IB Theatre
Solo Performance

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Word Count: 2989
The theorist, the selected aspect/s theory and the context

Tim Etchells

Tim Etchells is an artist and writer based in the UK whose work covers various forms of art and contexts. While Etchells is the most notably recognised as the founder and the creative director of an internationally renowned theatre company, Forced Entertainment, Etchells has worked in a wide variety of contexts in collaborations with various visual artists and photographers. His work spans performance, video, photography, text projects, installation and fiction.

Forced Entertainment

Forced Entertainment is one of the most influential theatre companies in the UK founded by Tim Etchells. Etchells has led the group since its inception and has directed, devised, and occasionally performed in, numerous critically acclaimed performances that have been shown at major festivals and theatres around the world. Beth Hoffmann in his review of Bloody Mess, referred that “as opposed to simply revealing in incongruity, opacity, and overload, Bloody Mess seemed to be very much about a deep ambivalence.” (Hoffmann, 2006) Also, according to Tory Vazquez, “Forced Entertainment is not merely marketing the pleasure of post-modern chaos commodified as theatrical spectacle on the international touring circuit.”(Benson et al., 2006)

Academic and artistic context - Pursuit of experimental theatre

The thorough relationship among the six founders of the Forced Entertainment is rooted in the academic common ground that the core members who are all graduates of the theatre course at Exeter university in the UK. Etchells once mentioned the academic background of the company, saying that during the initial form of the company, they critically benefited from Exeter's theatre course at that time, “which was very experimental”. (Etchells, 2016) As result, Etchells and the company produces the experimental theatres that break away from narrative-based work, play with. form and explore what performance is and could be.

“At the centre of many of my projects there is a fascination with rules and systems in language and in culture, in particular with the way these systems can be both productive and constraining. ” -Tim Etchells, 2014.

Throughout the wide ranges of artistic forms that Etchells have worked, the experimental style of theatre that questions the nature of performing art and Etchells's particular interest in language is highlighted. For instance, in the collaboration with violinist Aisha Orazbayeva on a n improvisation of spoken text combined with the violin sound. Within the intense moment of text and music flowing and disrupting each other as one fluid medium there remains an ‘unstable landscape’. I initially found this quite minimalistic, yet one of the most powerful and fresh experience that I have had with any artistic dimensions of language.

Sociopolitical context - Postmodernism

According to Alina Volobuyeva, the postmodern style of Etchells’s works are rooted from the socio-political context of post-war British society:

“In Thatcher’s England, liberal individualism and competition came to define all facets of life, and everyday language was steeped in notions of business and profit and ‘theatre was forced to see itself as a part of the entertainment industry.’”(Volobuyeva, 2018)

Etchells and the Forced Entertainment embrace postmodern approaches to theatre, which reject the orthodox axioms and methods, particularly the linear narrative and emotion in theatre. Liz Tomlin referred to Etchells’ pursuit of the postmodern method of art as “a rebellion to the norm of enforcing art to industry”.(Tomlin, 1999)

Selected aspects

1. Repetition of spoken text

Constructing the accumulating text collage of the work, Etchells’ draws on fragments from his notebooks as well as on excerpts from performance texts and works in progress, creating collisions, loops, and unexpected connections between different spoken materials.(Seeping Through, 2016) Repetition of spoken text is the basic building blocks of many of Etchells’s works that explores various possibilities in theatre through language. I was particularly interested in adapting Etchells’s use of repetition that allows the audience to shift their attention from semantics to the almost organic quality of language, which effectively reconstructs the linguistic experiences that the audiences are accustomed to.

2. Juxtaposition of the opposite semantics

The performances of Forced Entertainment directed by Etchells often involves the juxtaposition of words or phrases that have opposite meaning. A symmetry of two contradicting connotations are constructed within audience’s mind through their use of language. Tomorrow’s Parties is an example of Etchells’s profound use of juxtaposed opposite meanings, where two actors take turns arguing the possible futures sharply contradicting to each other.

3. Ambiguous boundary between natural and theatrical representation

Taking a cue from their provocative name, Forced Entertainment’s work is often concerned with the mechanics of the live event - disrupting conventions and expectations associated with attending live performance. Quizoola! is an live negotiation of what is real and what is performed and the need for knowledge, certainty and definition through language.

Conclusion

What struck me was Etchells’s use of repeated phrase because I felt that such experimental use of spoken text is a rebellious theatre that reject traditional narrative and how the juxtaposition of contradicting dictions makes Etchells’s theatre minimalistic, yet very powerful and clear. Therefore, I want to build theatre with the repetition of text that desensitises the audience from semantics and evoke them with the the linguistic twist.

Section 2
Practical explorations, performance and production intentions and development of the performance and production of the solo theatre piece

Practical explorations of the chosen aspects

I began exploring by watching Etchells’ works that demonstrate my chosen aspects. This process allowed me to not only understand the chosen aspects accurately, but it also allowed me to capture the essential moments or visual materials that I can adapt in my own theatre piece.

1. Of and From (on Freedom)

Etchells’ wall text installation Of And From (On Freedom) iterates familiar and unfamiliar types, ideas and experiences of freedom in a contradictory and free-associating list. I was intrigued by the interesting conception of freedom, which in Etchells’ text, is a ‘tangled inquiry of both liberty and, all too often, a constraint of the other, or a burden on the subject.’(Of and From, 2017) I then began listing various kinds of freedom on a piece of fabric and read them out to create a sequence of similar words that exposes the difference in the dictions of ‘of’ and ‘from’. Throughout the process of transforming the original installation work into a spoken text, I focused on discovering the effect that listed diction creates when it is delivered verbally.

2. Negotiation of the boundary between natural and performed events

Whilst pondering on Etchells’ various forms of works that are concerned with the mechanism and the expectations of a live theatre, I constructed a space that would involve the active role of the audience. With the help of my peers, I experimented an interactive structure using the strips of fabric that give the physical quality to the abstract diction of reading. Through this exploration, I imagined the audience holding and letting go of the fabric. While the space is constructed and deconstructed, it visualises the meaning of reading of text and I found the breaking of the fourth wall created a space that diminished the boundaries between what is performed and what is naturally presented.
Development of the intentions on my solo piece

Exploration of the conditions of reading

Adapting Etchells’ methods, I decided to build a theatre using language that invites audience into the linguistic exercise that enacts the innate force of language. In light of this, I decided to use many pieces of fabrics that the piece of literature is written while the reading voice of the same text is played at the background. Within the structure the audience is invited to the experience of reading by engaging in the deconstruction of the space through the physical object that represents the text.

Reflection on the feedback during the rehearsing process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Changed/ additional aspects from the practitioner</th>
<th>Development made on the solo piece</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The style of my theatre is quite reverential and ritualistic, while the prominent style of Etchells’s theatre is often charismatic. It can be helpful to add some implications of social or political issues.</td>
<td>Presenting socio-political context</td>
<td>After receiving the feedback, I realised that it is not necessary to rely on the active role of audience when inviting them into the linguistic experience. Therefore, while maintaining reading a text as the basic form of all directions, I decided not to directly engage the audience into the construction of the space. Additionally, I decided to adopt the literature that presents the socio-political norms as the main text.</td>
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<td>It would be helpful to use silly or humorous diction to visualise the abstract meanings of the spoken texts.</td>
<td>Incongruous use of daily object</td>
<td>I decided to use Pringles jars to display the physical quality of freedom. This imitates the essential aspect of Etchells’ theatre, which provokes people, yet remains playful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incorporating mixed media may reinforce the aspect of experimental theatre</td>
<td>Use of multi-media</td>
<td>The key aim of this particular moment is to juxtapose the auditory presentations of language through verbal delivery and recording. Based on the peer feedback on the initial performance, I decided to incorporate various media into the moment of reading a text out loud.</td>
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Development of the final piece

Moment 1. Loop of fragments

This moment is an adaptation of Etchells’ aforementioned solo performance *Seeping Through*. By iterating the fragments of phrases and words and playing with duration, I wanted to begin the show by exposing audience to the confusion of confronting a narrative-lacking performance. I expected the instinct of looking for storyline to first motivate the audience to eagerly understand the meaning of the repeated fragments, then as the words are endlessly looped, the audience would start to shift their focus to the way the words sound. To help the audience to invoke a different way of knowing (auditory perception and no longer through reasoning) of the spoken text, I decided to play background music, which makes the loop of fragments conceived as a fluid medium, yet does not specify or dramatise certain emotions.

Additionally, I wanted to use a simple but strong line that can invoke socio-political issues. Thus, I adopted the provoking opening line of *Milkman*, the last year winner of the Man Booker Prize novel by Anna Burns.

![Diagram by me, Annotation indicating the fragments and reconstruction of the opening line of Milkman as a part of linguistic exploration, Jeju, 2019](image1.png)

Applying how Etchells plays with meter when we iterated phrases in his solo performance *Seeping Through*, I fragmented the chosen line and annotate it with the indication of breaks and connection within the sentence. This would emphasise the musicality of the loop of the phrase that flows along the background music.

Moment 2. Reading in ‘Twin’

“There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom from and freedom to, said Aunt Lydia.” - From *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood

Drawing from my intriguing experience of reading *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I chose this particular line as the main text for this moment because this line stirred me with the ironic concept of a wall that protects a social group while constraining them, which is simply indicated by the use of juxtaposition of ‘from’ and ‘to’. Thus, the hanging fabric form a structure that looks like a wall as shown in the image.

The verbal delivery of the text will be amplified through a wireless microphone, while the recording of my voice reading the same text will be played. In order to create the effect of ‘twins’ growing within one person, this moment required a lot of speaking every words in time with the recording.

An important moment is when the microphone and the recorded voice suddenly go off and only the natural voice speaking the line live is left alone. This sudden removal of the constraints of mixed media may allow the audience to instinctively come across the difference between a natural live voice and the recorded voice amplified through the microphone.

![Photograph by me, set design, Jeju, 2019](image2.png)
Moment 3. Listing various kinds of freedom

This moment is a turning point where there is a sudden removal of the amplification of voice through microphone and the recorded voice and only the natural voice is left, in which I get confused since I suddenly lost the help of the mixed media, signifying that such presentation of information has been relying on the technology. Despite the confusion, I am forced to continue reading the list of freedom. Thus, the atmosphere that the mixed media created, as if the voice is announcing the kinds of freedom that are often politically and publicly presented, is now turned into a private and personal moment, where the intimacy of the natural live voice stimulates the audience to feel less distant with the actor.

Moment 4. Table top Freedom

Taking inspiration from Forced Entertainment’s series of Table Top Shakespeare, I planned to use a daily object in defying the paradigm meaning of freedom, which are conceptualised in the previous moment. An important contrast that occurs in this moment is the juxtaposition between the abstract presentation of the concept of freedom and the use of an everyday object that defines freedom. This is where I applied the juxtaposition and the use of comical and pedestrian code to communicate serious ideas from Etchells’ works.

Moreover, planned to use a couple of Pringles jars to indicate the contrasting definitions of freedom. The juxtaposition of these two kinds of freedom itself implies the paradoxical quality associated with the concept of freedom, while the use of everyday object gives a physical quality to the abstract concepts. Furthermore, I will make the sound of the chips and eat one piece to present the first and the last expression of my own feeling regarding the text by saying ‘it’s actually good’, which are the practical exploration of the concept of freedom, distinguished from the predominant ‘reading’ that has been continued throughout the show.

Structure - Inductive thinking method

Regarding the peer feedback, I decided to impose this structure based on inductive methods, the audience can be guided through the flow of reasoning and interconnection between the meanings of each moments of the performance, which explores the unique dimension of language.
Section 3
Evaluation of the solo theatre piece and the implications this has on my work in theatre

Reflection on the talkback session

<table>
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<th>Original intentions</th>
<th>Audience responses (Thoughts, emotions, questions)</th>
<th>Effectiveness of the moment and presentation of the chosen aspect</th>
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<tr>
<td>The background music emphasises the musicality of the flow of iterated words in the loop of fragments</td>
<td>The repeated phrases and fragments of a sentence were almost echo of uttered thoughts. The moment when the actual full sentence that gives all the information was finally revealed after being iterated as fragments, it was almost like a ‘clang’ in the audience's mind. The narrative seemed to be cyclical, rather than linear. Is the narrative stuck in a tunnel? Is the character stuck in a loop? The moments when a new phrase is added to the loop stirred a theatrical impulse. Through the changes in tempo and the changes in emphasis, every time you hear something new, although the phrases were repeated, there is a big difference. And it is nice to be given opportunities to just hear the words, which is very sparse. The repetition of a set of fragments for long duration made the audience to shift their attention from the meaning of the text to the way the loop sounded.</td>
<td>Invoking audience’s sense perception through my intention behind the unusual structure of presenting a text worked out successfully, since some audiences felt that “the final line was almost like a clang”, “the loop of phrases were like echo in a tunnel”, which suggests that they interpreted even the semantics of the text through the sensory perception. It was also very successful in presenting a spoken text as a fluid medium that possesses within the boundary between the semantic and auditory form of language because the reverberating of the repeated phrases stimulated the audience to focus on their use of sense perception, which overthrows the instinctive hunger for logic and meanings.</td>
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<td>The juxtaposition of dictions in the listing of the various kinds of freedom</td>
<td>One of the best moment that one remembered was when she heard the ‘freedom of women’ followed by ‘the freedom of bubble milk tea’. The juxtaposition of the ‘grand meaning of freedom’ and the ‘trivial meaning of freedom’ was very interesting. The audience thought that the moment that I ate the chip that I called ‘freedom’ kind of rebellious and some of them even thought that I would share the chip.</td>
<td>Most of the audience found the moment when they heard ‘the freedom of bubble milk tea’ the most enthralling not because they like such daily material but it was incongruous.</td>
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| Giving the physical reality to the abstract concept of freedom using Pringles chips | |

8
Evaluation on the final presentation of my solo theatre

Based on the talkback session, I discovered that there were many successful aspects of the presentation of my final solo theatre that met my original intentions. Adapting from Etchells, my intention behind the aspect of the experimental linguistic theatre was to lead the audience into the linguistic exploration of theatre while the ambiguity penetrates the overall show. This effectively encouraged the audience to ponder their own questions regarding the unusual form of the spoken text. Theatrical impulses were most significantly stirred when there was new fragments are added to the loop. Iterating the phrases carried the audience to somewhere between the intuitive curiosity and the eager attitude to understand the narrative and the appreciation of the sound of the spoken text.

“We all thought this was fantastic although only you knew it was going with your plan. So there was the freedom from the structure you set up and the freedom to do something new.” - An audience member during the talkback session

However, there was a major technical accident that influenced the entire performance, in which it created a serendipitous effect that I did not expect. There were specific aspects that I wanted to incorporate in my solo piece that did not work out as I intended due to the sound problem. For instance, the experimental use of mixed media, in which my natural live voice and the recorded voice playing simultaneously the sudden removal of the voice amplification did not happen. Thus, this particular aspect that I wanted to adopt from Etchells’s works could be done. Despite these failures, most of the audience found the silence throughout the show much more mesmerising and intended mainly because it signified my voice of reading different texts. An overall response regarding the limited sound of my performance was that such minimalistic. Therefore, the unexpected technical problem has enacted some serendipity within the moments that I planned.

Moreover, the performance was responded in various ways by the audience coming from different backgrounds. For instance, many of the audience were English teachers who recognised the texts that I extracted from the literature and their interpretations of my performance were often much academically deeper than those of the other audience. This suggests that although my performance could be interpreted very thoroughly, its impact could be limited only to a small audience.

Learnings and Implications

Over the course of creating my solo theatre, I came across that the feedback I received from my peer mentors throughout the rehearsing process crucial to the production of my performance. This allowed me to understand that the perspectives of the spectator may not respond to my artistic intentions while unexpected parts of my performance could be appreciated. Specifically, the experience of encountering an unexpected technical issue changed my attitude regarding the nature of theatre, in which it impacted me to embrace any potential serendipitous incidents that occur during the performance. This also extended my narrow vision on theatre, which I used to only endorse the theatre that perfectly works out with the plan.

I learned that minimalistic theatre with a miniature narrative can stimulate the theatrical impulses from the audience through various ways of knowing. Particularly, I was thrilled to discover that sometimes the audience can interpret the meanings of the text, which are predominantly conceived through logic and reason, through sensory perception. Thus, the translation between one way of knowing to another will not bound to theatrical perception, but it will apply to my pursuit of knowledge in any area.

In conclusion, I was the most excited to find out that the process of creating my solo theatre that started with my passion in language could open up for other approaches in pursuit of knowledge. Thus, I think my theatrical process became a content medium of my DP courses that enables me to interact between literature, performing art, and the reality of social/historical context.