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# Spectatorship and the New (Critical) Sincerity: The Case of Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties*

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**Abstract:** This article considers Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties* (2011) as an example of the 'new sincerity' – an aesthetic mode that has emerged in the wake of postmodernism, particularly visible in contemporary American fiction. The particular contribution here is the trans-disciplinary shift from fiction to theatre studies as the new sincerity – as theorised by American fiction scholars via Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) and David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993) – is assessed in terms of its applicability to the specificities of theatre performance. A trusting and trusted spectator is central to the operational practice of sincerity in performance. In many ways *Tomorrow's Parties* succeeds in interpellating such a spectator; however, it remains a piece performed by an experimental theatre company renowned for engaging in metatheatrical innovation, immersive practice and ironic game playing, all of which haunt this particular postdramatic performance. To account for this troubling of sincerity – and all performance is on one level *insincere* – the term 'critical sincerity' is coined, a term that describes the knowingness that certain theatre pieces – like *Tomorrow's Parties* – exhibit of the inherent insincerity of performance, while simultaneously striving for a sincere encounter.

**Keywords:** Forced Entertainment, *Tomorrow's Parties*, spectatorship, new sincerity, new critical sincerity, trust

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## Introduction

Tim Crouch and a smith's 2013 play, *what happens to the hope at the end of the evening*, is full of mischievous references to academic scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Through the inclusion of citations from Helen Freshwater's *Theatre and Audience* (2009) and Alain Badiou's *Rhapsody for the Theatre* (2013), a certain post-Theory aesthetic of 'writing back' to the academy, also central to an entire strain of contemporary fiction, is core to the play's aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> A third academic source, Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (2005), is quoted in a satirical taunting of (perhaps Dolan's overly) optimistic claims for the potential of spectatorship:

ANDY: The scholar Jill Dolan has written that the theatre is capable of what she calls utopian performatives.

FRIEND: Fuck sake.

ANDY: She describes these as 'small but profound moments in which the performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present'.

FRIEND: You have a Neighbourhood Watch sticker in your window.

ANDY: It was there when we bought the house. (48)<sup>3</sup>

"Shouting down utopia", as comically effected in this scene, "is an easy move", complains José Esteban Muñoz (10). It is easy to critique the many acts of faith that Dolan invests in a community of spectators, whom – along with performers – Dolan sees as "cocreators of meaning in performance, [who] might strive together to imagine the potential for radically altered social communities in the momentary suspension of disbelief that constitutes theater" (66). Despite the fact that *Tomorrow's Parties* contains explicit utopian references (to which I will return later), I do

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Martin Eve, who sent me his forthcoming chapter on sincerity and provided valuable comments on a draft of this article. I am particularly grateful to Eve for the idea of 'the dialectics of sincerity', which evolved from conversations with him.

<sup>2</sup> Post-Theory refers to the late 20th- / 21st-century moment of a perceived exhaustion and decline in the academy, and in cultural production, of the influence of high critical theory, particularly French poststructuralist strains (see Eagleton; McQuillan et al.).

<sup>3</sup> Despite my use of *what happens to the hope at the end of the evening* as an example of a particular form of contemporary theatre making that satirises the sincere encounter, it is important to note that Andy Smith, in particular, is nevertheless also engaged in issues of trust and sincerity in performance aesthetics. This is especially evident in his shows *all that is solid melts into air* (2011) and *commonwealth* (2012), which resonate suggestively with *Tomorrow's Parties*, but which there is not the space to develop a full discussion of here. I would like to thank Andy for responding positively to the conference paper version of this article and for helping my thinking about its development.

not in this article make a case for the work to inspire utopian performatives – which make “palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better” (Dolan 1). Indeed, in many ways Forced Entertainment shares with Crouch and Smith an interest in foregrounding the potentially productive but inevitable failure of aesthetics to construct utopian *communitas* in any kind of straightforward way. Instead, I make an argument for a particular form of dialogical spectatorship – one that makes visible the potential for the interpellation of spectators in a sincere exchange, in a delicate communicative reciprocation that connects (however inadequately) over the implications of our anticipations of the future.

In making this argument, I engage with current scholarship that has been flourishing recently in fiction studies (see Kelly, “David Foster Wallace”; Kelly, “Dialectic of Sincerity”; Eve) on what is called the ‘new sincerity’ with a particular focus on contemporary American novels. The primary contribution of this article is the trans-disciplinary shift from fiction to theatre studies: I consider the ways in which the work underway on new sincerity in fiction is applicable to theatre performance, issues of spectatorship, and to Forced Entertainment’s *Tomorrow’s Parties* in particular. The specificities of the theatre performance form with its numerous and potentially conflicting sources of communication, representation and affect pose distinctive questions for thinking about the operational practice of sincerity in the theatre space. I argue that there is much that is of use in importing ideas of new sincerity from fiction studies, but to account more precisely for the differences between the novel and theatre performance (postdramatic performance in particular), a modification of the term – to what I call ‘critical sincerity’ (which I define later) – is helpful in speaking to this shift in disciplinary emphasis.

Forced Entertainment’s *Tomorrow’s Parties* was devised and first performed in 2011 and directed by Tim Etchells. Each performance involves two of the following five performers: Robin Arthur, Richard Lowdon, Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden and Terry O’Connor. I saw *Tomorrow’s Parties* at the Quarterhouse Theatre in Folkestone in September 2014 with Cathy Naden and Richard Lowdon, and it is both this performance and the DVD recorded at Kampnagel, Hamburg, 2011, with Terry O’Connor and Robin Arthur, that I use as my primary points of reference for the performance. The title of the piece – *Tomorrow’s Parties* – gestures to the future, to the parties of the future, ‘parties’ expressive of playful sociality, organised political groupings or an assemblage of agencies and identities. The phrase captures two major strands of utopian expression: the libidinal / erotic aspect of utopian desire (the desire to satiate sensual appetites) and the practical, political schematising of utopian planning. There is also, of course, a resonance with the alternative, hipster festival series “All Tomorrow’s Parties” set up in 1999 by Barry Hogan that sets itself apart from big mainstream festivals such as Glastonbury

and Reading “by staying intimate, non-corporate and fan-friendly” (ATP website). The title is also acknowledged by Tim Etchells to be a reference to the older context of The Velvet Underground’s melancholic song “All Tomorrow’s Parties” (1966): “And what costume shall the poor girl wear / To all tomorrow’s parties”, goes the first poignant line. These multiple senses of futurity within the piece are well captured by statements from the performers themselves. For instance, Robin Arthur noted in an interview that “[t]he basic idea for *Tomorrow’s Parties* came from a commission for a festival in Fribourg in Switzerland, which had the theme of ‘Hope’”. Similarly, the blurb in the programme reads:

*Tomorrow’s Parties* finds Forced Entertainment imagining a multitude of hypothetical futures. Two performers wreathed in coloured lights speculate about what tomorrow might bring. Exploring utopian and dystopian visions, fairytale whimsy, political nightmares and absurd fantasies, the audience is carried along on a tide of conjectures and dreams. (Programme)

The piece positions itself in conversation with (or, perhaps, as an eccentric respondent to) a tradition of utopian and speculative genre aesthetics and as such appears to invoke an unfixed spectatorial agency that is responsive to imaginative possibility.

Beyond its contexts of production, though, the content of the performance itself is important and reiterates this theme: *Tomorrow’s Parties* is formed from fragments of different futures, which at least at one level constitutes the piece as an intertextual utopian performance. However, the fact that the future scenarios considered are mostly remediated in domesticated forms – recognisable through our utopian, dystopian, sci-fi, fantasy and speculative genre familiarity – and that some are hackneyed, silly or bizarre, complicates readings that seek to situate the piece as a straightforward invitation to contemplate utopian futures. So, for example, very familiar post-apocalyptic worlds of war, oppression, extreme inequalities, and resource scarcity recur in a number of different manifestations. The utopian visions consist variously of idyllic gardens, common ownership of the means of production and property, telepathic communication, communication with animals, and lounging around on sofas eating grapes. The completely ridiculous (family members sharing a single body) compete with the potentially materialisable (everything will be on CCTV or no one will eat meat) and the disturbingly recognisable (personal identity will be wholly determined by the corporation for which one works). Most of these scenarios already exist in one form or another in utopian aesthetics and the ones that do not tend to be too daft to stretch the imagination.

Thus while *Tomorrow’s Parties* is a patchwork of utopian and dystopian texts, it simultaneously makes visible the foreclosure of utopia by way of its remediation through too familiar or too farfetched future scenarios. It is a piece that asks

how the bounds or limits of genre familiarity shape our thinking about the future. Indeed, Etchells says in an interview with *Run Riot*: “I’m more and more drawn to that sense of limits – politically and philosophically – what can you get to with language? How can that playfulness remake the world? What are the edges of the space we can inhabit?” (“Etchells Confronts the Future”). This resonates with Fredric Jameson’s provocation that utopia’s

function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future – our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity – so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined. (46)

While there is a case to be made for the capacity of *Tomorrow’s Parties* to make visible the limits of our imaginative political horizons and thus exert pressure on those limits, I am not pursuing that argument further here. Instead, I want to turn to the relationship between the subject matter of the piece – the process of considering multiple futures (good and bad) – and the form of the communication and the modes of spectatorship to which this form gives rise.

## Forced Entertainment

Before turning to the background contexts of sincerity that I want to raise in this article, it is important to note, from the outset, that it might seem strange to approach Forced Entertainment’s *Tomorrow’s Parties* as a potential act of sincerity, a genuine attempt to communicate earnestly on matters of inter-subjective connection and trust. For Forced Entertainment is known as an experimental theatre company – experimental in its intention to reinvent theatre that speaks newly to the times within which we live. Forced Entertainment’s main forms of work are scripted and ‘fixed’ postdramatic performances of one to two hours that tour theatre spaces; durational performances that last from a few to more than 24 hours that are hosted in theatre and non-theatre spaces, include improvisation, spectator immersion and where spectators are free to come and go; and site-specific works that include performances, photographic or digital-media installations. Key questions that inform all of the work include “what is it to make something?” and “what is it to be in front of an audience?” (Naden 134). These questions evidence Forced Entertainment’s central interest in the self-reflexive and metatheatrical – interests more often aligned to ironic rather than sincere aesthetics.

Furthermore, much of Forced Entertainment’s work has resisted expressing intentionality, an aspect that can create problems for notions of ‘sincerity’, as we shall see. For example, in relation to *Bloody Mess* (2004), Joe Kelleher suggests

that “if there is any intention in the performance, it would seem to reside in an aspiration to the condition of the irreparable” (169). In analysing *Club of No Regrets* (1993), Sara Jane Bailes describes the work’s “crafted staging of a kind of impasse” (56). It would seem that this refutation of intentionality might be an additional complication for any attempt to ascribe sincerity to *Tomorrow’s Parties*, sincerity involving to some degree the communication of honest intention. Yet, much of Forced Entertainment’s work has not been an unqualified postmodern undoing of humanist subjectivity and metanarrative; as Graham Parker observes, “[t]he work continually accepts the inadequacies of its form, yet celebrates the communal will to make the attempt at all” (13). Liz Tomlin too has demonstrated in relation to *Showtime* (1996), *Roses & Morphine* (2005) and *Spanish Train* (2006) that Forced Entertainment utilises self-reflexive processes to ensure that

the ghosts of the metaphysics of presence are always visible, even as they are being exposed as illusion. In this way Forced Entertainment’s performers gesture to the necessary contradiction exposed by their own deconstructive process: that their scepticism itself is grounded in a powerful desire for that which they seek to disrupt. (361)

Warmth and a certain optimism have tended to inform much of Forced Entertainment’s work, which, perhaps, makes the attribution of new sincerity – or critical sincerity – in *Tomorrow’s Parties* not quite as much of a stretch as it might initially seem.

## The New Sincerity

So what does it actually mean to be ‘sincere’? And what can this mean in a performance space? Lionel Trilling’s idea of sincerity in his 1972 study *Sincerity and Authenticity* – which he considered to have become “a salient, perhaps a definitive, characteristic of Western culture for some four hundred years” (6) – depends on an essentialist notion of the self: “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (2). The important point for Trilling is that if one is true to oneself, one cannot be false to the Other. His example, actually originally drawn from the dramatic sphere, is Polonius’s advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*:

This above all: to thine own self be true  
And it doth follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (Shakespeare 1.3.78-80)

Trilling’s main concern in the study is with sincerity’s sharp decline in the 20th century, particularly in the context of a Modernist move away from viewing literature as a medium of communication (where “men speak [...] to men” [7]).

Instead ‘authenticity’ – a preoccupation with being true to the self as an end in itself (rather than as a means to be true to the Other) – was displacing sincerity during this period.

However, this displacement itself came under increasing pressure as the inner / outer construction of the self and the accompanying assumption of an expressive subjectivity become radically destabilised in the context of poststructuralist re-conceptions of selfhood and subjectivity later in the 1970s. Hence, the emergence of the idea of *new sincerity*, which refers to an aesthetic mode – present in a range of cultural forms (including music, poetry and fiction) in the late 20th and 21st centuries – that revives a form of sincere communication. The new sincerity attempts to move beyond postmodern irony, cynicism and fatigue, but is simultaneously careful not to rehabilitate an essentialist self, an expressive subjectivity.

In theatre studies, the idea of new sincerity resonates to a degree with Dan Rebellato’s concept of ‘radical naivety’ which he perceives to be present in the work of a number of 21st-century playwrights, including Simon Stephens and Mike Bartlett. In relation to a particular speech in Bartlett’s *Earthquakes in London* (2010), Rebellato considers “its messianic overtones and utopian dream of perfect communication” as “a good example of [such] radical naivety”, since “[t]here is no sign that this is meant to be ironic” (17). Furthermore, there is resonance of the new sincerity in Chris Megson’s discussion of a post-secularist re-emergence of interest in belief in the 21st century after a long period of dominance of disenchantment (associated with the Enlightenment). Megson focuses on Rob Drummond’s *Bullet Catch* (2009), Lucy Prebble’s *Enron* (2009) and Mike Bartlett’s *13* (2011) as examples of this renewed engagement with belief and argues that belief “reopens the telos by stoking the conversation about the kind of society we want to live in and the values that might shape it”. However, although Rebellato and Megson gesture suggestively towards new sincerity, neither an explicit nor extended reflection on the new sincerity and theatre performance appears yet to be in evidence.

In the field of contemporary fiction, however, there have already been some substantial explorations of this new sincerity. In a chapter titled “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”, for instance, Adam Kelly locates a return to sincerity – after, or in response to, ironic or cynical postmodern metafiction – among a generation of contemporary American writers, such as Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, Rachel Kushner, and David Foster Wallace. That Wallace is a prominent figure in Kelly’s analysis is striking. Indeed, Wallace’s piece, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” is now considered a manifesto for the new sincerity and a considerable portion of the essay is focused on American television’s practice of appropriating aspects of the post-

modern – “the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion” – and “bend[ing] them to the ends of spectation and consumption” (182). Hence, according to Wallace, a generation of young postmodern fiction writers who grew up with television as their cultural dominant have produced an “avant-garde irony and rebellion [that] have become dilute and malign” (184). In addition to television’s neutralisation of the radical effects of irony, Wallace’s contention is that “irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (183). The article’s final paragraph includes the following:

The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels’, born oglers who dare back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. [...] Maybe that’ll be the point, why they’ll be the next real rebels. (Wallace 192–93)

In classic manifesto style, Wallace emotively (and ironically) uses mock self-criticism as a call to arms (or pens) in service of sincerity.

As part of servicing sincerity, literature as a *communicative* medium is a fundamental element. Kelly claims “the possibility of sincerity depends upon its becoming dialogic in character, always requiring a response from the other to bring it into play” (“David Foster Wallace” 141). The dependence on dialogism for the operation of sincerity makes it peculiarly suited to live theatre performance (or indeed a recording of live theatre). The physical presence of multiple spectators and the attendant unpredictability that the liveness of performance generates have the capacity to engender a peculiarly intense, affective kindling of the intersubjective encounter. Kelly further argues that “sincerity can only be attested to, not proven, always requiring the listener’s own response to the haunting call of the other” (“David Foster Wallace” 142). This is how spectatorship becomes central to the potential of a sincere encounter in *Tomorrow’s Parties*. Desire for an agential role is marked in the gaps and spaces, where, as Andrew Quick observes, “the mechanics of theatricality break up and the onlooker (whether audience or performer, since both are witnesses) has to produce meaning for herself” (29). But more than this, its presence makes itself felt in the performative invitation to spectators to respond and attest to the potential of a sincere dialogical encounter over our personal and collective futures.

This performative element of sincerity can be further inferred from the work of Martin Eve, who, like Kelly, takes contemporary American novels as his examples. Eve describes sincerity as “an ongoing negotiation between trust, public performance and proof, between the rhetoric of the present and the action



of the future” (4), thus introducing the requirement to offer evidence (“proof”) that one means what one says as part of a sincere encounter. But, Eve notes, proof can be deferred and “sincerity in literature [...] is – at least in part – about appropriateness and consistency of representation” (9). Eve draws attention to Wallace’s focus on a medium more easily facilitative of *inconsistent* representation – television – which Wallace considers as “practically *made* for irony” because of its “bisensuous” character (Wallace 161). Unlike the novel, television tells *and* shows and one can undermine the other, which affords a potentially richer opportunity for irony. Of course live theatre performance is not bisensuous but potentially ‘quintosensuous’: it can appeal to sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.<sup>4</sup> The numerous sign systems at work and the multiple sources of stimulation would therefore, presumably, make the theatre potentially the medium of irony *par excellence*. Indeed, the potential for irony in the theatre has been fully exploited by experimental theatre companies, particularly those producing immersive theatre, such as Punchdrunk, You & Me Bum Bum Train, Coney, Lundahl and Seidl, Ontroerend Goed, Look Left Look Right – and of course Forced Entertainment.

Finally, in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal consider sincerity “not [as] an integrated consequence and qualification of subjectivity” but as “an indispensable *affective* (hence, social) process between subjects” (5). For van Alphen and Bal, sincerity is understood not as an expressive emanation of an essentialist self (‘authenticity’) but as a performance effect of aesthetic mediation. In an essay titled “A Feeling of Insincerity: Politics, Ventriloquy, and the Dialectics of Gesture”, Jill Bennett (following Denise Riley) talks of language as exerting “a torsion on us that becomes visible as a struggle”; for Bennett sincerity is not produced “through the perfect confluence of words and emotion, but by revealing a struggle with the feeling or experience of something we might call insincerity” (198; 199). This struggle between sincerity and insincerity has some resonance with the conclusion Eve reaches: that actually a more complicated balance of the sincere and ironic is at work in both metafictional novels that

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<sup>4</sup> Almost all theatre performances appeal to the visual and auditory senses, but spectators’ senses of smell, touch and even taste are also stimulated. For example, in a conventional stage drama, spectators are affected by the physical environment, the feel of the seating, the temperature and smell of the room. Some performances deliberately explore the aesthetic impact of stimulating other senses by, for example, having audiences taste food. Examples include Quarantine’s *EatEat* (2003), Amy Godfrey’s *The Biscuit Chronicles* (2010), Sonia Likhari’s *Behna* (2010), Caroline Smith’s *Bedtime Eating Secrets* (2010) and Quarantine and Arrow Factor’s *Kitchen Project* (2012).

attempt to counteract the dominance of authenticity, as well as novels of the new sincerity that might seek to move beyond postmodern irony.

## Critical Sincerity

Although this accommodation of the presence of irony in the operational practice of new sincerity is helpful to my reading of *Tomorrow's Parties*, the shift in attention here from contemporary American novels – and in the case of Rebellato's theatre examples for his discussion of 'radical naivety', contemporary British drama – to experimental theatre practice and postdramatic performance in particular calls for a further widening of the category; hence my introduction of the term 'critical sincerity'. By this I mean the performance of a genuine, communicative encounter, where trusted and trusting, inter-connected spectators are interpellated as part of a conversation about things that matter in the world, but where residues of an ironic affect continue to trouble the encounter, ironic moments exist within the space of sincerity, and the authentic is always in question. This formulation can be located within histories of self-knowing and truth-telling, such as Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Michel Foucault's four volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (the fourth unpublished), as well as his study of the classical Greek concept of *parrhesia* (usually translated as 'free speech') published in *Fearless Speech* (2001). For Foucault, "parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty" (19). In *Fearless Speech* (which is the combined publication of the recordings of five lectures), Foucault establishes a reading of *parrhesiastic* practices that covers around seven centuries from mid-5th century BCE. He views these lectures in conjunction with his other critical histories as constructing "a genealogy of the critical attitude in Western philosophy" (171).

Hence, as part of this critical tradition of philosophy – a tradition that develops a paradigm of knowingness and self-conception – critical sincerity strives for a communicative encounter that it simultaneously critiques. It pursues the communication of a certain truthfulness – beyond rhetoric, beyond irony – that at the same time it knows is undermined by the inherent insincerity of performance. However, while critical sincerity is cognizant of the inevitable undoing of sincerity in the aesthetic practice of performance, crucially it nevertheless continues to strive for the sincere encounter and undertakes this endeavour without cynicism. The constructive function of critical sincerity is that through the difficulty of

achieving the inter-subjective forms of trust necessary to the operational success of sincerity, this trust becomes all the more urgent to attain.

## Tomorrow's Parties

To begin to think about forms of inter-subjective trust in the theatre space, it is necessary to think about performer-spectator relationships. *Forced Entertainment* is well known for encouraging a participatory form of spectatorship. As Terry O'Connor notes in relation to durational pieces *Quizoola!* and *And on the Thousandth Night...*, "within the system of both of these pieces, there's an invitation to the audience to make their own space to wonder in, a game with the audiences as witnesses and silent players. We are only the players by proxy. We are no smarter than the people watching" (92). Much in Etchell's beautiful book, *Certain Fragments*, points to this too: "since the work we made or loved was often in fragments or layers (of image, sound, movement and text), so too the writing should be in fragments – fragments between which the reader must slip and connect if she is to get anywhere" (23). Etchell's desire for *Tomorrow's Parties* – that "[h]opefully the spectator gets bound up in her own work – of imagining more, of extending the narratives and of thinking up different ones" (qtd. in Badham) – articulates an act of faith in the spectator to assume an agential role in the creative expression of the piece. According to Etchells:

In the end [*Tomorrow's Parties* is] about the debate itself. It's the act of showing two people grappling with what might happen in the future, which wakes that same process in the audience because it's something we all do anyway – either by wondering about what is going to happen on a personal level to you and your family, or by reading newspaper headlines and wondering what is going to happen to the world. (qtd. in Badham)

Attempting to 'wake the same process in the audience' situates the piece as an inheritor of *Forced Entertainment*'s historical interest in encoding participatory forms of spectatorship by positioning the spectator as an active participant in a dialogical encounter. The performers' modes of address include both an inter-diegetic encounter (their interaction with themselves and each other) and extra-diegetic communication with spectators, and this communicational exchange is the same process aroused in spectators.

My focus now is to consider the form of the communication as a potential act of sincerity – or 'critical sincerity' – and to think about the mode of spectatorship that is incited by that act. Etchells says the following about *Tomorrow's Parties*:

We became very interested in the forms of actual speaking – the textures of repetition, sketching with words, unfinished sentences, doubling back – the way that ideas are formed in the process of speaking. That work is still very important to us. [sic] and you can see it in *Tomorrow's Parties*. It's a very formal performance in some ways – but on the level of language it's very relaxed, very easy – you have the feeling of two people 'just talking'. ("Etchells Confronts the Future")

These last two clauses are of particular significance for this discussion: the relaxed, very easy, 'just talking' aspects of the language. The performance is stripped down and the candour of the communication – its lyrical sincerity – gives the performance a radically overexposed quality. The seeming guilelessness of the performance – with hesitations, linguistic fillers and occasional mistakes: a delivery style that seems under-rehearsed – suggests the possibility of a sincere communicative encounter.

However, this manoeuvre is not straightforward: the legacies of postmodernism are discernible in *Tomorrow's Parties*, manifest in its understated stylishness, its foregrounding of the materiality of language, text and genre, and in the more-than-innocence that spectators expect from Forced Entertainment. Shadows of irony, narcissism or solipsism ghost the piece, yet the will to (a critically) sincere communication (however precarious) is simultaneously a dominant impulse. It is a delivery style that is thoroughly rehearsed to seem under-rehearsed. This context makes the potential for a sincere dialogical encounter in contemporary performance particularly tricky. A successful dialogical encounter depends on an act of faith on the part of the spectator, faith in the sincerity of the communication, and acts as part of a performative attempt to reconstitute social and communal spectatorial bonds. *Tomorrow's Parties* works hard to achieve this. The frequent repetition in the performance of the second person plural 'you' and the recurrent use of words like 'everybody' and 'people' mark the possibility of, and encourage identification with, intersubjective connections and collective forms of identification. Furthermore, the male performer says 'you know' frequently as a speech filler, a phrase that is part of spoken grammar carrying no semantic meaning but that is both performative of natural conversation and, crucially, is dialogical in its interrogative form. Additionally, a certain spectatorial commonality is courted through collective familiarity with the utopian, dystopian, speculative and apocalyptic narratives of the future in which we are already well versed. Out of the performance's foregrounding of the delimitations of language and genre, emerge spectatorial discoveries of inter-personal connection around that quite tightly bound position of familiarity.

The performance effect of sincerity in *Tomorrow's Parties* arises partly from its linguistic and gestural inter-semiotics. There are many instances of confluence

between language and gesture that seem to suggest the earnest expression of deeply held thoughts and feelings. For example, Terry O'Connor's meditation on futures with extreme segregation of humans by class, gender and race closes with a softly spoken, "people will find this difficult", accompanied by moistened eyes and blinking (Etchells, "*Tomorrow's Parties*"). Strikingly, in both my experiences of the performance, this was met with a thick and active silence from spectators. After a noticeable pause, O'Connor flicks her hair and recomposes herself. These intense moments become more frequent towards the end of the piece and in the final minutes of the performance – where the scenarios are increasingly bleakly surreal (there will only be a few people left in the world; time will speed up and people will live for a day; in the end people will only live for an hour) – are accompanied by a gradual dimming of the fairy lights until darkness envelops performers and audience. Thus, lighting is used to reinforce the truthfulness of the communication.

However, as discussed above, Bennett notes that the expression of the sincere is achieved partly through a struggle with the insincere. Indeed, minor tensions or non-confluences within and between language use and gesture also exist in plenty in the performances of *Tomorrow's Parties*. Moments of bemused disbelief figure in small gestures, particularly evident in Robin Arthur's response to Terry O'Connor's stranger speculations. When O'Connor's vision of future cloning becomes increasingly farcical ("one of your clones tells you that the other clones have been gossiping about you"), Arthur shakes his head and laughs (Etchells, "*Tomorrow's Parties*"). These moments of discrepancy or friction in the texture of the communication might thus be seen to strengthen the affect of the endeavour to generate a sincere encounter. Yet, at the same time these moments of irony should not be so easily coopted by the aesthetics of sincerity. Hence, what might be called a 'dialectic of sincerity' could help us better to account for the oscillation of sincerity and irony within and between performers and spectators. This dialectic recognises the material presence of irony in the struggle for a sincere encounter without neutralising its content.

## Conclusion

As a postdramatic theatre event, *Tomorrow's Parties* makes visible the piece's inheritance of an experimental, self-questioning and metatheatrical performance practice – despite the stripped down, 'naturalistic' quality of the aesthetics. Our familiarity with the trickery of contemporary performance practice inevitably leads us to question the sincerity of the communication. The question gives rise to two possibilities. On the one hand, we could accede to the potential sincerity of

the gesture and enter dialogically into the politics of the representation. This might also include a serious (re)consideration of possible futures, a recognition of the importance of the utopian impulse to imagine more and different futures – and of the difficulty of doing so (*pace* Fredric Jameson) – and an engagement with the critique of the present that these futures imply. On the other hand, though, we could reject the invitation and read the performance as insincere. We might resist the dialogical invitation, locate ourselves outside of the communicational encounter and reside in a state of knowing detachment.

However, there is a third possibility, one that most reflects my experience of watching the performance and that can be accounted for within the framework of critical sincerity that I have introduced in this article. It is a shifting movement between these two positions. I was both drawn into the potential sincerity of the encounter, attracted by that possibility, excited by the political charge that such an encounter seemed to promise, but simultaneously reminded of the manipulative tendencies of contemporary performance practice, or what James Frieze describes as taking place in what he calls ‘intrusive hypothetical’ performance: “A braid of gentility and abrasiveness, IH invites us in and shuts us out, praises our attention and mocks our apathy” (8). *Tomorrow’s Parties* fits Helena Grehan’s description of a good performance: “it follows [spectators], nags and irritates them, and although they might attempt either to suppress these responses or to establish ways of being in the world with them, the nagging remains and demands consideration” (6). *Tomorrow’s Parties* has this nagging effect because of its shifting forms of spectatorial interpellation: spectator as trusted and trusting participant in a conversation about things that matter in the world; spectator as sceptical recipient of performance trickery; spectator in a dialogical conversation; spectator influenced by ironic affects. *Tomorrow’s Parties* has the potential to make visible and incite a range of different spectatorial positions, agencies and communities, and leaves the spectator with the complicated task of deciding whether the question is sincere: “And what costume shall the poor girl wear / To all tomorrow’s parties?”. The possibility of a sincere encounter over our collective futures is perhaps the (utopian) not yet. A critical sincerity would realise that the sincere encounter is at once essential and just out of reach.

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## Bionote

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