



REVUE DE PRESSE

**FORCED ENTERTAINMENT**

*La Possible*

*Impossible Maison*

06 – 15.10.2015

# LE TEMPS

Mercredi 30 septembre 2015

## La Possible Impossible Maison

Si British, c'est-à-dire tellement joueurs et maîtres de leurs sortilèges. Au dernier Festival d'Edimbourg, les acteurs de la troupe Forced Entertainment jouaient Tomorrow's parties. En scène, un homme vaguement désabusé, une femme à l'élégance mordante spéculaient sur le futur de l'humanité, chacun sur un petit socle. La joute durait une heure et des poussières et on était subjugué par la simplicité du dispositif. Autre facture sans doute avec La Possible Impossible Maison, spectacle destiné au jeune public. Une fillette tombe d'un livre de mathématiques. Sur les planches, deux comédiens brulent en direct une histoire abracadabrante. Forced Entertainment a chipé sa théière magique à Aladin.

Alexandre Demidoff

## La Possible Impossible Maison

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Si *British*, c'est-à-dire tellement joueurs et maîtres de leurs sortilèges. Au dernier Festival d'Edimbourg, les acteurs de la troupe Forced Entertainment jouaient *Tomorrow's parties*. En scène, un homme vaguement désabusé, une femme à l'élégance mordante spéculaient sur le futur de l'humanité, chacun sur un petit socle. La joute durait une heure et des poussières et on était subjugué par la simplicité du dispositif. Autre facture sans doute avec *La Possible Impossible Maison*, spectacle destiné au jeune public. Une fillette tombe

d'un livre de mathématiques. Sur les planches, deux comédiens brulent en direct une histoire abracadabrante. Forced Entertainment a chipé sa théière magique à Aladin. ADF

## Forced Entertainment's first kids' show looks good on paper

Adult themes may be the company's natural preserve, but *The Possible Impossible House*, created for children, works wonders with cardboard



*Clinical chaos ... scrappy doodles are at the heart of Forced Entertainment's The Possible Impossible House.*  
Photograph: Vlatka Horvat

By Miriam Gillinson

The theatre company Forced Entertainment are about to perform an early version of their first children's show, *The Possible Impossible House*, which opens at the Barbican later this month. Robin Arthur, one of the company's core members, is clutching a few scraps of cardboard and looking a little anxious. The kids are going to arrive at any moment. Arthur holds up the cardboard and a bright red feather is projected against it. It looks like the feather is hovering in mid-air. Another scrap of cardboard is held aloft and doors, dogs and marching soldiers are summoned into life. This is classic Forced Entertainment territory: messy, a little bit mad and strangely enchanting.

The six-strong company are celebrating their 30th anniversary this year (they formed shortly after graduating from Exeter University) and they're marking the occasion in suitably eclectic fashion. There have been revivals of classic productions, including a 24-hour live stream of the durational show *Quizoola* (in which they improvise responses to more than 2,000 questions, both banal and profound) and a six-hour live stream of *Speak Bitterness*,

described by artistic director Tim Etchells as a “catalogue of confessions”. The company has restaged their fairy-tale epic *The Last Adventures* and their kids show for adults, *That Night Follows Day*. They have also created a new show, *The Notebook*, a harrowing adaptation of Hungarian writer Ágota Kristóf’s wartime novel.

It isn’t the type of back catalogue that screams “children’s theatre”, but that’s the point. For the past few years, the Barbican has been commissioning “adult” companies, such as *Slung Low and Told by an Idiot*, to make Christmas family shows. Now it is Forced Entertainment’s turn and, as Arthur wryly comments after the run-through, “it’s a walk in the dark for us”.

Forced Entertainment are known for their playful approach to devising their work, which essentially involves installing themselves in a rehearsal room, with just a few props and ideas, and refusing to leave until something happens. That rehearsal process, which Etchells once likened to “playing with a child, using different toys”, has changed very little over the years. Forced Entertainment began devising *Possible Impossible* with just a few fragments in mind. “The starting point was two things, really,” reflects Etchells. “One was the idea of a location, a house where very strange things could happen. We knew that much. And the second thing was working with [the visual artist] Vlatka Horvat and incorporating her images and collages into the show.”

Etchells, a visual artist himself – he is this year’s Artist of the City, Lisbon, and contributed to the Hayward’s exhibition “Mirror City” – has collaborated with Horvat for a number of years. “There was a flavour about Vlatka’s work that we found interesting,” he says. “It had this sense of worlds meeting. Vlatka’s work has often been about photographic collage and here, in this show, it has become about that meeting between drawings and doodles and photos and story-telling.”

The *Possible Impossible House* follows Horvat’s doodled girl around a strange house one night as she encounters creatures including a talking mouse, a philosophical spider and a friendly ghost. There is something about the combination of Horvat’s scrappy doodles and stark projected photos that seems typical of Forced Entertainment, whose shows tend to feel naive yet sophisticated, chaotic but clinical, make-believe but unmistakably truthful.

The company initially thought they might draw inspiration from their 2009 show, *Void Story*, in which a couple of actors describe a journey through a crumbling cityscape, aided by vivid cinematic projections and a frenetic sound track. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Etchells soon realised this “bleak fairytale”, which takes place on a “night so intense that there are no stars to be seen”, was perhaps not the best starting point. “We knew we needed to be more lively and more direct,” he says.

The aesthetics had to be different, too. “Showing your images on bits of torn-up cardboard isn’t really to be recommended in all sorts of ways,” explains Arthur with a nervous chuckle. “But when it works it is much more powerful than something pristine and polished.” Etchells picks up on Arthur’s train of thought. “We knew we were on to something as soon as we moved [away] from full-screen projections ... Suddenly the performers were in a much more intimate space. I was talking to the kids just now and they said” – Etchells adopts his best awed whisper – “The cardboard, it’s really quite magical!”

- The *Possible Impossible House* is at the Barbican 17-28 December.

# EXEUNT

16 décembre 2014

## Possible Impossibilities

By Alice Saville

**Exeunt speaks to Forced Entertainment's Tim Etchells about making the company's first children's show, *The Possible Impossible House*, in collaboration with visual artist Vlatka Horvat.**



Forced Entertainment have been making experimental performance work since 1984. But behind the forbidding impression this opening sentence creates, there's plenty of joy, messiness and imagination that's ready to be injected into the new territory of making work for children.

As Tim Etchells explains, "the impulse to make something for kids has been there for a long time, since different people in the company have had kids. Once the kids started to arrive you see the influence of that on the work; props or songs or story structures or images that belong in children's stories kept creeping in." Now, they're letting these influences in through the front door, by collaborating with Vlatka Horvat to explore the idea of a house where "things would happen in different ways or strange things that would happen." I wondered if it was influenced by 1927's [The Animals And Children Took To The Streets](#), and Etchell's cites "a big endless list of children's books that use the device of a familiar environment that has somehow

been transformed or is transforming. There was an inkling we'd access that sort of magical territory through Vlatka Horvat's work." Known for her installations, here she makes surreal, melancholy collages which spring from the pages of a girl's algebra book.

Where 1927's impossible apartment block populated a vast stage, this piece "uses projection, but not in a spectacular full screen way. We're making quite small projections on bits of cardboard that performers are holding, with objects that you observe or strange characters you meet. You might look over at the corner of the room and there on the cardboard appears a drawing of a mouse, or a soldier." Etchells is intrigued by the way that "those homemade, rather chaotic things produce something magical and you're transported to a different place. It's this doubleness of theatre's ordinariness and everyday qualities, and its extraordinary capacity to summon other worlds, narratives and stories ."

There's more chaos on hand from comically inappropriate sound effects and disagreements between performers about how things should work. As Etchells notes, "we're often interested in narrative - how it goes wrong, how it gets interrupted, how digressions work, how stories are constructed - and you can see that here. It both is a story, but also a subversion of a story, and a digression and set of confusions about the story."

Just as Forced Entertainment's Alice-in-Wonderland layers of ideas can slot neatly into the language of children's theatre, children's language can broach and make sense of its adults' performances, too. Exeunt writer [Alex Chisholm streamed Quizoola with her 3 year old twins](#); "If you've not watched a Forced Ents show in the company of small children I thoroughly recommend it - it's even more entertaining than Twitter. This brought out to me just how much of my normal home life resembles *Quizoola*". Tim Etchells laughs, and tells me that "ever since we mentioned to people we're making a show for children people are endlessly saying to us do something like *Quizoola*. Aside from the occasional expletive adults-only content, the energy of those pieces and the freedom and the theatrical playfulness is something children really like. The Ruhrtriennale had a children's jury who came to see all the shows, and invented and gave out prizes. We won craziest music, costumes, and story. I was just happy not to get the prize for the one that sent them to sleep most quickly."

You can see why he'd be relieved: Forced Entertainment is well known for its durational performances which stretch up to 24 hours. *Speak Bitterness* is a catalogue of confessions, personal and historical, shared by performers in tones that range from accusing to confiding to a politician's smooth reeling. Veteran format *Quizoola* has the performers constantly asking and answering each others' questions for either six or 24 hours. The company has been making these performances for decades, but they've had a sip of throat-clearing, voice-amplifying water thanks to the power of online streaming. The company streamed its first show online in 2008 (*Speak Bitterness* from Essen, Germany) then returned to the idea last year after a long hiatus

with four online performances each year. Etchells explains that “we’ve really managed to build an audience; they’re sort of like sporting events, sort of like unfolding news. No one knows what’s going to happen, it’s all tumbling in the moment, it makes for a good online conversation.”



The Possible Impossible House

They lend themselves to multi-tab, distracted internet watching too, as “they’re events that have always had that aspect of an audience able to come and go, get some food bar, they benefit from that slightly dispersed drop in, drop out sense of audience.” He explains that “in our durational work we’ve focused a lot on game-like structures that are very easy to grasp and involve a kind of live, playful energy. Every one of them has a very simple structure, so you can watch five minutes and know exactly what it is. We’ve thought about it like that since 1991 or 1992, because it allows people to come in and enter them imaginatively very quickly.”

I wondered out loud about whether there was a best time to watch or stop watching, and asked how difficult it was to let go of worrying about control over an individual viewer’s experience. Etchells finds that “you completely abandon it. When they’re there you’re trying to keep them by making it compelling or troubling in different ways, but they’ll inevitably go off and make tea or fall asleep.”

Online, people can drift in and out seamlessly, or be invisible “lurkers” who leave no trace. But in the live durational pieces, Etchells relishes the more confrontational absences. “When people leave it’s a gift as a performer. The sound of their footsteps, the fact that it’s sad, that creates a different atmosphere you can use.” Audience numbers have their own texture, too. “Sometimes we’ll have 50, sometimes 10: it’s so nice when there’s only 10. Those facts of who is in the room become very material if you’re not frightened of them, and they can become a very strong part of that work. Yes [audience members leaving] it’s a relinquishing and a loss, but you’re gaining a tremendous realness and presentness, and that’s an amazing thing.”

Forced Entertainment has been going on for a lot longer than many of their adult audience members (let alone the new child ones), circling round and building on similar themes as well as evolving online. They’re collecting 365 word messages to celebrate their 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Etchells finds that “the thing that comes out a lot is this experience people report of coming into a theatre space not knowing what they’re going to find, and coming out changed with their sense of what’s possible in theatre and the world shifting. Sometimes that’s a very joyous experience, or sometimes it’s a frustrated and slightly annoyed ‘I don’t know what to do with this feeling’ which over days and years changes to ‘Oh it’s all shifted now or unlocked something inside’.”

It seems like people might be less surprised now – that expectations have shifted. Etchells tells me that “it has changed in the sense that in the 80s or 90s the conversation we had to have most was ‘Is this really theatre?’ or ‘Is this really acting?’ We don’t have to have that conversation so much anymore. The battle lines got pushed because the work so many people did in those years was about opening up theatre in those different ways, and now what’s possible is more open. Ideas that began in the experimental avant garde context have moved into the mainstream.” The one thing that hasn’t changed, for Etchells, is that “in Britain I still feel like playwriting is the boss, and doing work in a devised way on the margins of theatre, is still slightly problematic in terms of the position it has, and the way it’s talked about.” He’s found a way round it, of sort, by infiltrating the contemporary art world that was already a key inspiration: he’s [written about the influence of Tehching Hsieh](#)’s year-long performances on his durational work.

## Quizoola

Now, Etchells has shifted to a point where “probably about 50% of my artistic work is happening away from theatres and performances. I find it very exciting the work is able to shift words and registers and contexts. It’s an opportunity to reach audiences and viewers in different ways; you’re not asking them to come and sit in theatre for an hour and a half. It’s finding different ways of opening contact with other people, like making neon signs many thousands of people will pass by.”

These include mundane phrases like “A stitch in time” hovering over the Londonderry skyline, no explanation or authorship offered. It seems, like the

durational pieces, to be a way of relinquishing control. “The signs exist on many different levels. Some people will google it, some will see a work in public space like that and won’t necessarily know what it is, but maybe that phrase sticks with them for a week, or a month, or maybe they remember it a year later – you just don’t know and that’s what makes it so great, that you don’t know what they’ll do with it.”

There’s an analogy to be drawn between seeing a neon sign on the skyline and watching a few snippets of a Forced Entertainment stream – the internet is more of a public space than the theatre. Etchells explains that in the theatre “you have to make a kind of engagement, but art maybe opens that connection with them. Maybe some people tune in for five minutes and say ‘Bunch of twats I’ll watch something else,’ but some people will think they’ll watch for five minutes then watch for five hours – it’s the possibility to hook someone in.”

Getting to Forced Entertainment’s show at the Barbican might need a little more deliberate engagement – if only to navigate the route from the tube station – but Etchell concludes that “the art, internet streaming, and in a way making work for young people is a similar thing in terms of getting in contact with an audience that normally wouldn’t get to see what we’re up to. There’s a liberty or freedom making work for audiences that aren’t necessarily expecting a particular kind of thing – to open possibilities of theatre might be and how stories might be told. For most people, the first work of ours they see is at secondary school, university, or in their early twenties. It’s an interesting thing that with this show you’ll have your first Forced Entertainment experience at the age of seven. What does that do to you? We’ll see I suppose.”

William Drew on [Quizoola 2013](#)

*The Possible Impossible House runs at the Barbican Theatre, London, from December 17<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>. Read more [here](#).*

# DanceTabs

## Forced Entertainment – The Possible Impossible House – London

By Siobhan Murphy on December 19, 2014 in Reviews · 0 Comments



Cathy Naden and Richard Lowdon in *The Possible Impossible House*.  
© Hugo Glendinning. (Click image for larger version)

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Siobhan Murphy is a freelance writer, reviewer and editor, based in London. Between 2005 and 2014 she was London Metro's arts editor. She also contributes to LondonDance and tweets sporadically at @blacktigerlily.

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### Forced Entertainment

#### *The Possible Impossible House*

London, Barbican Pit

18 December 2014

[www.forcedentertainment.com](http://www.forcedentertainment.com)

[www.barbican.org.uk](http://www.barbican.org.uk)

Forced Entertainment's first show conceived for young people is a whimsical ode to the power of storytelling. Narrator Richard Lowdon leads us into *The Possible Impossible House* and its adventures through a series of remarkably immersive projections cast on to cardboard scraps he holds up. Accompanist/foley artist/disruptive element Cathy Naden keeps interrupting proceedings with suggestions, questions, and excessive celery eating.

The tale of the drawn girl we discover in a maths book, and her missing special spider friend provides the traditional quest structure, with comforting nods to storytelling convention (if you're in a story, there must be a way out of the cupboard you've been shut in, otherwise you'd never have been put there, goes the reasoning).

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Cathy Naden and Richard Lowdon in *The Possible Impossible House*.  
© Hugo Glendinning. (Click image for larger version)

Hazards include a cohort of soldiers who've been practising their dance routine for four years and are still struggling to perfect it, and a flock of birds with a penchant for group choreography. These are the only nods to dance, it must be admitted, in what is in fact a very static production. But there's enough lo-fi charm to this Christmas offering to keep a roomful of kids quiet, so it's doing something right.

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**Ariene Phillips CBE** @arlenephillips 1h

And we drank cocktails to celebrate this most glorious of dancers [twitter.com/dancetabs/stat...](#)

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