



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report

Jan Suk MA, "The Poetics of Immanence: Performance Theatre of Forced Entertainment" PhD dissertation

Jan Suk completed all course work in the doctoral programme with distinction and passed the final exam with an excellent result. In the course of his studies, he presented results of his research at a number of conferences including the major conference in his field, Performance Studies International in 2015. Also during his studies, he has contributed to a number of publications and since 2013 he has served as the editor of the Hradec Králové Journal of Anglophone Studies. His teaching and scholarship testify to his commitment to Anglophone Studies and performance in the Czech Republic.

The thesis takes as its subject the work of a theatre collective that has become a central part of contemporary British performance culture. Founded in 1984 by Tim Etchells, Robin Arthur, Richard Lowdown, Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden and Terry O'Connor, Forced Entertainment have now been an idiosyncratic and influential company devoted to testing the limits of performance, probing the nature of relationships with audiences and investigating theatrical failure. They have accrued a considerable following not only in the UK, but across Europe and elsewhere. An appreciation of alternative theatre making practices has been slow to emerge in the British context where the focus of academic discourse has long been on plays and playwrights, and the mechanisms for funding have prioritised new writing. Yet, since 2000 there have been some distinct and promising alterations in this regard. Consequently, Forced Entertainment's work has gradually become the focus of increasing scholarly interest and research. As Suk notes, although Judith Helmer and Florian Malzacher's 2006 edited collection *Not Even a Game Anymore: The Theatre of Forced Entertainment* is the only book solely devoted to their work, there has been growing acknowledgement of their significance within numerous other recent publications such as *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (2004) by Nick Kaye, *At the Sharp End: Uncovering the Work of Five Leading Dramatists: Edgar, Etchells, Greig, Gupta and Ravenhill* (2007) by Peter Billingham, *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* (2010), edited by Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender, and *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Service* (2011) by Sarah Jane Bailes. Moreover, the formation of Performance Studies International in 1997 and the Performance Philosophy network in 2012 indicates a lively contemporary discourse in which this dissertation participates and to which it productively contributes.

Jan Suk's dissertation is an ambitious and thought-provoking piece of research. It makes a distinct and original contribution to scholarship and demonstrates independent critical thinking. While indicating an awareness of the material covered in detail by earlier



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scholarship, Suk has strategically concentrated upon an appreciation and investigation of Forced Entertainment's mature work. This decision has permitted him to trace the evolution of the company in the twenty-first century, and to incorporate new material produced in the course of his studies. Suk succeeds in perceptively surveying and discussing a substantial corpus of projects from 2004 to 2016, including (unusually) Tim Etchells's prose writings, and develops his analysis within an apt theoretical landscape.

The aims of the work are outlined in sufficient detail and complexity at the outset. There is a strong consciousness of methodological choices expressed. In the first chapter the rationale for the selection of primary materials is lucidly explained and the theoretical framework through which they are considered is elaborated in chapter two. Suk combines Deleuzoguattarian philosophy with Laura Cull's work on performance and immanence in order to advance an understanding of what he calls a "poetics of immanence" in Forced Entertainment's recent work. At the level of primary research, the dissertation demonstrates a wide knowledge of performance and live art practices, a close acquaintance with a compendious array of Etchells's texts, and first-hand knowledge of many of the company's performances. This is without doubt one of the work's prime strengths.

The dissertation is logically structured and synthesises the impressive body of practical research with theoretical and philosophical reflection. Research has been acknowledged throughout and is handled with relative clarity, though perhaps not always as critically as it might be. There remains, I would argue, a persistent strain between Phelan and, to an extent, Fischer-Lichte's homage to performance as presence, as non-reproducible, and the practical reality of analysing recorded and technologically mediated performance 'documents'. In addition, I wonder to what extent the celebration of failure in itself has become something of a dogma in performance and performance studies, or more specifically in Forced Entertainment's practice? In particular, I have pressed Jan Suk to take a more sceptical line with regard to Forced Entertainment and Tim Etchells' processes of self-interpretation. Without doubt the devised base from which the company works is much more fluid than conventional theatre, yet after more than thirty years of collective work, Forced Entertainment have their own self-generated habits, codes and boundaries that have a certain fixity. While I believe immanence is a productive term with which to approach their theatre making, there remains a certain vagueness about how the invitations of performance in the "liminoid territory between real and representational" (16) might enhance or trigger an audience's sympathy/empathy. As the external examiner's report notes, the quasi-religious, even mystical, tenor of many of the dissertation's keywords is in tension with rational(ist) and rationalisations of such relations.

Both opponents' reports have summarised the work to a greater or lesser extent, so I will refrain from doing so again. Since the candidate and I have discussed the project at length in the course of its composition, I would give precedence to the important questions and comments raised by the other examiners which I hope Jan Suk will engage with fully during the defence.



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I would concur with the reports submitted by Prof. Voigts and Dr. Roraback that the work needs careful stylistic and linguistic editing. It is an issue on which I have worked at length with the candidate as the thesis was being composed, but regrettably the final document still leaves much to be desired. It would have benefitted from professional language editing.

To conclude, this dissertation addresses a distinct and carefully delineated space within the field of contemporary performance in a creative, theoretically topical way and makes an original scholarly contribution to that field. In the hands of a good editor, it would certainly make a publishable monograph.

I recommend the thesis for defence. / Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.

25.2.2017

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD