

Seeing the Seeing the Seeing: Understanding the Spectatorship of Forced Entertainment

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to explore the crucial role of the audience in the artistic strategies of Forced Entertainment, a leading contemporary British experimental theatre troupe. The paper attempts to highlight the shift of the role of audience towards the spectator as a witness, raising thus further ethical issues. Furthermore, the company's insistence on the presence, realness and "failure" framed by the tools of postdramatic theory and the umbrella of Live Art create a new reading of the endless interplay between the theatre and its audiences, which is illustrated on two recent performances of Forced Entertainment, *Showtime* (1996) and *Spectacular* (2008).

KEYWORDS

Forced Entertainment, Live Art, postdramatic theatre, contemporary British experimental theatre, ethics of spectatorship, *Spectacular*, *Showtime*.

"[I]sn't theatre now just an endless rearticulation of this proxemics – the play between hereness and thereeness – the play between presence and absence?"

Tim Etchells¹

Recent acquisitions of new terminology in the contemporary theatre milieu have inevitably resulted in a new understanding of spectatorship. Fresh umbrella terms and strategies, such as Live Art, postdramatic theatre, performance theatre and alternative performance have brought the need to locate the newly rediscovered spectator in the context of creative strategies of these state-of-the-art theatre trends. As Aleks Sierz accurately observes, the noughties have manifested an enormous upheaval in contemporary theatre, most notably in new British writing,² primarily thanks to the fertile socio-political milieu and the generous funding policy of Britain. Similarly, this period marks a significant rise in the plethora of various fringe theatres and theatrical practises that are consciously challenging the understanding of theatre in its classical, realistic, or dramatic sense. The blooming of the hard-to-locate genres might be traced both in newly emerging projects, such as acclaimed technology-acting combining *Me and the Machine*, or as an energizer of renowned theatre troupes, with Forced Entertainment, being the prime example.

Forced Entertainment, classified as the theatre for the spectator who was brought up in a house where TV was always on,³ may provide an ideal study case for the following analysis that highlights the physical presence of the actor on the stage with a direct address to the audience; as well as summons the notion of theatrical experience of failure, personal confession arousing sympathy or self-importance, in other words, a fragile realization of presence – of both actors and spectators – a genuine state of energetic

co-existence that I dare to call *Life Art*. Rather than the audience individual, the present analysis scrutinizes the understanding of the role of audience in creative strategy of Forced Entertainment. The presents paper is preoccupied primarily with the illustration of the manipulative force of Forced Entertainment in one of the company's latest theatrical enterprises, *Spectacular* (2008) and an earlier piece, *Showtime* (1996), in which the performer-actor relationship manifests more clearly an attempt to establish a certain space with a direct correlation between the play, performers and spectators. This unbounded space in-between, it can be argued, stems from the company's innovative approach to theatre-making which indeed proves difficult to locate within classical genres or artistic movements.

Undoubtedly, Forced Entertainment has always attempted to operate against the established conformity of mainstream theatres. Their oeuvre fails to be read purely as postmodern, experimental, avant-garde, metatheatre, performance art, performance theatre, or according to Bennet, alternative performance, a form attracting new audiences into theatre by estranging its traditional forms.⁴ Like many other fringe theatrical enterprises, its ambivalent location inevitably provokes a necessity for its definition. Therefore in Britain, Forced Entertainment is very often pigeonholed as Live Art representative. To quote Carlson, Live Art is a 'theoretical framework defining the phenomenon of the shift of artistic performative forms from modernism to postmodernism':⁵ it is a way of mapping a new performance culture that respects no limits and understands no borders. Live Art can be read as a strategic umbrella which encapsulates the whole range of process-based art practices; it is an attitude or an approach towards contemporary art. Its existence suggests that questions such as 'Is it art?' or 'Is it theatre?' are not necessary, or even spurious.⁶ In contrast to theatre defined in realist or even modernist terms, Live Art performance does not present *mimesis* of events, but rather presents actual events as art.⁷ Live Art develops as well as subverts the role of postmodern theatre that operates on classical dramatic structures, rewritings, adaptations, and citations. Live Art is a cultural strategy or, according to Keidan, a framing device.⁸ Forced Entertainment plays inevitably trigger the anticipation to be read as something on the fringe, cutting edge, or perhaps on the edge.

Postdramatic theory, on the other hand, is a recently acknowledged approach largely stemming of postmodern vagueness that accentuates other-than-textual aspects of theatre; it is a *theatre of the present*,⁹ that can be identified as an offspring of postmodern theatre and cross-breed of contemporary experimental theatre and performance art, sometimes overlapping sometimes both – meeting in the moment of the real, non-acted here and now. Most arguably the postdramatic contribution to reading contemporary theatre is the shift of the spectators' role, theatre's assertion of the real and the deprivation of its heavy influence on the textual script, so deeply grounded and pervasive element in English theatre. The theatre of Forced Entertainment, or its actors respectively, express reality not far from that of Shakespearean theatre (see below), in which reality and fiction

1 Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments* (New York, London: Routledge, 1999), 79.

2 Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), 1.

3 Lyn Gardner, "Little to Regret" in *Bloody Mess Information Pack* (Forced Entertainment, 2004), 3.

4 Susan Bennet, *Theatre Audiences* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997), 179.

5 Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York, London: Routledge, 2003), 132.

6 Jan Suk, "Live Art – Art of Life" *Umělec/Artist* 4 (2002): 45.

7 Jens Hoffman and Joan Jonas, *Perform* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 15.

8 Lois Keidan, "This Must be the Place: Thoughts on Place, Placelessness and Live Art since the 1980s" in *Performance and Place* ed. by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 9.

9 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 142.

conflux. Albeit seemingly improvisational, Forced Entertainment plays are demandingly rehearsed, often demanding several months – thereby, always very much in control.

Performance theatre is a term coined originally by Michael Van Heuvel (1991); Elinor Fuchs narrows the term specifying its “continuous awareness of itself as performance, and its unavailability for re-presentation.”¹⁰ The definition stresses the reality and adds a metatheatrical aspect. In her recent book, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, Sarah Jane Bailes departs to the understanding of performance theatre with the accent of its “intrinsic concern with presence [... and] a renewed emphasis on process which enhances the non-reproducibility of the art work (that it cannot be *reimagined* even if it is restageable).”¹¹ The restageability manifests a crucial point, since beside the preoccupation with presence and process-based nature of works so accentuated both by Lehman and Live Art theoreticians, it highlights the uniqueness of each performance. Thus it signifies a different reading/understanding/reception by not only societies, commodities, theoreticians, but predominantly by different audiences, spectators, or witnesses.

The Seeing: Audience-cum-spectator-cum-witness

As many authors have attempted to scrutinize, the issue of spectatorship in the context of postdramatic theatre and Live Art and performance theatre and appears seminal. In postdramatic term theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing *and* the spectating take place.¹² Thus the arena of the theatre creates a confluence of energies, ideas, and pure existential flux. Then the actors, as stated above, no longer become alienated beings but instead co-create a collectively unmediated experience of theatregoing. *The fourth wall* in the theatre has been gone since Brecht. Similarly to Brecht’s appeal to the audience, happenings, postdramatic theatre, Live Art and performance theatre presuppose a possibility to engage more with the one seeing, to create a bound, a social and physical union that Auslander calls *community*:¹³ an engagement between the theatre and the one seeing, be it a spectator, a witness or simply an audience member, all immersed in the theatre-being spectacle.

In his 1967 essay, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, Guy Debord coins the following terms of spectacle: the spectacle in narrower sense manifests visualized popular culture representatives, particularly those appearing on TV. In its broader sense, spectacle may be defined as living in a society heavily influenced by mass-media un-reality, using the aids of censorship, advertisements, or even corporal interests. Taking into consideration its historical perception, spectacle shall stand for a performative event memorable for its visuality. The term is derived from the Latin *spectaculum* meaning a show. The term has been used in popular culture to indicate extraordinary visual splendour. Additionally the term was used in low culture to embrace folk performative events, notably freak shows. Therefore, spectacle is closely linked with aestheticity, imagery, the criteria accentuated also by postdramatic tendencies, to which Forced Entertainment undoubtedly

belongs. Additionally, the term spectacle is not far from that of *spectaculum*, a mirror, in medical terms a mirror inserted into patients’ cavities to observe the condition of their inner self. Metaphorically speaking the spectacle thus summons its aura both as a mirror to the society via its author and actors, and as a probe into the one who is watching.

According to Debord, however, the spectator is a victim of the manipulated reality. Mass-produced imagery to enhance consumer profitability affects the spectator in their solely existential being. There is, however, one possible advantage of the false reality, which is the spectator’s possible escape from everyday life, something that in his *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Tausig recognizes as “mimetic excess.”¹⁴ Debord, as a member of the Situationists, namely criticized the spectacle for its consumerism and profitable nature. Additionally, the corruptive force of the spectacle does not convey merely any artistic contribution. In contrast with the passive image-consumerism of Debordean spectator, the spectator of Forced Entertainment is a proactive witness who has subscribed to participate by the simple fact of paying a ticket to be forced to entertain and be entertained by Forced Entertainment. Tim Etchells, the director of Forced Entertainment and a writer, deliberately elaborates on Michael Herr’s theory ‘that you are responsible for everything you saw, as you well for everything you do.’¹⁵ This understanding, nevertheless, recalls Erving Goffman’s notion of performance as a cultural behaviour for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience.¹⁶ Such a theatre-making approach enables the author to develop a manipulative and highly engaging relationship with the spectator casting onto the witnesses in the audience considerably larger attention demand and possibly creating a moment of failed expectation leading as far as the feeling of guilt. Alan Read interestingly observes that the etymology of the word witness brings us to the root of martyr,¹⁷ an observation that offers further extension to the field of ethics.¹⁸ Considering the audience as martyrs, the spectacularity of theatre appropriates the form of both execution and martyrdom. Thus Etchell’s revisit of Herr’s responsibility manifests clearly a striking parallel to contemporary theatre and warfare, arousing both feelings of guilt, uncanny passivity and helplessness, sympathy rather than empathy, all properly distanced. Another possibility is to approximate the origin of witness with the Old English *wit* standing for wit or wisdom. Thereby the witness takes power of the one informed, acknowledged, knowing and inevitably has to bear the truth and agonize themselves by it. According to Heathfield, “[w]hat separates the witnessing an event from a watching one is the experience of the event’s excessive power. Here performance is aligned with trauma as ‘the thing seen’ exceeds the understanding of its witness and consequently return to haunt her.”¹⁹

10 Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theatre after Modernism* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 80.

11 Sarah Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (New York, London: Routledge, 2011), 21-22.

12 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 17.

13 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York, London: Routledge, 1999 [2008]), 2.

14 “Mimetic excess” refers to the possibility to live subjunctively as neither the subject nor object of history but both, at one and the same time. It “provides access to understanding the unbelievable truths of make-believe as foundation of an all-too-seriously serious reality, manipulated but also manipulatable [...] freedom to live reality as really made-up. For further reference see Michael Tausig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), 254-255.

15 Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, 14.

16 For deeper treatment of responsibility and performance in Goffman see Dell Hymes, “Breakthrough into Performance,” in *Folklore*, ed. by Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein (New York and London: Routledge, 1969), 208.

17 Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement: the Last Human Venue* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 175.

18 For recent study of ethical aspects of performance, refer to Helena Grehan, *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship a Global Age* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

19 Adrian Heathfield, “Out of Sight: Forced Entertainment and the Limits of Vision” in Hugo Glendinning, Tim Etchells and Forced Entertainment, *Void Spaces* (London: Site Gallery, 2000), 21.

Like in the Debordean *Society of the Spectacle*, Forced Entertainment audiences are trapped in the game of (not) knowing, seemingly familiar history, time, space and the in-between. The process of co-existence, on the contrary to Debord, is much more stimulative or even suggestible. The Debordean spectators encounter more passive feelings unlike the witness of contemporary performance.²⁰ Still, spectators located in the plays of Forced Entertainment experience certain alienation achieved by the method of invented events (such as in *Hidden J*), slow-motion (*Pleasure*), extended time duration (*Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me?*), repetition (*Club of No Regrets*), palimpsesticity (*12am: Awake & Looking Down*), confessional shame (*Speak Bitterness*), or illusionary appeal (*Spectacular*). Correspondingly, the company manifest the Etchells's penchant in mixing the elements of high and low entertainment, with the characters, not *acting but playing*, rather than "bullshitting" and pretending; the performers keep their own names, and use simple tawdry animal costumes, cheap effects, cheesy scenery, dulcet music, glossy make-up and cardboard aesthetics.

It can be argued that most notably in durational pieces of the company, such as *Quizoola*, a six-hour pub quiz gone wrong, *Speak Bitterness*, a four-to-six hour confessional conference, *12am: Awake & Looking Down* – a 6-hour cross-dressing and cross-charactering bricolage, or *Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me?* a 24-hours long theatre marathon, the lives of actors and audience members converge. Quoting Etchells "what is interesting is that the durational work never has that negative energy, that sense of picking a fight, it is only present in the later theatre work."²¹ It conveys a more generous and humane attitude to those who are watching.²² The extended time frame definitely manifests more apparent transgression of classical theatrical boundaries. Time as such is turned into an object of the aesthetic experience. The ones witnessing such performances rather than feeling empathy with the actors immerse into sympathy, bearing with them; thus the members of the audience are activating, subliminally drawn into the play.

Seeing the Seeing: Actor

The actor of postdramatic theatre is often no longer the actor of a role but a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation.²³ For performance, just as for postdramatic theatre, 'liveness' comes to the fore, highlighting the provocative presence of the human being rather than the embodiment of a figure. According to Gumbrecht, theatre is a 'production of presence', which agrees with the 'integrative aesthetic of the live' - a typical feature of performance art.²⁴ Interchanging realness and pretentiousness is the key element of the postdramatic approach of Forced Entertainment. For postdramatic theatre, in principle, performers in theatre want to transform not themselves but a situation including the audience. By contrast, the ideal performance (art) is a process and moment

20 Judith Helmer and Florian Malzacher, eds. *Not Even a Game Anymore: The Theatre of Forced Entertainment*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag Berlin, 2004), 124. The first to introduce the notion of witnesses was Chris Burden in his *Shoot* (1971). Burden described those watching not as spectators or audience, but as witnesses. See Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, 17.

21 Quoted in Adrian Heathfield, "As if Things Got More Real: A Conversation with Tim Etchells" in Helmer and Malzacher, *Not Even a Game Anymore: The Theatre of Forced Entertainment*, 86.

22 Qtd. in Heathfield, "As if Things Got More Real," 88.

23 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 135.

24 Quoted in Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 141.

that is (1) real, (2) emotionally compulsory, and (3) happening in the here and now.²⁵ Yet many interpretations of what theatre stands for operate with the memory, revisiting, recycling, recollecting, re-experiencing, reliving, "simulacrum of the cultural and historical process."²⁶ The necessity for the engagement of memory of the audience projected onto spectators and play-experiencing process is often accompanied with failure of expectations, what in other words Jauss calls "horizon of expectations,"²⁷ of experience failed to realize or realized wrongly. In this context, Carlson pins down a notion of *ghosting* – the use of the memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret encounters with the new and somewhat different, recycling memory, recycling western concept, haunting the audience.²⁸ It might be argued peculiarly enough, the performers of Forced Entertainment fail to render such comprehension, since unlike an actor in traditional terms, who enact different roles in various plays (Prince Hamlet in *Hamlet*, Cordelia in *King Lear* etc.) thus layers the interpretations of the experienced spectator; throughout their 27 years of theatre-making, Forced Entertainment performers retain their names and identity in all plays, yet adding new details and facts which oscillate on the border between the fictive and real, often unclear, dauntingly enigmatic, the aforementioned interplay between presence and absence,²⁹ summoning of the presence in the context of absence.³⁰

Echoing Heiner Müller, the specificity of theatre is precisely not the presence of the live actor but the presence of the one who is potentially dying.³¹ Such metatheatrical allusion to life and reality outlines humanity, *Life Art* features, fragility, in other words, understanding that the actors are trying to understand that the people are there trying to understand. The perennial function of theatre to imitate is no longer stimulating or appealing. In connection with the experimental film, Martin Čihák asserts that structural films carry no significant meaning;³² Čihák accentuates the significance of the shared space and experience. Thus such experimental films necessarily need not communicate any clear message in terms of plot, narrativity or reality. On the contrary, in parallel to live events, such works claim to investigate the social or "cultural valence."³³ Message becomes message.³⁴ Similarly, Tim Etchells remarks, "The meaning of what you do is the aesthetic and is the form;"³⁵ or as Sierz rearticulates, "the discussion of the play's message is the play's message."³⁶ Therefore the present project, the process of writing this text, even the action of (your) reading of the text is a part of the theatre, where life and art overlap. The audience of both structural films and postdramatic Live Art of

25 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 138.

26 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as a Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 2.

27 Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 22-23.

28 Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 8-12.

29 Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, 79.

30 Tim Etchells, "Some People Do Something: the Others Watch, Listen, Try to Be There" in Daniel Brine and Lois Keidan, *Programme Notes: Case Studies for Locating Experimental Theatre* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2007), 33.

31 Cf. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 144.

32 Martin Čihák, "K teorii strukturálního filmu" [Towards the Theory of Structural Film], *Iluminace* 3 (1999), 54.

33 Auslander, *Liveness*, 2.

34 Čihák refers to the *sdělení* (message) and *sdílení* (sharing). In case of the letter, I have employed the term *message* to highlight somehow authoritarian omnipresence of theatre vs. spectator relationship. For further treatment of the theory of structural films, see Čihák, Martin, "K teorii strukturálního filmu," 50-65.

35 Quoted in Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, 7.

36 Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, 7.

Forced Entertainment voluntarily subscribe to the message, to being manipulated. The contemporary mass-media saturated audience are deterritorialized, what is more, actively deterritorialize thus and BECOME witnesses.

Taking into account new modes of acting, the performing destabilization brought about further experimental appeals towards the spectators. Which is to say, in case of Forced Entertainment theatre, the flux of stage events often employ certain *erness* – the theatre of vulnerable and sympathetic unease, hesitations, annoyance, boredom, irritations, errors, personal confessions. In such human-scale theatre, presumably, Forced Entertainment meets the demand of the spectator – satiated by reality TV/ TV reality, anticipating sensational mistakes, spectators' fragility. The urge of human compassion as opposed to media, the omnipresent media or social oppression, as in Debord, sovereignty, as well as perfection of the capitalism, creates a solid ground for the popularity of Forced Entertainment. The company's familiarity with the audience stems from the shared conspiratory feeling of fulfilling no ambitions, requirements, obligations, from the above argued emphasis on *hic et nunc*, here and now. To illustrate, the company's famous opening line of the performance of *First Night* would be: "Ladies and gentlemen we have something really great for you this evening, here today."³⁷ The statement clearly articulates metatheatrical reaffirmation of the spectating process, its reference to reality, self-referentiality in which the audience can laugh at the protagonist while feeling empathetic simultaneously. Additionally, it offers a promise of something really great which eventually becomes unfulfilled, yet activates the audience. The direct actorial appeal of Forced Entertainment hence transforms the audience from *it* audience to *they* audience, or better say, *he* and *she* audience. The *here today* summons hope and transformation as well as conjures pure anticipation.³⁸

Thereby Forced Entertainment form the notion of proximity: an intimacy created by the fact that the performers look at you and seem to say 'OK you can see me, but remember, I can see you too'³⁹ that is indeed worth researching further. In the playscape of Forced Entertainment, nothing, however, nothing "really great," speaking from a viewpoint or a spectacle, ever comes. Forced Entertainment is theatre of duration, lasting – with a clear and distinct beginning and somewhat clear ending, which, however, remains a mystery. Like life, rather than a climaxing end it stresses the process, thoroughly enjoying the play and playing, in which their work converge with Live Art, or possibly even Life Art, that is the aspect of presence, ephemerality, and failure. Suffice to say, the in-between-ness of Forced Entertainment, the constant relationship between the actor and the audience, is located in the space which Victor Turner designates, developing Van Gennep's rites of passage theory, the space in-between: i.e. the transition between two states of more settled to more conventional activity. This shift from so called liminal performance – which is able to invert the established order, but never subvert it, into liminoid activity, much more limited, individual, those of the audience's responsibility or conscience. The theatrical engagement of the company with the onlooker manifests the shift from *the Other* of Lacan, a different alterity, to liminoid spectator willing to cooperate in the theatre making process.

37 Forced Entertainment, *Showtime* (2001).

38 Tim Etchells and Adrian Heathfield, *Somewhere Near Variety* (Live Art Development Agency, 2006), DVD.

39 Geoff Willcocks, "When Clowns go Bad" in *Bloody Mess Information Pack* (Forced Entertainment, 2004), 3.

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[I]t is where you stop 'showing' and the audience can use their imaginative powers and they're the ones that fill in that gap. That's where they become true collaborators. And if you can invent the gap well enough the audience just comes right into there.⁴⁰

The 2008 performance of Forced Entertainment *Spectacular* strips the visual imagery of the piece to its limits. Furthermore, the frequently illogical and nonlinear storyline recedes to almost ultimate plotlessness. With only one present constantly character (Robin Arthur) on the stage and one appearing and disappearing only to pretend she is dying (Claire Marshall), the format that resembles a variety gone bad and too long. Dressed as a skeleton, Robin apologetically addresses audience in a self-pitying way contemplating his acting or explaining the show is different normally with "some plants here and here on the sides,"⁴¹ with musicians, lights and dancers. His words conjure the image of the other-than-now normally set stage with music, lights, other characters, especially the warm-up guy, whose jokes remain pointless both for their interpreter Robin as well as for the audience. His lengthy monologue/soliloquy (almost 90 minutes) veers into confessional and highly personal tone, a typical feature of Forced Entertainment scripts. About 30 minutes throughout the play Robin goes on to directly refer to the audience:

[T]he strange thing is that it's usually round about now that one or two people are starting to leave.
I don't know why.
I guess that on those nights when it's got that edge, that it's just a bit too much for some people.
They came along expecting a nice night in the theatre.
And they got this.⁴²

Self-pitying mode combined ironic self-referentiality appears fundamentally powerful element in other plays as well. Finally Robin metatheatrically recollects on the reality to an actor. Acting acting acting or an actor acting actor acting actor creates a specifically important interplay between realness and fictitiousness, to which the aforementioned term of *ghosting* fails to materialize. The only thing spectators see is a bare stage, Robin and Claire, who is lying on the stage and occasionally interrupts with an exaggerated enactment of dying screams. Her overacted hysterical outbreaks are balanced with the meek and tactful comments of Robin. *Spectacular* thus summons a bizarre combination of boredom, plotlessness, and ultimately highlights what I dare to call Life art, the above mentioned medley of erness, sympathy, fragility and human-scale event, or what Sara Jane Bailes pins down as theatre that simply fails to realize.⁴³ Yet, it might be argued, the play addresses the audience in a very tender way, in a voice that is comforting, but perhaps too long, becoming thus almost disturbing; considering the span of the piece (90 minutes of static experience), also confusingly long and boring. In reaction to the durational and partially actionless nature of the Forced Entertainment piece, Sierz questions the length regarding the complicity of the audience, to which Etchells responds by their

40 Ron Vawter in an interview with Tim Etchells. Published in Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, 93.

41 Forced Entertainment, *Spectacular* (2008).

42 Forced Entertainment, *Spectacular* (2008).

43 Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 77.

creative method of stretching the funny moments⁴⁴ and trying to be always one step before the audience.⁴⁵ Applying the notions of guilt and complicity onto the audience in physically denied material setting, one cannot help revisiting the abovementioned Auslander's *community* which is transformed into referring to "imagined communities" of Benedict Anderson that in his *Transversals* Martin Procházka revives in the connection with national and cultural myths. The *imagined communities*, like theatrical spectacularity of Forced Entertainment, are "distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness" (the aforementioned stage tool of the company), "but the style in which they are imagined."⁴⁶ The visual imagery of the play is thus entirely in the imagination of the onlookers present. Therefore, like many scholars who observe the theatre of Forced Entertainment it resembles the imaginative nature of a Renaissance stage.⁴⁷ *Spectacular* invokes the theatrical quality of Shakespearean imaginary theatre, yet in a rather twisted context of a media-saturated environment such an effort indeed proves worthless, leading to the inevitable failure of pure enjoyment of the spectator. Sara Jane Bailes accurately observes spectators' groping for somehow graspable storyline. Bailes highlights this failure as being one of the seminal aspects of the company's creative strategies by enhancing Etchells' understanding of the spectator: "[A]s witnesses, how much are we responsible for what we see? But also, how much are we responsible for what, critically, we fail to see?"⁴⁸ Unlike any other play, *Spectacular* offers the purest refined theatrical experience, a "metaphor for death."⁴⁹ The following actor's (Richard Lowdon's) appeal to the audience in *Showtime* underlines the provocative, direct, affirmative, "British affect of standoffishness"⁵⁰ approach, varietishness of spectacle-to-come theatre experience:

There's a word for people like you, and that word is audience. An audience comes to the theatre perhaps to see something that if they saw it in real life they might find it offensive. Something that if you saw it in the street, it might make you turn away. Perhaps you've come here this evening because you want to see something that will repulse you. Perhaps you want to see something that you've only done in the privacy of your homes, or something you wish you'd done in the privacy of your own homes or something that you dreamed about doing in the privacy of your own homes. An audience likes to sit in the dark and to watch other people do it. Well, if you've paid your money — good luck to you.⁵¹

To conclude, regardless its artistic label, Forced Entertainment theatrical performances manifest a significant attention to the audience. However being overly simplifying, the application of both postdramatic perspective and Live Art ramified approaches may still allow sophisticated discussion on academic levels in discourses across genres. The discussion is most notably concerned with the issues of audience, space, time and the non-dramatic insistence, which literary theory from the classical point of view will have

44 Tim Etchells in an interview with Aleks Sierz, *TheatreVoice*, www.theatrevoice.com. Accessed Nov 2, 2010.

45 In a personal interview with Jan Suk, Tim Etchells remarks on the company's strategy to predict what the audience is able to bear. Personal interview, Hellerau, Dresden, Germany, 26.9.2009

46 Quoted in Martin Procházka. *Transversals* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2007), 150.

47 Most importantly see Hans-Thies Lehmann "Shakespeare's Grin: Remarks on Worldtheatre with Forced Entertainment" in Helmer and Malzacher, *Not Even a Game Anymore*, 103-120, and Robert Shaughnessy "Ruined Lear" in *Shakespeare Effect: A History of Twentieth Century Performance*, 182-193.

48 Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 104.

49 Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 77.

50 Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 97.

51 Forced Entertainment, *Showtime* (1996).

difficulty in saturating might be treated within such a frame. Therefore the in-betweenness and hard-to-locate theatre works of Forced Entertainment could be successfully analyzed, albeit with the danger of being ignorant of its textual quality.

Understanding of Spectator in Forced Entertainment appears more transparent after a closer analysis of *Spectacular*, in which audience members are actively participating, although exclusively on a mental level. Although Forced Entertainment may be read as "theatre without theatre,"⁵² it is perhaps in the nature of their plays manifest consciously failing potential, performing intentionally deconstructing and reiterating graspable moments of plot that the ones seeing are trying to put together and apparently fail. This acknowledgement implies not only "architecture of regret,"⁵³ but "architecture of failure." The theatre of Forced Entertainment therefore provokes and challenges those who look and try to understand it, a failing task, to embody the fact that there is no theatre without its spectators, regardless what message the work carries or tries to pass on, and what theoretical umbrella surrounds it. In the plethora of theoretical scholarship, be it Live Art, postdramatic theory, performance theatre or alternative theatre, Ihab Hassan's revision of postmodern theory refers to "a number of related cultural tendencies, a constellation of values, a repertoire of procedures and attitudes."⁵⁴ Thus postmodern bred spectators, actors and theatre makers attempt to coexist, albeit reading contemporary experimental plays prove challenging and involves, echoing Wallace, "both evasion and engagement."⁵⁵ The contribution of Forced Entertainment in this relationship is, I like to argue, is via their direct address and provocation, non-physical, trying to understand the spectator, who is struggling/failing to decode the play; an attempt to see the one seeing the seeing, an inarticulated silent bound of coexistence, *Life Art*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: The research for this paper was generously granted and completed within GAUK Project number 396211 supported by the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. This paper is also a result of the Specific Research of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, "Research of Topical Linguistic Issues," number 263103.

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55 Wallace, *Suspect Cultures*, 317.

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