

**Or in the future: Utopian and dystopian dramaturgy in Forced  
Entertainment's Tomorrow's Parties  
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1.

Forced Entertainment is a British theatre company that has been making performance since 1984. They describe themselves as '... making theatre to speak about the times we live in'. There is something Orwellian about how their work sits between the utopian and the dystopian, the optimistic and the pessimistic. I begin with an extract from a publication from 1994 entitled *A Decade of Forced Entertainment* that features a transcript of a conversation between company members Richard Lowden and Terry O'Connor.<sup>1</sup>

*Richard: What was the question people asked most about the work?*

*Terry: Er, whether it was optimistic or not.*

*Richard: And what was the answer they got most often*

*Terry: We used to say the work was optimistic.*

*Richard: In what way?*

*Terry: We said there was an optimism in the struggle of it – an optimism in the way the on-stage protagonists used and reused the material they'd been left with.*

*Richard: How was that optimistic?*

*Terry: In a way we marveled at their ability to cope – to change things, to deal with them, to make things their own...*

*Richard: So this optimism was just a kind of coping?*

*Terry: Yes*

*Richard: Did people believe this idea – that the work was optimistic?*

*Terry: Not always, no.*

*Richard: Why not?*

*Terry: The optimism seemed remote.*

*Richard: Why?*

*Terry: The victories won by the performers, or characters, were often private and delicate. And the victories were never total – there was always doubt, irony, a kind of melancholy...*

*Richard: So the work was doubtful, ironic and melancholy but somehow optimistic?*

*Terry: Yes*

*Richard: How can those things exist together?*

2.

This paper takes Forced Entertainment's devised performance, *Tomorrow's Parties* (2012), and casts a dramaturgical eye on how the text enacts and erases a series of utopias and dystopias, oscillating between optimism and pessimism. Standing still on wooden pallets for over an hour, two performers, one woman and one man, describe and then discard a string of fictive futures. Illuminated by coloured light bulbs that fade out over the duration of the performance, the pallets represent both a life raft and a soapbox for these two lost politicians of hypothesis, building on and deconstructing each other's arguments about life in the future. The paper imagines the text as a shifting landscape of potential that ebbs and flows and questions notions of politics, gender, ethics and environment.

With reference to the company's devising processes drawing on Tim Etchell's practice of iterative writing and J. L. Austin's notion of the 'performative', the paper explores how the text corrects itself, questions its logic and reflects on its origins.<sup>2</sup> *Tomorrow's Parties* is a post-dramatic text that sits somewhere between science fiction and fantasy and touches upon terror and catastrophe. It predicts and undermines the endgame of the world but also the endgame we play when we are making the world of a performance. I want to talk in this paper about context, dramaturgy and stories that ravel and unravel. As Valentine Cunningham suggests in *In the Reading Gaol* (1993), I want to suggest '... a simultaneous connection, and difference, between text and context, literature and history, words and things, signs and places, the textual and the human.' In doing so I seek to explore what happens at a 'convergence of writing and worldliness, text and context, literature, theatre and history'.<sup>3</sup>

3.

In April 2013, I witnessed Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties* in the Festspielhaus Hellerau outside Dresden as part of Szene England, a festival of British Theatre supported by the British Council. Let us start by putting this performance into context. Hellerau was the first garden city in Germany and a utopian vision of what a community might be. In the Festspielhaus Hellerau at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, 'Europe's intellectual elite came to the legendary summer festivals wanting to develop new means and ways of connecting life, work and art.'<sup>4</sup> During both World Wars, Hellerau was used as a training facility by the German army and the Nazis. Following the annexation of Germany in 1945, the Soviet Army continued to use the theatre and its grounds as an army base and it was falling into disrepair when they left the city in the 1990s. According to the theatre's website, 'After the army moved out, the people of Hellerau and Dresden reclaimed the grounds of the Festival Theatre with art projects and forms of cultural occupation, turning it into a place for the cultural Modern Age.'<sup>5</sup> The venue has in itself moved from utopia to dystopia to utopia again in a sort of historiographical moebius strip of creativity, conflict and politics. In its heyday, before the First World War, Festspielhaus Hellerau had hosted musical, operatic and theatrical premieres by renowned composers, directors and the designer of the building himself,

Adolphe Appia. According to Brockett's *History of the Theatre* (2008), Appia designed the Festspielhaus Hellerau as '...the first theatre of modern times to be built without a proscenium arch and with a completely open stage'.<sup>6</sup>

4.

This is where our historical context collides with our theatrical context. Just 20 years after the Soviet Army withdrew from the building, Forced Entertainment presented their work in Dresden for the first time. They arrived in Germany as a cultural export of British theatre companies supported by the British Council to educate, inform and entertain a German audience. Interestingly, for all of the performances as part of *Szene England*, the festival arranged surtitles, because the Dresden audience, being formerly East German, does not speak English as readily as German audiences in the West. These surtitles, framed the piece, in the absence of a proscenium arch. Projected on a screen high above the performers' heads, they provided an alternative visual narrative. The string of coloured light bulbs hanging beneath the surtitles became the open curtains suggesting that a performance was about to take place. The company have spent the last 30 years making performance in which they often build their own proscenium arch onstage, as Tim Etchells, of Forced Entertainment, explains: 'In the end, as far as set design went, all we could put on the stage was another stage. Inside the larger building of the theatre, our crude wooden stage on the theatre's own stage, our crude scaffolding and worker's lamps proscenium inside the existing proscenium of the theatre. As if to say: this pretending is our topic.'<sup>7</sup>

5.

I want to put 'dramaturgy' into context now. Coined by a German theatre critic in the 1700s, it has become more prevalent in the UK theatre context in the last 20 years. We might consider dramaturgy to be the composition of a performance. Etchells describes the dramaturgy of Forced Entertainment's work as: 'A journey with picaresque structure, from a beginning to a >middle<, through anticipation and climax, finally to closure on arrival somewhere, here, a place which did not exist before'.<sup>8</sup> Dramaturgy is

inextricably linked to context; culturally, historically and geographically. Especially when that performance deals tacitly with a materiality of text spoken and translated into different languages. As an audience, we are made aware of our place in the world culturally and geographically by the presence of surtitles. Surtitles that become a textual proscenium arch. Allowing *Tomorrow's Parties* to be framed by its own text. We are watching with those for whom English is not a first language but the words spoken in English and written in German perform a future that we can all understand. This notion of performing the future resonates with Austin's 'performatives', the concept of a word doing what it is saying. For example, to say 'I do' performs the act of getting married. Austin's speech act theory is about a performance of speech, building on notions of perlocution - it is not just what is said that matters, but the act of speaking, enunciating, the form it takes when performed.

6.

In *Tomorrow's Parties*, the future is performed not only by the text on the stage but also in the audiences' collective and individual imagination. Forced Entertainment enacts our engagement in a dramaturgy that does what Eugenio Barba describes as a 'dance of thought in action'. Barba uses the term 'action' to describe all elements that '... work directly on the audience's attention, on their understanding, their emotiveness, their synaesthesia'.<sup>9</sup> In *Tomorrow's Parties* our understanding, emotions and sensations respond to what we cannot know – what we will become. In *Performance and Place* (2006), Lois Keidan remembers Forced Entertainment's 'sublimely bleak' early work for audiences '... who grew up with the television always on'. She describes a '... place for audiences to contemplate their own relationship with 'the Other''.<sup>10</sup> In this performance 'the other' is 'the future'. It is a place for audiences to contemplate their own relationship with the unknown. A place for the making strange of the present through the lens of history. As McLuhan said, 'we look at the present through the rear view mirror, we march backwards into the future'.<sup>11</sup> Forced Entertainment look at the future via the rear view mirror.

7.

*Tomorrow's Parties* starts like this.

*Robin: In the future there won't really be countries, like there are now, there won't be nation states, there'll be just one big world government body, and it will be based in a big white modernist building somewhere and it will be modelled on the UN probably, but it won't be the United Nations because nations won't exist, it'll just be like The World Government.*

*Terry: Or in the future, there will be a return to a sort of feudal system and each country will be divided into lots of small, more or less rural communities, each of which will have a leader – not exactly a king but more like a kind of 'chief' or 'wise man' or 'wise person' with a group of advisors who would be nobles or merchants...<sup>12</sup>*

The opening exchange of *Tomorrow's Parties* between Robin Bowman (Male) and Terry O'Connor (Female) takes us into the future by describing a place without nations, it refers to a 'big, white modernist building' that may or may not resemble the theatre in which we are sitting. It takes the mind of the viewer out of the theatre and into the world which we all inhabit. Whereas most theatre asks us to forget the world around us for an hour and enter into a micro-narrative of characters' lives, this piece does the reverse. It yields no images other than what we see on arrival and it resists the theatrical wearing an aesthetic of the political party and the fete, perhaps one of the utopian summer parties that took place there over 100 years ago.

Etchells states: 'For me there's an inherent ugliness in theatre because it is always trying to do something to you. It wants something. So I would use the word theatrical in a derogatory sense: something that is trying too hard to affect you and is distorting itself by doing this. I am very attracted to theatrical practice where things are given the time, the space, and the place to be what they are, and not forced beyond a certain point. There is a kind of beauty in this work that interests me. There's a kind of dramaturgy of anti-dramatics.'<sup>13</sup>

8.

Forced Entertainment belongs to the post-dramatic tradition defined by Hans Thies-Lehmann and *Tomorrow's Parties* adheres to this kind of dramaturgy of anti-dramatics.<sup>14</sup> There is a man and a woman and they are talking. There is a grand-narrative of the future and the only characters are the entire human race. It is important that it is a man and a woman delivering the text, the company rotates the performers, but the gender balance remains the same. Each performer represents half the population of the globe. Note in the first statement, that Terry amends 'wise man' to 'wise person', suggesting that in this future, the gender will be as balanced as it is in the casting. Delivery is measured and neutral until times in the narrative when Robin and Terry correct each other in a way that might represent a domestic, political or universal argument. Between couples. Between genders. Between nations. This is hinted at by a raised inflexion or a raised eyebrow but exists to remind us this is a story about storytelling, a story about futures that do not exist yet.

9.

The complex text writes and rewrites the world of the future in the vocabulary of today. The performers enact this grand narrative in an everyday, matter-of-fact way. They stand still. They use small gestures and hum-drum mannerisms we know from relationships, to explore the unknown relationship with our future through a series of fragmentary, revisionist interruptions to each other's text. The piece operates like a novel, its complex threads woven together, just as Barba describes dramaturgy as both 'a weave and a process of weaving.'<sup>15</sup> The dramaturg is therefore a weaver. Dutch dramaturg and academic, Janine Brogt, takes this analogy of a weaver further when she suggests that a dramaturg is the 'weaver of dreams'. She says 'I love the different shapes it can take in my head when it does not exist yet, as much as I love creating it in reality'. Her aim, as dramaturg, is 'to protect the dream of production against its necessarily limited reality for as long as I possibly can'.<sup>16</sup> Forced Entertainment talk of dreams in *Tomorrow's Parties*.

*Terry: And more and more people will learn to control their dreams. So dreams won't be the kind of unpredictable noisy things that people have now, they'll be like very complex dramatic compositions – like novels - that people can actually shape and edit.*

*Robin: Or things will have developed in such a way that this whole era, now, our time, will really be irrelevant...a sort of minor diversion down a road that isn't really going anywhere, a sort of pointless distraction from the main narratives.<sup>17</sup>*

10.

In terms of process, Forced Entertainment work with fragments. Etchells describes that they '... have this unspoken agreement that no one would bring anything too completed to the process – a few scraps or fragments of text, an idea or two for action, a costume, an idea about space, a sketched out piece of music – everything unfinished, distinctly incomplete – so there'd be more spaces for other things to fill in...more dots to join.'<sup>18</sup> Perhaps in line with Mike Pearson's notion that: 'What begins as a series of fragments is arranged in performance: dramaturgy is an act of assemblage.'<sup>19</sup> *Tomorrow's Parties* pieces these fragments together to create an assemblage of futures. Futures that illiterate, that spin off each other, that contradict each other. Etchells states: 'I'm drawn to the endless possibility of language to generate confusion or double-understanding, to produce different or contradictory images and associations, to create unknowing as much as knowing, to generate confusions, hiccups, logic problems, glitches in the fabric or flow or sense.'<sup>20</sup> The narrative of *Tomorrow's Parties* confuses, hiccups, problematises and glitches the fabric of the future that the two performers are weaving. Weaving and meaning are so closely linked that when one unravels so does the other. As academic and dramaturg, David Williams, writes: 'Let its seams, stitchings, flaws be visible - it is provisional, contingent, in process, ravelled and unravelling, human, imperfect, a made thing still being made'.<sup>21</sup>

11.

Etchells writes about how when Forced Entertainment makes a performance they use improvisation as a way of '... eliminating things from their



enquiries'.<sup>22</sup> *Tomorrow's Parties* is a verbal notebook of these enquiries, written down, crossed out, rewritten, crossed out etc. Towards the end every line starts with the word 'Or'. The text performs a dot dot dot dot not a full stop. It is an iterative, illiterative, repetitive, inventory of potential enquiries. As the lights faded in Dresden in 2013 and I listened to the future being rewritten, line by line, I imagined all the potential ways in which the world would end or people would live or die. The two performers' words ebbed and flowed like time itself through over an hour that seemed to last no less or no more than a moment. As the company wrote in 1994 about their first decade together: 'They knew something strange had happened to time.'<sup>23</sup>

12.

*Tomorrow's Parties* ends like this:

*Robin: Or in the future this whole part of history, now, all this will be a mystery, pretty much. These times will be like a jigsaw where most of the pieces are missing and looking back on it will just have to be guesswork, by and large. And people will speculate, you know, historians will speculate, what this was all like, putting the few jigsaw pieces together to make incomplete and unconvincing pictures, but there'll be so little of it left, so little evidence for anything, that they really won't know for sure.*

*Terry: Or time will speed up, and people's lives will get shorter and shorter... people will be like butterflies, they'll just live for a day.. but they'll cram so much into that day, all the things they need to do, and then even that lifespan of a day, will get shorter and shorter so it will be like a summers day....and then a winters day...and then even that will get shorter and shorter until in the end people will only live for an hour...<sup>24</sup>*

*Tomorrow's Parties* lasts for an hour. Terry O'Connor says in a video interview: 'I think what's great about this piece is the way meaning in it isn't very fixed and each of the suggestions about the future, they kind of move around a bit, they shimmer, and maybe that in itself is also hopeful. That things are constantly shifting and constantly changing and that means there always has to be some hope possible'.<sup>25</sup> As we ask questions like *What Happens Now?*<sup>26</sup> and

*What happens to the hope at the end of the evening?*<sup>27</sup> we might want to find a place to contemplate our own 'other', our own future, and ask if the world and indeed the work we make, watch or write about in that world is optimistic or pessimistic, utopian or dystopian, a dot dot dot or a full stop.

13.

On that note, I end with an extract from the publication I cited earlier entitled *A Decade of Forced Entertainment* (1994) that features a transcript of a conversation between company members Richard Lowden and Terry O'Connor.<sup>28</sup>

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*Richard: Do you think the work is optimistic?*

*Terry: Yes*

*Richard: Even when it's bleak?*

*Terry: Yes*

*Richard: Why do you think that?*

*Terry: It opens a space which people fill*

*Richard: So the optimism is more an absence than anything else – the optimism lies in the viewer's experience?*

*Terry: I don't know*

*Richard: Answer the question. People are waiting [pause] The optimism you were speaking of is more of an absence than anything else – a space that people are left to fill.*

*Terry: Yes*

- <sup>1</sup> Etchells, Tim, 'A Decade of Forced Entertainment', *Performance Research*, 1.1 (1996), 73-88.
- <sup>2</sup> Austin, John L., 'Pretending', *THE SYMPOSIA READ AT THE JOINT SESSION OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY AND THE MIND ASSOCIATION* (Southampton, 11-13 July 1958), vol. xxxii (1958), pp. 261-278, Literature Online.  
<[https://www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk/pdf/Austin\\_Anscombe.pdf](https://www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk/pdf/Austin_Anscombe.pdf)> [accessed 25 April 2016].
- <sup>3</sup> Cunningham, Valentine, *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts and History* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Hellerau website [online] (23 April 2010) <<http://www.hellerau.org/english/hellerau/>> [Accessed online 27 June 2014]
- <sup>5</sup> Hellerau website [online] (23 April 2010) <<http://www.hellerau.org/english/hellerau/>> [Accessed online 27 June 2014]
- <sup>6</sup> Brockett, Oscar G. and Franklin J. Hildy. *History of the Theatre* (New York: Pearson, 2008), p. 39.
- <sup>7</sup> Heathfield, Adrian, *Live: Art and Performance* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> Sherwood, Miriam Rose, 'The D-Word', *Theatertreffen Blog* [online] (15 May 2012) <<http://theatertreffen-blog.de/tt12/2012/05/13/the-d-word/>> [accessed 20 April 2016].
- <sup>9</sup> Barba, E. *The Nature of Dramaturgy: Describing Actions at Work*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 1.1 (February 1985), (pp. 75-78).
- <sup>10</sup> Keidan, Lois, 'This Must be the Place: Thoughts on Place, Placelessness and Live Art since the 1980s', in *Performance and Place*, by eds. Leslie Hill and Helen Paris (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 8-16.
- <sup>11</sup> McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An inventory of effects* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 1975).
- <sup>12</sup> Performance text of *Tomorrow's Parties*, Forced Entertainment (2011)
- <sup>13</sup> Nexö. Martin A., Judith Helmer and Florian Malzacher, *Not Even a Game Anymore: The Theatre of Forced Entertainment* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag: 2004).
- <sup>14</sup> Lehmann, Hans-Thies, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jurs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
- <sup>15</sup> Barba, E. *The Nature of Dramaturgy: Describing Actions at Work*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 1.1 (February 1985), (pp. 75-78).
- <sup>16</sup> Brogt, Janine, 'Keeper of Dreams', in *Dramaturgy: A User's Guide* (London: Central School of Speech and Drama / Total Theatre, 1999), 8-9.
- <sup>17</sup> Performance text of *Tomorrow's Parties*, Forced Entertainment (2011)
- <sup>18</sup> Etchells, Tim, *Certain Fragments* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- <sup>19</sup> Pearson, Mike and Michael Shanks, *Theatre / Archaeology* (Routledge: New York / London, 2001).
- <sup>20</sup> Etchells, Tim, *While You Were With Us Here Tonight*. (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2013).
- <sup>21</sup> Williams, David 'Geographies of Requiredness: Notes on the Dramaturg in Collaborative Devising\*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20.2, p. 201.
- <sup>22</sup> Etchells, Tim, 'Tim Etchells on performance: why a few heads are better than one', *The Guardian Blog* [online] (21 December 2009) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/dec/21/tim-etchells-improvisation-theatre>> [accessed 28 February 2016].
- <sup>23</sup> Etchells, Tim, 'A Decade of Forced Entertainment', *Performance Research*, 1.1 (1996), 73-88.
- <sup>24</sup> Performance text of *Tomorrow's Parties*, Forced Entertainment (2011)
- <sup>25</sup> Forced Entertainment, *Tomorrow's Parties* [online] (23 April 2014) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2R089WovDw/>> [Accessed online 27 June 2014]
- <sup>26</sup> *What Happens Now: 21st Century Writing in English* conference at the University of Lincoln, 14-17 July 2014. Conference at which this paper was delivered.
- <sup>27</sup> Crouch, Tim and a smith, *What Happens to the Hope at the End of the Evening* (London: Oberon Books, 2014). Keynote performance at the conference at which this paper was delivered.
- <sup>28</sup> Etchells, Tim, 'A Decade of Forced Entertainment', *Performance Research*, 1.1 (1996), 73-88.