquism [Dumbstruck] he says that every voice implies a body. He describes the rise, in the 50's, of 'close mic-ing' for vocal recording - people like Sinatra and so on. This technique effectively created a new kind of voice that people hadn't heard before. And Connor talks about how it summoned a body, as all voices do - in this case a kind of sensual body, that appeared to be impossibly close to you and at the same time very close to itself, touching itself. He invokes this idea of a 'vocal body' that's larger than life and I think that really connects to aspects of Thrill.



KM: The other impression I got from rehearsals relates to the gap between the sound of the voice and the content of what it's talking about. You seem to polarise things again - a very ponderous deep kind of voice talking about fragile sentimental things, or a twittering, sharp high pitched birdy voice asking big philosophical questions.

TE: Much of this arises from the childish decision, to turn all the guys voices very deep, to this cliché of preposterously exaggeratedly lumbering masculinity, and at the same time to turn all the women's voices high and shrill and thin - again in this preposterous cliché of what a woman's voice might be like, as stereotype. On the mixing desk it's like two ends of the same dial - simple as that - but through it there's a set of binaries you get into around constructed masculinity, constructed femininity. I think tangling with these binaries became one of the organising principles of the work. So I'm slowly realising that the guys with their big voices should talk about small things and that the women with their high tiny voices should talk about big weighty topics. This operates on many different levels in the piece, that one's trying to throw opposites together and let them vibrate in the same space.

KM: It's interesting because I have quite a strong delight when I hear them talking about bodies. I've been trying to unpick why that is. I think I wanted to tie the voice and the body together directly. So I loved it in improvisations when someone would start talking about sweating or crying, or when they'd complain that someone else was smelling. There's something about the exaggerated voices which for me proposes a sort of hyper-physicalised state as well, a state that I wanted to know more than you can learn just looking at them - you want to hear about the insides of those bodies, to know about the texture and weight of them.



TE: I just wonder if many of the things we are touching on in the work - the separation of the voice from the self, the voice as something that looks back on the body, the body as this failing, fragmented machine - if all these things are connected. it's even to do with wigs also, the costuming. Perhaps all these things together project an unease about what we are as human beings at this present moment. That the possibility to stand there as this straightforward, no nonsense "I" - to say "I'm here" "I am here" - which I think we've used so much in other shows - that the "I am here" isn't quite happening in this show.

KM: I have the feeling that there's something about the voice that also makes the people a bit monstrous in a certain way, in the sense that they are fully constructions, and you feel the gaps and the joins in that constructedness. It's disturbing but also quite fascinating...compelling.

TE: What I can't work out is the relation between the monstrous, the larger than life, the exaggerated, the fabricated on the one hand, and on the other hand the human, the failing, the trying, the struggling and the joyous - you know, all those things that we can say about the movement. The rehearsals are an odd meeting between those two frames almost, and I wonder quite what we're reaching for in that as we try to complete the piece.

KM: It seems important also that in this case the dance is not a fully achieved thing, that it's more about the leaping in, and there's something very human about the dancing in that way, that the construction doesn't function in a glossy smooth way at all, it's very ragged. One of the big impressions I get about the dance is that it's raggedness is posed very exactly in relation to the overproduction of the voices. It's the more human part of the monster...

TE: That's true.

KM: Is there anything to say about what the relation is with the audience in this work, and how this connects to relationships with the audience in previous projects?

TE: I'd say the construction of the piece around a found form is typical of what we've been doing for quite some time really. We tend to draw on popular cultural precedent. So for Thrill... there's a feeling that you're watching some kind of late night cabaret or some particularly barbaric low budget Italian TV dance show.



In relation to the audience I think it's quite strange! Partly because when they talk it's mediated in this weird way, and partly because they spend so much time dancing so there's a slight feeling of distance. Generally I've tended to work with performers on stage being quite directly there for the audience - they address you, look you in the eyes, take care of you. But the converse possibility is interesting to me too



- when the performers appear to withdraw, enter their own space and logic. As a watcher the process of shifting between those two positions - drawn in/shut out - is really compelling I think.

I was wondering if there's something for you about what the performers bring to the movement, as non-dancers?

KM: One of the major differences is to do with efficiency. I mean when you ask someone who's not dance trained to do something they won't find the most efficient way to do it, which is a dancer's tendency, they'll find things that require extra energy. People tend to find quite unusual pathways to achieve what's been asked of them which is fantastic because it adds a lot of detail and individuality.

Two states interest me in the dancing. The first is when they're lost in what they're doing, so you feel that what you're watching is not self conscious. And the second is almost an opposite to that, when the non-dancers dance like it's just happening to them - as opposed to being totally lost in the dance, or totally controlling what they do. So as I'm watching there's times when it seems they can't quite believe how they're moving, and they're slightly outside of or dislocated from the movement somehow. They're almost wondering themselves how it's happening, which is a kind of delight as well! You see someone who's just trying to just keep their head above water in a certain way, which has a lot of pleasure in it because as an audience you know, again, that what you're watching is not being 'produced' just for you. You're looking at somebody living through the situation of dancing, rather than re-producing a known quantity for you to appreciate.

TE: Yes. It's about escaping intention, in a certain way.

KM: Can I ask you about the sentimentality... I'm quite curious about that as a thread...

TE: The sentiment came very early, as a very lucky discovery in week one of improves on the piece. We found that the big lumbering thuggish, fighting guys loved to talk about sentimental topics. Like tough guys tearing-up when they hold their grandkids or something, I don't know where that image comes from, it's such a cultural trope though - this cliché of the ultimate sentimentality of masculinity.



I guess one of the things that the piece tries to speak to is this fucking machine that contemporary culture is, a machine for producing emotional affect. I'm thinking, broadly speaking, about television for example and the way that it's established as a machinery for producing emotion... from drama, to chat show, to reality show, even news coverage. It extends of course too - you know television's the rotten pulsing heart of it (laughs) but it's bigger than that you know, since contemporary



culture's obsessed with producing emotion, as if emotion were actually anything. It's emotion as a kind of masturbation combined with the cycling of meaningless energy, a kind of lurid hyperactivity, like this energy of Cathy at the beginning of the performance. Perhaps it has something to do with where Capitalism has got to. It has nothing else very tangible to sell now so what it's flogging you is your own emotions, souped-up and remixed.

One thing I like in rehearsals right now are moments where performers are pushing each other to 'go further' with some scene or another - forcing each other to get more emotion, or more ridicule out of what they are saying and doing. There's something rather brutal about this in a mercenary chatshow style - a desire to feed what they see as an audience demand for blood, tears, revelation.

Perhaps it's also about negotiating the expectations of 300 people sitting in a theatre. You've got to do something with them, and one of the things you're supposed to do is move them! So in a way of course Thrill relates to other work of ours - work that enjoys its place in front of an audience but which at the same time has got some problems with the expectations of that place. It's prepared to deliver on many things... but it also wants to prod and say...

KM: "is this, is this..." (laughs)

TE: (laughs) Yeah. "Is this really what we should be doing?"

As well as his work as Artistic Director of Forced Entertainment Tim Etchells is an artist and writer pursuing projects of his own in different contexts. See www.timetchells.com for more information. Kate McIntosh is a Brussels-based artist working in theatre, performance and video. You can find out more about her work at www.margaritaproduction.be



Website - www.forcedentertainment.com

Here you can find:

- An archive of all the company's projects, illustrated with stunning photographs by Hugo Glendinning, video interviews, programme notes essays and other fragments.
- Full details of all touring activity, including links to online booking where available.
- Links to online resources including free downloadable packs and articles about the company.
- Chance to sign up to our free mailing list to keep you informed of all Forced Entertainment news.

Online Shop - www.forcedentertainment.com/shop

Peruse our virtual shelves to order books, DVDs and other resources including:

Research Pack

Our Research Pack contains over 100 pages of articles, reviews, project information and notes on aspects of the making process. It is an invaluable resource for people with an academic interest in the company.

Performance DVDs and texts

High quality multi-camera performance documentation of most of Forced Entertainment's shows from the past 25 years and texts.

Making Performance

A 30-minute DVD exploring the company's working process.

Certain Fragments

Contemporary Performance & Forced Entertainment - Tim Etchells

An extraordinary exploration of what lies at the heart of contemporary theatre. Written by Tim Etchells, his unique and provocative voice shifts from intimate anecdote to critical analysis and back again to investigate the processes of devising performance, the role of writing in an interdisciplinary theatre, and the influence of the city on contemporary art practice.

British Library Sound Archive - www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/drama

The Forced Entertainment Collection at the British Library Sound Archive contains never seen before rehearsal footage, a complete collection of our performance DVDs and texts alongside other contemporary performance documentation. Access is free of but you will need to make an appointment, please contact them on +44 (0)20 7412 7447 or email NSA-drama@bl.uk.

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THE THRILL OF IT ALL

Conceived and devised by the company

Performers Thomas Conway, Amit Hadari, Phil Hayes, Jerry Killick, Richard Lowdon, Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden, Terry O'Connor, John Rowley.

Direction Tim Etchells

Design Richard Lowdon

Lighting Design Nigel Edwards

Music and Sound John Avery

Choreographic Advice Kate McIntosh

Director's Assistant Hester Chillingworth

Production Ray Rennie and Francis Stevenson

Forced Entertainment

Forced Entertainment is Robin Arthur, Tim Etchells (Artistic Director), Richard Lowdon (Designer), Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden and Terry O'Connor.

Forced Entertainment Management Team

General Manager Eileen Evans

Marketing Manager Sarah Cockburn

Administrator Gareth James

Administrative Assistant Natalie Simpson

Co-producers Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels), Hebbel am Ufer (Berlin), PACT Zollverein (Essen), Theatre Garonne (Toulouse) Les Spectacles vivants - Centre Pompidou in collaboration with Festival d'Automne (Paris).

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