

Michelle McGuire

Forced on Politics and Pleasure

Regarded by many as one of Britain's leading experimental theatre companies, Forced Entertainment devise theatre that questions issues concerning contemporary life. Based in Sheffield, the company has toured nationally and abroad with diverse shows for small scale theatres, installation works for galleries, site-specific performances, digital media pieces and most recently films. Formed in 1984 by a group of six graduates from the University of Exeter, the ensemble are a rare breed for having stayed intact through Arts Council cuts and a volatile arts environment.

Perhaps the secret of their success is an ability to operate within the media culture of the late 20th century - firmly placing themselves in a society of changing cultural forms, TV politics and consumerism. I met with Robin Arthur, Claire Marshall and Cathy Naden to discuss the processes of their understated work.

Michelle McGuire: Is Forced Entertainment a reflection of the times and therefore a product of Postmodernism?

Robin Arthur: I think the short answer to that is yes, probably. As people, as artists, we've always been consciously trying to make work that is contemporary. There are quite a lot of artists that are trying to make work that is almost like classical work. And I don't just mean people who, in theatre for example, go back and approach the classics. But, there are a lot of writers who think about their work being in the high modernist classic tradition - almost outside of the time - who would almost regard the notion that their work emerged out of the time that they write it in, as being a kind of insult, a kind of cheapening of what they do. But I don't think that is true for us at all. I think we've always tried to make work that is contemporary and arises out of the moment.

Claire Marshall: So it's always been influenced by music, by film, by videos, by other aspects of culture.

RA: When we first started making work, I didn't know what Postmodernism was. But when I found out what it meant, it did seem like quite a good way of describing some of things that we were doing. I think that our relationship with that term or that set of conceptions has gone rather more cynical of late. But, I think it would be stupid to deny that it is something that describes quite well a lot of what we do.

Cathy Naden: Tim [Etchells - Artistic Director] always used to put this quote on publicity that was around, might have been as early as *200% & Bloody Thirsty*, which was a show that we did in 1989. He used to say

that the work was always understandable by anybody, "who was brought up in a house where the TV was always on". And I think that in a way, we are kind of filters for everyday experience and that can be things we've seen on television, or things we've seen on the news. And it is not a conscious process of looking out for those things. I think it is like an expression of what it's like to be alive now. Because things kind of filter through accidentally, like the Gulf War happening around the time we were making *Marina & Lee*. And it crept into the text and little parts of the show. But that was never an overtly political statement we were making. It was just one part of an experience that was creeping into the work. And also, I think that the way you can use the high culture and low culture that you get in Postmodernism, is something that we use a lot. The sort of putting together things that shouldn't go together, trash things and crap things and making something new out of it.

CM: I think Postmodernism has become a bit of a dirty word sometimes, that suggests that everything is very ironic, very cynical and very removed. Although it's a word that describes some of what we do, it is just a describing word. You don't set out to make a Postmodernist piece of work. Sometimes it feels like it's not a good description because a lot of what we do contains a lot of cynicism, a lot of anger and there is also a lot of naivete and hope and innocence in the things that we want to make happen on stage.

RA: I think that is a really good point. Critical terms like Postmodernism are interesting at the point where they arise from an observation of work that is taking place. So, when the term was created, I think it was an observational term, it was a term that detected something that was present in work. One of the problems is that as soon as the word became in vogue, people tried to make Postmodern work. Those critical terms, it seems to me, should always be subsidiary to the creative process rather than in control of it or dictating it. I wouldn't like to think that we attempted to make Postmodernist work or that that was in the back of our minds. Or that we were trying to conform to some critical formula, it's a word that has, at various times in the work that we have been making, been a relatively useful description. But it is not a formula that we attempt to fulfil when we make work.

MM: Much of Live Art has a political social awareness. How does Forced Entertainment fit into that sphere?

RA: Again, the fundamental part of what we do that makes it political or socially involved is to do with the form. It's to do with things that we've discovered about what we do in live performance over the last ten years or so. Working out about five years ago that we didn't want to go and play in huge theatres in front of 600 people. Being involved in a form that's about small scale and about a kind of intimacy with people, is for me, one of the biggest political parts of what we do because it's a rejection of all those notions about 'up-scaling' and 'size is important' and mass communication being incredibly important. I mean, I'm not saying that we are totally opposed to those things and I don't even think we've worked out for our-

selves how or why that it is important to us. But it always comes back down to the fact that when we make performances, it's for small auditoria, it's for small numbers of people. At the top range of our touring circuit where you are dealing with venues that will hold two hundred people, you get in there and it's horrible, you don't like playing those places. You don't like the lack of communication or the lack of contact. So, that kind of smallness, not conceptually, but just the very gut-level instinctive rejection of the notion of commercial success or commercial concerns is very political. It is that kind of decision which is perhaps less overt than you might be talking about with regard to the whole live art thing. But I think it's there in that whole live art agenda, almost at root, because of the medium that people are dealing with.

CN: I think we tried to find our own way through the funding maze. We haven't followed the normal career path for a small scale company because we haven't moved from project funding to revenue funding. But three or four years ago, we made this decision to diversify. So, we tried to keep the creative process by making pieces that weren't with theatre and diversifying into other things like digital media. So in that sense, those sorts of projects that have been happening within live arts have really been tapped into. And that is also about getting to different audiences and reaching the fine art world or digital media world.

MM: So is that how you see Forced Entertainment progressing in the next few years? This kind of diversification?

CN: Yeah, I think we will still continue to make the live work. Certainly economically, it makes sense to diversify. I think it's really good when you can have work out there that's doing the job for you without having to involve other people. The thing about touring shows is that you always have to go to where they are going. A project like *Frozen Palaces* (CD ROM) could be out there in the world doing the work for you.

MM: And you do all your work in one day.

CM: Yeah, but there is something about that which in a way is at odds with what Robin was talking about because for all of us, it is a political act to commit so much time and so much hands-on work to make these shows. Everything is still to do with us all cleaning the buildings, us all being responsible for doing the little jobs that happen. I don't think it will ever come to the stage where Richard [Lowdon - company member] sits down, designs a set and hands it over to someone and they build it. I just can't see, not completely, him not wanting to see what materials are being used on the set and having to work with the performance as it grows. So, keeping the hands-on approach is really quite important. And then, sit that beside the idea that you can write *Frozen Palaces* and send it out in the world.

MM: And that is going back to that kind of multiplicity that we were talking about before. Where you then reflect back into that mass multi-media.

CM: And I think both of those things have to exist for us to exist. Sometimes, I think that in ten years time, Forced Entertainment will just be this name under which different projects exist.

RA: I think that what Claire was saying there comes back down to the other aspect of it that is - God, I don't really know if we really constitute as a co-operative anymore, but effectively that has always been the

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way that the company has worked. It is a strange kind of pragmatic socialism that takes place for us in our work environment a lot of the time. It is changing a little bit but at root, I think it is still there and I've not liked to think about us getting down to the point where the division of labour was so specialised that I only ever just turned up and did a show. At root level there is, in terms of the choice of media, in terms of the way that we work, a collaborative way that we work which, as I go on, think it is an increasingly rare to encounter. It does happen, it rarely happens for a very long time.

CM: I think it is almost unique given the longevity. Other companies that have been going a long time generally have about two original members. People like Natural Theatre Company, I think, are two creative directors with different performers each show sometimes. Having your little space in the middle of the city and all being centred around that and essentially nobody having major commitments outside of that is very unusual.

RA: Having established those two crux points to go back to, the political or social agendas that are more normal in live art. I think that, in a way, when we then embark on making work we don't carry that mental baggage with us. I'm sure that actually, because of the nature of the process and because of the nature of the business, that the work that we make is actually political, but for me it's political in a naturally evolved way rather than a formulistic way. I think the work has political and social concerns that emerge from the process and from the way that we work rather than political and social concerns that are bolted on. If you look at a lot of theatre as opposed to live art, because live art is a very different category, but if you look at the most overtly social or politically social theatre work that has come out of this country in the last twenty or thirty years, most of it has been made in the context of an incredibly, perniciously, nasty, not just capitalist system but a kind of really strange world. Where

notions of democracy or commitment are utterly out of the window. If you think about the great political playwrights, their relationship with the means of production of their work is well, dictatorial. It has no democratic credentials at all. They write the damn thing, hand it over to a director who directs the damn thing. And I don't understand how you can think about making political or social work if you haven't sorted out your own means of production to start with. It's utterly ludicrous for someone to claim that they are writing left-wing, social critiques when the mechanism that they use for bringing that stuff out into the world is highly suspect, by anybody's standards.

CM: I can remember thinking when that play, *Blasted* was on at the Royal Court which was all horrible ultra violence, buggery and terrible swearing on stage. I remember reading about it and thinking, well we've done all that, we just didn't make a fuss about it and we didn't pretend that our blood was real. We said it was fake and you could see the squirter but we covered ourselves in it and we died. The way that Tim and Cathy write, is a language full of obscenity that is just kind of casual. We use violence all the time by talking about it or not doing it or sort of pretending to do it. There are tons of angry political statements in a lot of our work, it's just that instead of making a play about 'the poor homeless people', or the problem of homelessness, you get a card board sign that refers to that or you get a little bit of text that talks about the people all around being 'just a bunch of fucking cunts'. I think it is very angry, especially with all the Thatcher years and the Major years. It doesn't start off that we are going to make a show about this, it's just if you're angry and political with a small 'p', that's going to be in the work.

RA: I think that is very true. There is always a belief that the world is more complicated than Disney or the Communist Manifesto. The world is a more complicated place than either of those things would like you to believe it is. And our politics are rather more amorphous, even romanticised. That results usually in a kind of general pissed-offness! It's more to do with punk than it is to do with structuralism. It is not about having an intellectual overview about what is wrong with society, it's about saying, 'I saw this thing and that made me fucking puke and then I saw this thing and that was rather sweet'. And how those things actually work for you now in the world. And that is where our politics and our social agenda comes from and where it makes itself apparent. The work always dictates its own politics rather than politics dictating the work. It is less common now, but in the early eighties, there was this Marxist critique that said that politics and political and economic underpinning of society dictates everything, which means that when you're an artist, you should be concerned with those things primarily and your art should in some way reflect that. And we've always had the attitude at root, that that is a very skewed way of looking at the world. And that the artistic way of looking at the world is a valid one. If it occasionally takes swipes at various economic or social political things on route, then for sure it's going to do



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that because it lives in the same world as those things.

MM: Is *Pleasure* [touring show 97/98] representing the mood of the company?

CM: *Pleasure* must have come out of the mood of the company. I mean, I think we were exhausted making it, we got really stuck making it. It was an incredibly difficult show to make and we went down a lot of blind alleys to make it. And when we were touring it before Christmas we were still changing it. I don't think we are going to change it anymore now, as you have to put a stop to it at some point. But it does reflect something. The last show, [*Showtime*] was such a show about making work, it was such a show about being a performer, it was a show about being away so much and being dislocated. Making *Pleasure* is kind of a reaction against that. It's like, what have I got? What do you want to see? What can I do for you? And I think a lot of the mood of *Pleasure* is about that. I think it is a very strong reaction to a very mixed and difficult and busy year.

RA: I think another thing to say about *Pleasure* is, when we started work on *Pleasure*, I think we all thought it was going to be a very different show from all of the other shows that we have made. And, one of the interesting things is that it turned out to be not such a very different show. I think it exposed a difficulty, within the company which is that the work is always a compromise, a complicated and difficult compromise between lots of people whose quite idiosyncratic desires and wants form a piece of theatre. I think it has been a good learning process for us to know that you can't just suddenly launch off into something entirely different and just expect it to just to be this radically different thing. We are always going to advance in tiny little grandmother-like footsteps, I think. Rather than in big jumps. It is not in our nature as a group of people to do that.

CM: Because you are some kind of democracy. You can only do those big leaps if you brought in a new director and you did what they said. And we wouldn't!

RA: And I do think it is how we make things as well, and you can't get away from it. It sure is a hell of a lot different than *Showtime*.



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