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**Poetika imanence:
performance divadlo Forced Entertainment**

**The Poetics of Immanence:
Performance Theatre of Forced Entertainment**

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The Poetics of Immanence: Performance Theatre of Forced Entertainment

The present dissertation thesis has examined the transformative potential of performance theatre of Forced Entertainment in the context of Deleuzian and Deleuzoguattarian thought, most particularly via the notion of immanence. Immanent logic presupposes the mutual interconnectedness of elements located within; rather than any external force coming from outside. Immanence is a system of coexisting relations, therefore it can function as a methodological tool in the mapping of the transformative area between the stage and the auditorium. By studying the performance theatre productions of the British experimental company Forced Entertainment, the thesis has focused on the identification of the elements of the poetics of immanence within the chaotic devised structure of the company.

To conceptualize the transformative aspects within the experimental character of the company's productions is a challenging issue. The thesis has allocated several elements which enable the appearance of transformative potential. These elements are the openness of performances' structures, the oscillation between the real and the phantasmatic, direct address to the audience and themes such as silence and failure. The thesis highlights that the mutual interconnection and coexistence of these elements is the immanence producing experience of a theatrical artwork.

Immanent logic presupposes that analogously to philosophy, which is an opening to new concepts by thinking differently, art is a composition of mutually immeasurable elements. "The peculiarity of art is to pass through the finite in order to rediscover, to restore the infinite,"¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari advocate. Art can thus perform, create and preserve by becoming alive, thereby enabling the transformation. The process of this transformation is decodable on a plane of immanence. The plane of immanence is what enables the creation of meaning against the chaos which underlies all life.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the plane of immanence is the border of thinking. "The plane of immanence is [...] that which must be thought and that which cannot be thought. It is the unthought in thought."² Thinking is transformative, thinking means becoming somebody else, a process where thinking means becoming a stranger to oneself. Analogously to thinking (philosophy), while decoding an artwork, the plane of immanence

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 197.

² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 59.

provides new answers by making new cuts through chaos. “Poets, artists make a slit in the umbrella, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to frame in a sudden light a vision that appears through the rent.”³ The ruptures in the chaos enable the appearance of a life, humanness, potentiality to fail.

The present thesis genuinely attempts to manifest that failure is one of the greatest qualities of theatre, philosophy and also writing, in its possible collapse of the fragile line between perfection and the disastrous. The moments of non-matrixed appearance of this humanity within theatre is what I call theatre’s poetics of immanence. Deleuze identifies immanence as something which is not outside, above, beyond, visible or transcending. It is located within, under the surface, and is the result of rhizomatic, interconnections. Contrary to transcendence, representing the opposition to the lived world (e.g. a God, substance or subjectivity), immanence has no outside and its creative force is located within; immanence is an open whole, “a whole which changes.”⁴

Theatre is a process that happens in-between – as the interconnection of shared energies between performers and spectators, flowing between the stage and the auditorium. Analogously, philosophy, like life or theatre is a coexisting system of relations and networks. The complexity of life resembles philosophy and theatrical experience; they are interconnected, both in motion and duration. Gilles Deleuze argues that “life does not itself have moments, [...] but only *between-times*, *between-moments*.”⁵ The “inter” and “in,” inclusive rather than exclusive nature of immanence. The interest in the interrelations, so pervasively present in the philosophy of Deleuze, is equally applicable to performance, to the relationship between the performer, spectator and the work itself.

The aim of the thesis is the analysis of multifaceted oeuvre of the contemporary British experimental troupe Forced Entertainment. Although considered a leading voice of English performance theatre in the last thirty years, the group has escaped almost any critical attention. The present dissertation builds upon the only academic treatise dedicated solely to Forced Entertainment, *Not Even a Game Anymore: The Theatre of Forced Entertainment* (2006) edited by Judith Helmer and Florian Malzacher, which maps the first two decades of

³ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 203.

⁴ Cited in Laura Cull, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 236. Otherwise retrievable in full in Gilles Deleuze “Ethology: Spinoza and Us,” in Marian Fraser and Monica Greco, eds. *The Body: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge) 58-61.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*. 1965; trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001) 29. Emphasis added.

Forced Entertainment. The thesis then goes on to critique and springboard to company's other more recent projects from the third decade of the troupe's existence, during which their idiosyncratic voice fully crystalized.

The present analysis is therefore structured to cover company's productions from their third decade and beyond, i.e. from 2004 to 2016; most specifically the research examines closely six devised performances and five recent (or recently revived) durational projects. The organically devised manner of the productions reflects the major aims of the thesis, a focus on the rhizomatic dramaturgy within the open-system that produces spectatorial sympathy within their performing of devised and open-structured pieces accentuating the aforementioned radical presence.

There are few other critical treatments of Forced Entertainment to build on. Besides the above-mentioned monograph devoted to their oeuvre celebrating 20th anniversary of the company's existence *Not Even a Game Anymore*, there are several studies that devote chapters or sections to Forced Entertainment including, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Service* (2011) by Sarah Jane Bailes and *At the Sharp End: Uncovering the Work of Five Leading Dramatists: Edgar, Etchells, Greig, Gupta and Ravenhill* (2007) by Peter Billingham. Finally, there are scarce chapters dealing with the company's individual projects, such as "Forced Entertainment - *The Travels* (2002) – The anti-theatrical director" by Alex Mermikides, published in *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* (2010), edited by Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender, Christina Wald's essay "Forced Entertainment's Adaptation of Sophie Calle's *Exquisite Pain*," *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook* by Alison Oddey; or *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* by Nick Kaye, to name just a few. As it is apparent, there is no other single study devoted solely to the complexity of Forced Entertainment's performance projects. Therefore one of the ultimate tasks of the present thesis is to devote a narrow perspective of the original oeuvre of Forced Entertainment.

The title of the dissertation is *The Poetics of Immanence: Performance Theatre of Forced Entertainment*. In the light of Deleuze's thought, the ultimate task of the project is to highlight the aspect of a life within theatre and performance and the transformative potential of theatrical experience that surfaces due to what I call poetics of immanence. These elements are then illustrated on the devised performance theatres of Forced Entertainment, most notably from their third decade.

The first part of my thesis therefore navigates the performance and philosophical discourse on the transformative potential of theatre and immanence. The thesis largely builds on what has been designated as the ethico-aesthetic paradigm of immanence as advocated by Laura Cull. However, rather than the structural understanding of what Cull understands as theatres with immanent tendencies, I elaborate on the possible affects of such theatres. The first chapter further develop Sara Jane Bailes's notion of poetics of failure as a vehicle to enable the permeability of the real and its transmission onto the spectator. In my view failure is a constitutive element, both as a theme and a performative tool, in the emergence of an immanent dimension of performance. Finally, while speaking of the transformative experience I incorporate also the critique of Erika Fischer-Lichte's understanding of the autopoietic feedback loop of a performance, where I contrast with the connection-making and inclusive interdependence rather than closed self-contained independence as advocated by Fischer-Lichte. I then designate four principal factors which contribute to the revelation of performances' poetics of immanence, the aspects of what Deleuze calls pure immanence: "A LIFE, and nothing else [...] complete power, complete bliss."⁶

The first chapter of the thesis culminates with the definition of so-called virtual-proximity enhancing invitations. These are the result of immanent structure of the devised *open structure* of a performance; secondly, the non-matrixed acting accentuating the *live presence* of live bodies both on stage and in the auditorium – "making present" of the performers in the here and now for the audience; finally, a ludic approach to theatre-making using intertextual or metatheatrical elements drawing upon *sympathy triggering aesthetics* (failure, silence, fragmentary, unfinished, sampling, bricolage aesthetics). These designated elements have then been projected onto initially on the prose work of Forced Entertainment director, Tim Etchells (chapter three) and both standard-length projects and durational pieces of Forced Entertainment, paying a special attention to the works from their third and early fourth decade, i.e. from 2004 -2016 (chapter four, resp. five). Namely I have focused on six devised productions - *Bloody Mess* (2004), *Spectacular* (2008), *Void Story* (2009), *The Thrill of it All* (2010), *The Coming Storm* (2013) and *The Last Adventures* (2013). The five durational projects from their third decade covered in the chapter five include *Speak Bitterness* (1994, performed 2014), *Quizoola!* (1996, performed 2013), *And on the Thousandth Night* (created in 2000, performed 2013), *Complete Works* (2015) and *From the Dark* (2016).

⁶ Deleuze, *Pure Immanence* 27. Original capitalization.

To map the complex nature of contemporary performance theatre, I have included a chapter dedicated solely to the thought of Gilles Deleuze and his collaboration with Félix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari supply a suitable terminological apparatus for reading works of contemporary performance, especially those on the verge of life-art. Rhizomatization of the relationship between art and life accentuates not their opposition, but coalition. Finally, Deleuze believes that “to interpret is [...] to produce an effect, to make something happen.”⁷ The trinity of philosophy, thinking and interpreting is used as a productive, performative tool in reading the performances on the verge of life, therefore they are read as performance theatres, created on the basis of devised, immanent approach.

As already stated, immanence, or the plane of immanence, manifests the greatest potential in reading contemporary performances. Immanence is inclusive, it contains both life and death, creation and non-creation. Similarly, art and life coexist and should not be separated. The life, Deleuze’s major preoccupation, is unqualified immersion or embeddedness. Deleuze and Guattari argue that immanence is *a* life rather than ‘my’ life or *the* life,⁸ a universal potentiality. The second chapter concludes with the observation that the immanent reading of performance, with its cracks and dissonances, brings the potentiality of creative transformative experience.

The third chapter is focused on the chief quality of texts produced by Tim Etchells, Forced Entertainment’s director. I investigate initially his fiction prose; the chapter concludes with a brief analysis with his non-fiction projects and other text-based projects. The performativity, or immanent poetics, is located primarily in their open, metatextual aesthetics. Within the chapter, I delineate what I have called the proximity invitations of the text to the reader. These function through the exposure of the real: the fluidity of margins and boundaries between the world of the fiction and outside of it. The proximity invitations further include the elements questioning authenticity, intimacy, confessional voice contrastively interconnected with platitudes and far-fetched conceptual approaches, non-linearity and most importantly, the acknowledged potential of failure. Etchells’s texts constantly revolve around blurring theatre and the author’s autobiography, fiction and reality; the texts frequently appeal to the reader in the form of long, often repetitive lists or catalogues of ideas.

⁷ Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) 52.

⁸ See Cull, *Theatres of Immanence* 10. Original emphasis.

On the formal side Etchells's texts are hypertextual collages or footnoted lists in order to create a space between the text and its reader. Textual form, deviations, provocations, such as footnotes, crossed-out texts, repetitive lists, fragments of other texts, palimpsests of his other essays, echoes of performance texts and links to other projects appear as a common element both in essays, installations and video projects. Thereby the texts formally test language possibilities, addressing the audience/reader by way of commands or creating settings that provide the workings of imagination.

Etchells's prose interconnects the aforementioned elements, which results in a symbiotic relationship that is creative and performative and functions as an assemblage: "it is symbiosis, a 'sympathy.' It is never filiations which are important, but *alliances, alloys*; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind."⁹ Deleuze sees in the assemblage's function to trigger sympathy, spreading organically, randomly, like the wind. This rhizomatic interconnection along the elements of his self-reflexive metanarrative, palimpsestuous links, devised aspects, mistakes and imperfectness constitute Etchells's proximity producing elements. The synergy of these elements, I would argue, enable the immanent experience of transformation, be it via the performance witnessing experience or reading of a text. Analogously, these elements are examined in the last two chapters in the context of Forced Entertainment's latest oeuvre, particularly from 2004 to the present (2016).

As a logical output of the argumentation in the three preceding chapters, the immanence of live production is the result of a devised, collaborative bottom-up approach, rather than top-down theatre with the transcendent force of a director, author or dramaturg present. This of course does not imply that there are theatres that are only immanent or transcendent. Theatre is a mixture of both immanent and transcendent tendencies. Yet collaborative theatres have greater inclination to immanence. For my project, however, I am more preoccupied with the relational and reciprocal power of immanence and its transformative affect.

Chapter four builds its argumentation on the premise that the rifts and chasms in performances' structures along with the intertextual interconnection to company's other projects represents the immanent potentiality to transform. The imperfectness of the structure as well as their self-citatoriality is the key while analysing the standard-length

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, 1977; trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 69.

projects of the company via the use of immanence. For collectively devised theatre productions are in fact immanent, with the creative impulses and dramaturgies coming from within the company. Particularly the open structure of Forced Entertainment's projects subscribes to the immanent critique – as Laura Cull puts it, “nonrepresentative force: resisting recognition, eluding interpretation and forcing the audience to think in new and unexpected ways.”¹⁰ Although the interpretation of performance experience may be open, the significant aspect of theatre experience lies in the connection-making. Immanent logic supposes that participation is crucial because of the connection and sharing. Deleuze and Guattari believe, that ontologically speaking, we are always “in the midst of things,”¹¹ transforming and being transformed.

The last chapter demonstrates how immanence functions not only as an open whole that changes, but how its transformativity becomes apparent in duration. Deleuze sees duration as a process of alteration, “a lived passage or transition.”¹² The temporal aspect of immanence through the plurality of durations enables a transformative, interconnection with the audience on a greater level than in standard lengths. The duration complements the experience that Deleuze and Guattari, speaking about an artwork, call “*a passage from the finite to the infinite*, but also from territory to deterritorialization.”¹³ An immanent theatre through its imperfectness, ruptures in the story, creates a space for creative production of meanings.

The poetics of immanence is an open whole that changes, due to the operation of poly-rhythmicity, inclusiveness, simultaneity, multiplicity. Other features of immanent poetics are openness to interpretation, or the inclusion of the spectator, who is no longer emancipated, passively isolated, but actively and creatively incorporated in the shared experience of theatre-witnessing. Durational pieces bring about the conceptual rules which are further open to chance operations, therefore to failure.

The thesis has investigated how the immanent reading of Forced Entertainment's performances, with their cracks and dissonances, brings the potentiality of creative transformative experience via the thought of Gilles Deleuze. Thinking, after Deleuze and Guattari, is an unorganized yet organic process. Deleuze has demonstrated that art and

¹⁰ Cull, *Theatres of Immanence* 73-74.

¹¹ Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 280.

¹² Deleuze cited in Cull, *Theatres of Immanence* 187.

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 180. Original emphasis.

philosophy both react to the chaos; while philosophy establishes a plane of immanence, art creates on the plane of composition. Philosophy, art and life become mutually indistinguishable, because they share “the same shadow that extends itself and across their different nature and constantly accompanies them.”¹⁴ The shadow which is not their negation but a glimpse of something new within themselves, by following the shadow we become different, we are transformed. In thinking, one makes a dangerous journey here and back to bring a glimpse of chaos, by pushing thinking to the extreme.

The present dissertation thesis is an attempt to create a Deleuzian transversal across diverse contexts. Or, even better, the project endeavours to rhizomatically interconnect several ideas coming from across the discourses of philosophy and performance studies; to project a plane of immanence on the chaotic life within theatrical experience. The conclusions of my findings suggest that due to the experience of Forced Entertainments’ poetics of immanence, by being exposed to the experience of one’s own fragility embedded within their performance theatre, the realization of one’s fragility is productive and transformative. The interconnections of Deleuze’s thought and the contemporary devised performance theatre results in the symbiotic relationship that proves that such readings are not mere academic exercises, but truly life-illuminating realizations.

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 218.

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Jan Suk – the list of selected publications from the field within the last five years (sorted chronologically)

- Suk, Jan. "Seeing the Seeing the Seeing: Understanding the Spectatorship of Forced Entertainment." In *American and British Studies Annual*. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, vol. 4, 2011, pp.
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Academic activities

Memberships

Since 2012 – a member of PSi - Performance Studies international

Since 2011 – a member of CDE- German Society for Contemporary Drama and Theatre in English

Since 2010 – the editor-in-chief of *Hradec Králové Journal of Anglophone Studies*, a scholarly journal

Selected international conference papers and research stays within the last five years

2015 - Performance Studies, Gallery of Modern Art, Nuuk, Greenland

2013 - Performance Studies, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA, USA

2013 - UCY - University of Cyprus – visiting lecturer, CYP

2013 – Theatre and Politics: Theatre as Cultural Intervention, Prague, CZE

2012 - Performance Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

2012 - Bodies on Stage, Mülheim/Ruhr, University of Bochum, GER

2012, 2011 - Research stay at Roehampton University, London, UK

2011 - Violence and Representation, Konstanz University, GER

2011 - Ethical Debates in Contemporary Theatre and Drama, Mainz, GER

2011 - World Shakespeare Congress, Charles University Prague, CZE

Successful grant applications within the last five years

2015 – *Performative Proxemics of Contemporary Theatre in ELT*, a specific research grant at University of Hradec Králové, Faculty of Education

2012 – 2013 – *Postdramatic Perception of Presence and Failure in the Theatre of Forced Entertainment*, a GAUK research grant at Charles University, Faculty of Arts

2011 – *The Phenomenon of Silence in the Oeuvre of Forced Entertainment*, a specific research grant at University of Hradec Králové, Faculty of Education