

Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare

Forced Entertainment (United Kingdom)

Australian Premiere

Sat 8 Mar – Sun 16 Mar

Space Theatre, Adelaide Festival Centre

Duration 45 minutes – 1 hour, 15 minutes

Co-produced by Berliner Festspiele – Foreign Affairs Festival, Berlin and Theaterfestival – Basel

The Company

Forced Entertainment is an ensemble of six artists founded in 1984 and based in Sheffield, UK. Touring and presenting their ground-breaking provocative performances around the world, the group have sustained a unique collaborative practise for over forty years. The work explores and often explodes the conventions of genre, narrative and theatre itself drawing influence not just from drama but from dance, performance art, music culture, cabaret and stand-up. Exciting, challenging, entertaining and questioning, Forced Entertainment has influenced the ecology and experience of theatre in the UK and beyond and been key players in of the development of a truly contemporary theatre language, inspiring generations of international theatre makers.

'...Near legendary...at the forefront of performance and innovation.' **The Stage (UK)**

'...Theatre pioneers' **BBC Arts News (UK)**

'Shockingly Brilliant.' **The Guardian (UK)**

'The best group of stage actors in Britain.' **The Times (UK)**

From the Director

Tim Etchells on Forced Entertainment's Complete Works

Shakespeare ghosts the English language so ubiquitously, cropping up just about anywhere you look as either idiom, pun, quotation or paraphrase, that it's pretty much impossible to avoid the bloke, no matter how deep in the world of devised performances, new texts and interdisciplinary projects you might generally try to hang out. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Plus as a theatre maker – in England at least – you're almost inevitably dogged by random annual inquiry as to 'when you're going to try your hand' at that particular 16th century fairground attraction.

Coming late in the game, after 30 years pretty much Shakespeare-free (ok, bar the odd textual allusion and a week-long skirmish with *King Lear*), the Forced Entertainment project *Complete Works* feels like we've found a good solution to this particular version of the 'English problem'. Approaching all the Shakespeare plays in a single project, albeit focusing entirely on the narration of the plots, we're in at the deep end, and somehow

pretty much dodging the bullet at the same time.

In the 36 discrete 45-60 minute-long performances that comprise the complete version of the project, Forced Entertainment performers – Robin Arthur, Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden, Terry O'Connor and Richard Lowdon, joined by regular collaborator Jerry Killick – take turns enacting or summarising the stories of the plays using a large collection of everyday objects arranged on a modest tabletop.

Drawing on research I did during an RSC MyShakespeare commission a couple of years back, the schematic narrations of *Complete Works* are about proximity and overview. The intimacy of the auditorium, seating people close to the table that serves as its stage, finds a close mirror in the camera shot presenting the action to online audiences when we have sometimes live-streamed the work. The banal platform of the table-become-stage is at once the how-to space of so many Internet tutorials and how-to videos and at the same time, a distant cousin to the 'wooden O' invoked by Shakespeare in *Henry V* as the arena for the audience's collective imagination. Indeed, Shakespeare is full of such references to the alchemical transposition of language to images, explicit invitations that spectators work to conjure action as described from the stage. It's a device that, in one form or another, has been a part of Forced Entertainment's performances since a long time, most centrally perhaps in *Dirty Work* (1998), a stage production in which pretty much everything that 'happens' does so through description and a process of linguistic unpacking. For *Complete Works* – our episodic Shakespearean marathon – this game of decoding language is set in motion hand in hand with a kind of lo-fi puppetry and diagrammatic deadpan, playing the tabletop as stage, making stand-ins for the characters and actors with a set of unlikely domestic objects.

Watching Richard Lowdon in rehearsal for *The Tempest*, with a flowerpot for Caliban and a bottle of soy sauce for Trinculo, summoned for me the idea of some last-minute-kitchen-table-bank-heist planning session gone wrong; the shipwrecked mariners here, Prospero and Miranda there, the getaway car long forgotten. Claire Marshall's *All's Well That Ends Well* meanwhile cast a bottle of Nina Ricci Perfume as the King of France and a large size Discount Pharmacy Nail Polish Remover as Bertram, Claire seated at the elaborately laid out table, resembling a storybook child acting plays with whatever's to hand, confined to a bathroom, cupboard or attic on some toyless rainy afternoon.

In one sense, the inscrutable objects give nothing, amplifying to absurdity some of Bresson's maxims about the ideal of blankness when it comes to acting and images in cinema. But the project does somehow manage to get blood from the stones. The unpromising machinery of the tabletop stirs something deep, through which the stories gain a kind of traction; in time you find yourself watching the box of matches for a trace of a protagonist's guilt, staring at the large bottle of wood glue for signs of a supporting character's dilemma, or wondering about the fate and motives of an allspice jar. On the one hand, it's a kind of rudimentary ventriloquism, bringing life and voice to these supposedly dead things, but on another, the work taps the half-life that objects have anyway, their speechless speech, the traces of their action and purpose, their haunted existence. Even these inanimate performers – coming from the kitchen cupboard, the grocery store, the garage, the junk shop and the supermarket – bring something to their roles.

Amongst the most interesting moments in these versions of Shakespeare are those where the plays, on their own terms, stage questions about personhood and agency, fate and free will, life and death. Watching the objects arranged on the table for the end of *King Lear*, gathered around the body of *Cordelia* (as played by a small glass vial), Robin Arthur's glass vase representing Lear looking down to see if his daughter is still breathing; or watching Terry O'Connor's Richard II pontificate and philosophise endlessly, you're confronted in a double sense by the lifelessness of *Cordelia*, by the inertness of the king. It's the search for a speculative interiority that's compelling and baffling at the same time – the conundrum that's at the heart of puppetry, and perhaps, at the heart of acting itself.

Tim Etchells

A version of this article was published in Exeunt Magazine 2 July 2015.

The Plays

CORIOLANUS

Performed by Jerry Killick

Sat 8 Mar, 1pm

Anti-elitism in ancient Rome: plebeians versus patricians – and in the middle of it all, a rumbling stomach.

KING JOHN

Performed by Cathy Naden

Sat 8 Mar, 2pm

Brexit in reverse: England is at war with the rest of Europe when in the middle of the battle John gives his Kingdom to the Pope. But the Pope doesn't want it and gives it back again.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

Performed by Richard Lowdon

Sat 8 Mar, 3pm

Love at first sight or love at the sight of a bank balance? Claudio, Hero, Benedict and Beatrice try to tell the difference between illusion and reality.

LOVES LABOUR'S LOST

Performed by Robin Arthur

Sat 8 Mar, 6pm

Tough rules for three bachelors: no sleep, no alcohol, no sex. But who can stick to that?

RICHARD II

Performed by Terry O'Connor

Sat 8 Mar, 7pm

Richard II is the pilot episode for the Wars of the Roses series. A double helping of bad blood, intrigue and murder between rulers, rebels and allies. To be continued in Henry IV.

TAMING OF THE SHREW

Performed by Claire Marshall

Sat 8 Mar, 8pm

Petruchio tames his wife Katherine: Kiss me Kate!

TIMON OF ATHENS

Performed by Robin Arthur

Sun 9 Mar, 1pm

You just can't keep throwing your money around. As soon as it runs out, Timon discovers he's also run out of friends.

TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA

Performed by Claire Marshall

Sun 9 Mar, 2pm

You know what's going to happen when they swear to be faithful: nothing can come between Valentine and Proteus... except maybe Sylvia.

ROMEO AND JULIET

Performed by Terry O'Connor

Sun 9 Mar, 3pm, Tue 11 Mar, 11:30am

The one with the nightingale and the lark!

MACBETH

Performed by Richard Lowdon

Sun 9 Mar, 6pm, Tue 11 Mar, 10:30am

The rise and fall of the gruesome twosome Lord and Lady Macbeth puzzles the witches and sets Birnam Wood in motion. Based on a true story!

HENRY IV PART 1

Performed by Jerry Killick

Sun 9 Mar, 7pm

The series continues: Henry IV is on the throne. As the action moves between London, York, Bristol and Eastcheap Henry fights to reform the state, Falstaff fights poverty and Crown Prince Hal fights for his right to party. Part Two follows.

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Performed by Cathy Naden

Sun 9 Mar, 8pm

Romeo and Juliet, the grown-up version: they too fall in love, are thwarted and die of despair. Not because of Caesar.

JULIUS CAESAR

Performed by Robin Arthur

Tue 11 Mar, 12:45pm, Wed 12 Mar, 6pm

Total Rome: wicked, treacherous, murderous. Oh yes, and you too, Brutus.

OTHELLO

Performed by Cathy Naden

Tue 11 Mar, 6pm, Thu 13 Mar, 10:30am

Love, prejudice, jealousy, betrayal - what's not to like?

HENRY IV PART 2

Performed by Jerry Killick

Tue 11 Mar, 7pm

On with the series: while Henry IV can see his end approaching, Falstaff and Hal are getting into more trouble. However, when rebels threaten the throne, Hal suddenly remembers his duties as a statesman. Continued in Henry V.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Performed by Claire Marshall

Tue 11 Mar, 8pm, Thu 13 Mar, 12:30pm

Zero interest politics: moneylender Shylock doesn't want money but a "pound of flesh" from his debtor Antonio's body. And he's coming to get it.

HENRY V

Performed by Claire Marshall

Wed 12 Mar, 7pm

A lavish series ending: Hal is in power: instead of pubs he now goes looking for a fight with the church and embarks without God's blessing on a hopeless war against France.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Performed by Jerry Killick

Wed 12 Mar, 8pm, Thu 13 Mar, 11:30am

What joyous loving, hunting, joking, conjuring, cuddling, scaring and taunting in the forests near Athens, complete with a play within a play and enough characters for every school theatre company.

CYMBELINE

Performed by Terry O'Connor

Thu 13 Mar, 6pm

Never heard of it?! A complex piece with those perennial favourites; faith, love and jealousy – only much crazier, which may be why hardly anyone dares direct it.

HENRY VI PART 1

Performed by Richard Lowdon

Thu 13 Mar, 7:15pm

The Wars of the Roses: Series 2, Episode 1, with special guest star Joan of Arc. She leads the French army against the English and fights – in vain – with everything she's got. Henry is briefly King of Paris.

AS YOU LIKE IT

Performed by Robin Arthur

Thu 13 Mar, 8:15pm

A romp in the Forest of Arden, where each and everyone falls in love forever and they all do whatever they want.

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

Performed by Terry O'Connor

Fri 14 Mar, 6pm

A title you can trust – this really is confusing. Two pairs of twins turn Ephesus upside down.

HENRY VI PART 2

Performed by Richard Lowdon

Fri 14 Mar, 7pm

Episode 2: Politics as power. Power as politics. Caught between them: a weakening King Henry.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Performed by Cathy Naden

Fri 14 Mar, 8pm

Duke Vincentio attempts to combat widespread moral decay measure for measure. But even show trials and the death penalty do little good.

TITUS ANDRONICUS

Performed by Robin Arthur

Sat 15 Mar, 1pm

Multiple protagonists but only one survives.

TWELFTH NIGHT

Performed by Jerry Killick

Sat 15 Mar, 2pm

But what do you want? Cesario loves Orsino. Orsino loves Olivia. Olivia loves Cesario. But Cesario isn't really Cesario: she's Viola.

THE WINTER'S TALE

Performed by Cathy Naden

Sat 15 Mar, 3:15pm

A jealous husband tyrannizes his wife, his child and his best friend. To get to a happy ending takes 16 years and the discovery of a coastline in "Bohemia".

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Performed by Claire Marshall

Sat 15 Mar, 6pm

Helena is in love with Bertram. Then things get confusing: he runs away, she runs after him and he keeps running – he has a one night stand with Helena, though he doesn't know she's Helena until Helena confronts him with this knowledge. Then there's a happy ending

HENRY VI PART 3

Performed by Richard Lowdon

Sat 15 Mar, 7pm

Episode 3: Politics as naked terror. More revenge, brutality and destruction than in any other Shakespeare.

HAMLET

Performed by Terry O'Connor

Sat 15 Mar, 8:15pm

To be or not to be!? The rest is silence.

PERICLES

Performed by Cathy Naden

Sun 16 Mar, 1pm

This is your chance! Rarely performed, an extraordinary dreamlike tale from ancient Greece

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

Performed by Terry O'Connor

Sun 16 Mar, 2pm

Spin-off from Henry IV starring Falstaff trying his luck as a gigolo in Windsor.

Worth it for the title alone.

KING LEAR

Performed by Robin Arthur

Sun 16 Mar, 3pm

The first edition of this inheritance thriller in 1608 is called: "The True Chronicle History of the Life and Death of King Lear and his Three Daughters" – with, frequently forgotten, "the Unfortunate Life of Edgar, son and heir to the Earl of Gloster..."

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

Performed by Jerry Killick

Sun 16 Mar, 6pm

The place: ancient Troy. The plot: a pledge of undying love. The time: a long way short of immortality.

RICHARD III

Performed by Claire Marshall

Sun 16 Mar, 7pm

The ultimate epilogue to the Wars of the Roses series: Richard revels in his role as a murderous villain until at the height of spinning his way to power ghosts from his past finally catch up with him.

THE TEMPEST

Performed by Richard Lowdon

Sun 16 Mar, 8pm

"O brave new world / That has such people in't!"