

## EVENT REVIEW

## What is there Beyond the Act of Storytelling? Theatrical Review of *The Coming Storm* by Forced Entertainment

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TERRY A good story needs a clear beginning. It needs something strong, something dynamic.<sup>1</sup> [...] A good story needs a protagonist with a problem, somebody looking for something maybe. Somebody looking for the truth, or just somebody looking for a lost thing. [...]<sup>2</sup>

*The Coming Storm*, the latest work by Forced Entertainment, begins with six performers casually appearing on the stage as themselves.<sup>3</sup> Greeted by a brief spell of enthusiastic applause, Terry breaks the silence by describing what good stories are. She explains, with hesitant pauses from time to time, that a good story needs attractive villains. It needs some truths that are buried and some lies that are discovered, and to make the reader sad when it is over. The performance here, compared with a coming storm, is begun by her calm, whispering voice, just as the storm is preceded by a moment of peaceful silence. *The Coming Storm* questions the act of storytelling, combining successive attempts to relate stories with competition among performers, and playing around with the miscellaneous objects. Forced

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<sup>1</sup> Forced Entertainment, *The Coming Storm Trailer* (2012), <<http://youtu.be/Z6lc4bEDcNw>> [accessed 22 March 2013].

<sup>2</sup> baclondon, *The Coming Storm* (2012), <<http://youtu.be/JVhYsnt7fII>> [accessed 22 March 2013].

<sup>3</sup> Forced Entertainment, *The Coming Storm*. Conceived and devised by the company. Directed by Tim Etchells. [Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield. 24<sup>th</sup> October 2012]. Performers are Robin Arthur, Phil Hayes, Richard Lowdon, Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden and Terry O'Connor. As in many other performances by Forced Entertainment, performers appear in the piece with their own names and refer to one another with their first names. Therefore, the performers are henceforth referred to with their first names, following the convention of the performance.

Entertainment invites the audience to redefine what a good story is and to experience the impact of storytelling in the storm of unfinished narratives.

Forced Entertainment, a performance group based in Sheffield, opened their UK tour at the Lyceum Theatre with *The Coming Storm* on 24th October 2012. Founded in 1984 by six drama graduates from the University of Exeter, Forced Entertainment is acclaimed for its devised performance pieces that destabilise the conventional performer-audience relationship and push the boundary of theatrical performances. The company has previously challenged the notion of storytelling with *Dirty Work* in 1998, in which a performance is described only through the words of two performers.<sup>4</sup> With no ‘real’ actions occurring on stage, *Dirty Work* conjures up numerous images through stories told in the present tense, from an apocalyptic spectacle of a nuclear explosion to the ordinary behaviour of an audience member seen in the theatre. By foregrounding the narrative using the present tense, the stories are created in the here and now, as the statements are related. A similar attempt can be observed in another performance, *Sight Is The Sense That Dying People Tend To Lose First*, a solo-performance written by Tim Etchells, the writer and director of Forced Entertainment.<sup>5</sup> In this piece, free-association statements in the form of definitions are related one after another, with each statement creating a meaning there and then according to the audience’s reaction.

The law is written down in a book that explains all the things people have to do so they do not end up in jail. The phrase “law of the jungle” is misleading. There is no law in the jungle.<sup>6</sup> [...] America is a country. Korea is also a country. Some men have sex

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<sup>4</sup> Forced Entertainment, *Dirty Work*, first performed in 1998. Conceived and devised by the company.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Etchells, *Sight is the Sense That Dying People Tend to Lose First*, first performed in 2008, by Jim Fletcher.

<sup>6</sup> PARC TV, Forced Entertainment *Sight is the Sense That Dying People Tend to Lose First* (2009), <[http://youtu.be/NTjBU\\_qYdYo](http://youtu.be/NTjBU_qYdYo)> [accessed 22 March 2013].

appeal. Blind people cannot see anything.<sup>7</sup>

Seemingly unconnected to each other, the statements themselves fall short of being a story with a single thread of narrative; however, the accumulation of statements soon starts to create a certain ambience where things that we once thought we knew are no longer tangible or certain. Therefore, a series of accounts create a situation where the audience is invited to redefine their own story of what the world is like.

*The Coming Storm* begins with the declared intention of illustrating what a good story is, yet it soon becomes clear that the succession of stories is doomed to fail at achieving this. It is a collage of fragmental episodes, combined with miscellaneous props, competition among the six performers and incessant interruption of one another, and the debris of fragments of narratives gradually fill the theatre. What is left to the spectators by the performance is not an answer but a series of questions. How does each of the unfinished stories end? How is the audience, as a collective as well as individuals, expected to respond to the performance? And, ultimately, what have they just witnessed? Forced Entertainment questions the conventional act of story-telling in this piece, because the purpose of the piece is not to relate stories of the past but to have an effect upon the audience in the present.

The audience is faced initially with a 'neutral' stage, which does not yet show what the performance will be like. Both sides of the stage are filled with various props, costumes, a piano and a drum set, among many other things; however, these objects simply sit there, as the spectators do on the other side of the theatre hall. They are still mere objects, not yet given any function or role in the show. This setting suggests that no curtain or wings will be used as in a conventional play; what the audience will see

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Etchells, 'Sight Is The Sense That Dying People Tend To Lose First', *timetchells.com*, <<http://www.timetchells.com/projects/performances/sight-is-the-sense-that-dying-people-tend-to-lose-first/>> [accessed 22 March 2013].

is created and presented in front of them in its entirety and there are no tricks or gimmicks involved. It is almost a trademark of Forced Entertainment to present a raw state of the stage in the beginning of a piece, which not only emphasises the continuity of the space from the stage to the auditorium, but also suspends the audience's interpretation of the piece by not concealing the stage with a heavy curtain.

Following the calmly delivered speech by Terry, a competition develops among the performers, with the next narrator literally grabbing control of the microphone, and it is at this moment that the long preface defining what good stories are dissolves into miscellaneous fragmental stories. All the stories this show gives us are interrupted, by noises, music, and rivalrous attempts to attract the audience's attention by the performers. Indeed, most of the stories are unfinished and not always audible because of the interruption. Etchells shows his interest 'in plurality and also in the way that things (stories, images, actions, fragments) collide'.<sup>8</sup> This multi-narrative performance gradually starts to speak as a whole, even though no individual narrative told in the piece reaches a conclusion or satisfying ending.

As the show proceeds, more and more objects are brought into centre stage; an upright piano is rotated violently, flashy costumes and tacky masks are worn, and branches are held to represent a forest. Just as the once bare stage becomes crowded with the objects from earlier stories, the fragments of these earlier unfinished stories also fill the air. The cluttered space makes the audience feel cast away amongst the violent waves of stories that continuously wash over them, or feel a kind of dizziness at the bustle happening on stage.

Etchells explains Forced Entertainment's interest in playing around with the

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<sup>8</sup> Charlie Kenber, 'Interview with Tim Etchells—Director of "The Coming Storm"', *London Calling.com* (2012), <<http://londoncalling.com/features-placeholder/interview-with-tim-etchells-director-of-the-coming-storm/>> [accessed 22 March 2013].

performer-audience relationship as ‘[a] game of drawing them in and pushing them away’.<sup>9</sup> *The Coming Storm* is definitely a piece with an emphasis on the latter, in a similar vein to pieces that Forced Entertainment created in the past, such as *Bloody Mess* in 2004 and *The World in Pictures* in 2006.<sup>10</sup> Faced with too many stories to hear and too many actions to see, the audience is taken aback, trying in vain to get a sense of the whole picture, just as you cannot comprehend the whole storm when you are in the midst of it. This enigmatic yet eloquent stormy piece is apparently welcomed with fascination by some of the audience; however, it is also true that the very central and supposed ‘attractive’ feature of the piece runs the risk of being interpreted as the opposite to what is desired; that is, posing a question about the performer-audience relationship through fragmental narratives and deliberately failing actions which have the potential to alienate the audience. The mixed reaction in the play’s reviews illustrates the diversity of what the audience experiences.<sup>11</sup> It risks exhausting the spectators with endless competition, and could become redundant even for those who are aware of it being a recurrent theme in Forced Entertainment’s work. Yet this confusion is part of the experience; being conscious of one’s concentration

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<sup>9</sup> Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.63.

<sup>10</sup> Both Forced Entertainment, *Bloody Mess*, first performed in 2004, and *The World in Pictures*, first performed in 2006. Both conceived and devised by the company. *Bloody Mess* and *The World in Pictures* similarly are performances of chaotic nature, in which a tumult of acts by performers are presented. Like *The Coming Storm*, both start from a prologue with a microphone, describing the intent of the performance and commenting on fellow performers.

<sup>11</sup> See James Holden, ‘DIG REVIEW: *The Coming Storm*’, *DIGYORKSHIRE.COM* (2012), <<http://www.digYorkshire.com/HighlightDetails.aspx?Article=1551&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>> [accessed 22 March 2013]; Patrick Brennan, Review of *The Coming Storm*, *What’s On Stage* (2012), <<http://www.whatsonstage.com/index.php?pg=207&story=E8831340271044>> [accessed 22 March 2013]; Lyn Gardner, ‘The Coming Storm – review’, *The Guardian* (2012), <<http://gu.com/p/38gce>> [accessed 22 March 2013]; Carmel Doohan, ‘LIFT 2012: The Coming Storm, BAC’, *theartsdesk.com* (2012), <<http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/lift-2012-coming-storm-bac>> [accessed 22 March 2013].

getting lower and having one's mind occupied with an exhausted feeling of déjà-vu.

When this confusion suddenly comes to a halt, in the silence, Terry bashfully steps forward to confess that she missed her dance routine, and offers to give it a go. She directs the audience to pay attention only to her dancing, a ghost-like movement, twirling white fabric. Meanwhile, Richard and Cathy distract attention, respectively moving around spookily in the background and giving a live commentary on what is happening. Ironically, after all the failure to relate a story to its promised end, it is this moment that something like 'a story' starts to take shape. Before too long, Terry's dance comes to an end and so does this story. The moment of pause before another bustling story-telling competition begins is unexpectedly peaceful in this hectic performance, and is a moment when the audience shares the disappointment at the fact that it has come to an end.

The ending of the piece is brought by Robin in a strangely serene manner, asking his fellow performers what they want to do as the last thing of the show. One by one, Richard, Phil, Cathy, Terry, and Clare answer the question. None of their answers are fully realised. Downstage left, at the piano, Cathy and Clare play a melancholic tune, with their backs turned to the auditorium, just before the lights go out. As if to show her own disappointment at the ending of this storm of narratives, Cathy casts a brief glance at the audience, which diffuses into the following darkness.

Overall, *The Coming Storm* is a clever and thought-provoking performance which invites the spectators to reconsider the act of storytelling and the power it has, although it has some sequences which seem lengthy and leave us exhausted. Unlike *Dirty Work* or *Sight Is The Sense That Dying People Tend To Lose First*, which explored the potential of stories to conjure up imagery and bring it to the presence of the audience, *The Coming Storm* scrutinises the act of storytelling through the

interactions and the relations between the performers. The spectators are dragged into a violent collision of narratives, just as relentlessly as a storm which swallows everything around it. When the storm has passed, the spectators starts to think about what they saw, pondering and cherishing the residue of the storm. The narratives and images that were only fragmental on stage start growing within the audience's mind, and this is when we start to look beyond the stories and realise that the actions that are related are less powerful than the actual effect the stories have on us.