

## Discussion and Analysis of Findings

While many aspects of our process and production were successful, the piece itself failed because the form did not hold the content in a way that truly communicated what we intended to communicate to our audience. The structure of our show produced its own content through exhaustive questioning which was both compelling and productive for discovering new ways in which the scholar and the university intersect with society. However, it did not do its job of helping us share what we had learned with our audience and starting a conversation that would continue when our performance ended. This failure is not necessarily a negative thing because it was through this failure that we gained an understanding and interest for the structure we were operating within.

The training portion of this rehearsal process went swimmingly. I had cast an extremely intelligent ensemble of people who were all invested in and fascinated by our subject of study. As I assigned texts and led discussions towards major connections and contradictions that I needed my ensemble to understand, I realized that I was teaching them. And, as so often happens in academia, they were teaching me as well. Although I had read these texts two or three times before I was surprised by what they brought to the table and gained new information and perspectives through their insight. Thus, we were learning from both published scholars and each other, and our process of creating *School* was starting out in school. It was a situation in which the method of creation fit the content it was being built out of. In addition to using The Tectonic Theatre's Moment work, we were inadvertently appealing to their artistic director, Moisés Kaufman's theory of creation. He emphasizes constant experimentation, therefore "the content of each new work dictates its means of creation – its unique investigation of form and content" (Brown 11). While my method of distilling the information on the university for my ensemble

was traditional as far as education goes, it was an unusual way to begin a theatre process and one that was uniquely appropriate for our piece. We were a demonstration of the positive aspects of the university that we were researching. We were learning how to see the system we are inside of so that we “could begin thinking for [ourselves] with something to think about” (Bloom 63).

During this first phase of our rehearsal process, form and content were serving each other.

However, the researching phase of our process could not last forever and once we departed from our class-like format we found ourselves somewhat lost. Without a structure to inform us on what we should be doing, we began creating blindly. This feeling of foggy frustration was well articulated by Tim Etchells describing the early rehearsals for *200% and Bloody Thirsty*: “we were looking for something and we couldn’t define it” (Etchells 36).

Without defining a structure, we couldn’t define what we were making. When we weren’t approaching material with a form in mind, we were not able to formulate an opinion on it and instead tried to see every topic from every perspective. Thus, although we now understood a great deal about the university, we didn’t utilize this knowledge to develop any new thoughts of our own. In this state we were not Emerson’s Man Thinking, the scholar who is educated “by nature, by books, and by action,” but rather “a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking” (Emerson 3). With nothing but content, we had nothing that we were striving towards and therefore the things that we were making had little meaning because we had no structure that would put them into context.

Once we realized that we needed a structure we experimented with a few different kinds. We tried to create a structure through our brainstorming and exploration of potential frames. This exercise of defining what our frame could be gave us a potential form for the piece but failed to supply us with a means of creation that would be appropriate for the nature of our project. So,

with limited time and a collective urge to make a durational piece, we turned to the structure of Forced Entertainment's long-form durational games. This company's method of creation was fairly accessible because their text is generated through company improvisation and found objects such as "newspaper articles, film dialogues, fragments of letters or diaries" (Malzacher 16). This collaging of scraps proved to be much less intimidating than the creation and organization of completely original material that Moment work requires. Improvisational games eased our process because it widened our definition of writing from meaning purposeful and detailed scripts which we all had to agree upon, to meaning anything – it "could mean sitting at the computer and working alone, but it could also mean improvising with the group, or it could mean... passing a note with a few lines on it to someone on-stage" (Benecke 46). Suddenly, assisted by the structure of these games and the acceptance of any content these structures created, we were making much more interesting work at a much faster pace.

But when we figured out how to create we forgot what we were making. We didn't ask where long form improvisational games intersect with the university or learning or research. Forced Entertainment is theatre about theatre while *School* was theatre about the university. To utilize Forced Entertainment's structure correctly we should've performed within it in the fully realized circumstances of the thing: for the full duration, with an audience. Only then could we have comprehended what is inherent within this structure so that we could discover where it connects with our content and our purpose in a productive manner. While we recognized that Forced Entertainment created their work with a different intention than ours, we didn't address this issue by exploring the structure fully because we were running out of time. We felt that we had to come up with answers, and fast. Thus, without fully comprehending it, we eagerly welcomed a structure that was relatively simple to work within. It was only in hindsight that "the

difference between coming to a decision and forcing one” became clear (Etchells 53). In reality, the correct decision was sitting right in front of us the whole time. We knew what we were making – we kept on coming back to it – we were making a piece about the act of trying to figure out what the role of the scholar and the university in society is. But this is also a description of our project as a whole. We felt that we couldn’t possibly create a compelling piece about doing the thing we were doing because there wouldn’t be any questions left to ask. The impossibility of our task scared us away instead of egging us on. Where certain failure should have freed us up to explore, it instead dug out imaginary pitfalls. We were scared to admit what we were doing because what we were doing couldn’t possibly be enough. So, we decided to take on someone else’s structure even though it did not necessarily serve our content, because it was safer and easier than trying to find one for ourselves.

In the end, pursuing the structure that we easily slid into paid off in some ways and didn’t in others. Although it was a compelling performance with strong content and an interesting structure, it did not fulfill the goal that I had set for us of engaging the audience in our research in order to start a conversation that would extend beyond our performance. It was difficult to directly incorporate our research into the performance because, as we discovered, attempting to control the content of a durational piece will lead inevitably to failure. During our full run-through, an organic moment manifested itself around the end of the second game: the players were instructed to cheat. This devolution organically led to the game needing to cease at the same time that the structure of our show dictated its end. I appreciated the ease of this transition and asked my ensemble to attempt to repeat it in our performance. The result felt fabricated and unnatural because when you do an improvisational durational performance twice it is a completely new show and “everything that you strategize in order to cause an effect in [a]

durational [performance] is inevitably outweighed by all of the other things that are happening that you cannot control” (Etchells 96). We learned through failure that one cannot force a consistent shape onto a duration show, a durational show will choose its own journey.

A durational piece composed of long-form games functions entirely differently from a traditional length theatre piece because plot structure and characters have been replaced by rules and players. A shorter piece “has an architecture, and as a performer you are ultimately a servant of that architecture” while a longer piece is not only more open to change but will inevitably change and demand “that you contribute now, live, fast, as a maker, of decisions and of moments” (Etchells 80). The only thing that must be kept intact are the rules that you are operating within which are dictating the limits of play. Success then comes from how well the performers adhere to and perform within the rules. Experimentation comes from how far the performers can push these limits. Without characters or imagined circumstances, the performer’s only objective is to win an unwinnable game “in which they falter or triumph, following the rules only to be able to bend and break them on stage” (Matzke 173). The high stakes that my ensemble had in the games made the show engaging to watch. This could be seen throughout the piece but became particularly noticeable when ensemble member, Rebecca Klein, was incapable of beating anyone in a game of flip cup for at least half an hour. The audience could witness her going through phases of frustration, admitting defeat, and then bolstering her resolve to finally conquer the red solo cups. This was an incident in which it was easy to tell when the performer was winning or losing the game. Most moments were not so simple and it was up to the audience and the performers to define success and failure in these circumstances. How far can one push the rules until you are failing to adhere to them? Was ensemble member, Zak Gordon, the most successful at balancing a stack of 100 solo cups on his hand because he relied the least on tricks

such as leaning the stack up against walls? Or was he the least successful because he dropped them the most frequently, while ensemble members who found ways to manipulate the ‘one hand on the cups’ rule and barely dropped were the most successful? While the rules were clear and the stakes were high, it was uncertain when the performers were winning or losing. When plot structure is replaced by rules, figuring out what the rules are and how far a performer can go until they break them is one of the most essential and compelling elements of the piece for the audience.

Instead of the detailing the plot, our primary job within this structure was figuring out what the rules to these games are and how specific they get. In every game there was this question of how far you can go: “‘What’s the furthest you can go inside the structure of this game?’ or ‘What would a rule break consist of here?’ or simply ‘How far could one go with this?’” (Etechells 69). Throughout our devising process, we realized how important it was to establish the line of where our rules stop and experimentation around the structure begins. There was a point in the making of the flip cup game where we taped out positions for where each cup needed to be stacked, flipped, and where the flipper needed to stand. After playing this way once we realized that this level of precision is unnecessary and overcomplicates a game that is best when simplest. It also allowed for greater experimentation within the form such as moving to different positions on the table, standing on one foot, and finding the most accessible position to place one’s stack of cups in, which was interesting to witness. When the rule bending got the most exciting was when the ensemble was doing it out of necessity due to pure exhaustion. In the final game, each individual had their own approach to coping with the continuous running. Zak would sprint as fast as possible, Rebecca would jog at a consistent pace, Chris would leap to keep himself entertained, and at a certain point Aubrey broke into other aerobic exercises to

break up the monotony of the run. As Aubrey alternated between jumping jacks and lunges, she looked over at me with a bashful grin and, having made eye contact, returned to running in place. I had no problem with her variations on the designated movement but clearly she believed that she had pushed the rules too far. The creation of new content out of necessity is one of the most interesting results of durational work because it is a genuine example of someone being pushed to use more and more tactics to achieve an objective once the obstacle is proving too large to rely on their fallbacks.

This constant creation of new content that is inherent to this structure was certainly the strongest part of our performance. Improvised fragments of text that came out of our games were some of our most interesting and honest insights on the educational system. One of the realizations that I most appreciated was Rebecca's reliance on vending machines for nutrition. She stated that she was the ideal scholar because she ate her meals from vending machines. She explained the validity of this statement by pointing out that that's when you're clearly being the most productive – when you don't even have time to go get a true meal. Then, she ranked the nutritional value of each item offered in our university's vending machine and therefore the correlating grade that you would receive on an assignment while being fueled by this food. In the end, she came to the reasonable conclusion: "my learning is made possible by hummus cups." This quippy realization would've never been made if we did not have a structure that pushed our performers to improvise new content.

Another success of this structure was the blurring of the line between true and false. Within the context of durational theatre as a whole, this serves as another way in which one can push the limits of play, "through the blurring and ultimate collapse of distinctions between true and false, between fiction and reality; and through the passion for failure and mistakes"

(Malzacher 20). Within our piece the smudging of this line also had an impact on the content. In the context of the university, and education in general, what is true and what is false is an extremely important distinction. However, throughout our piece there was little distinction between the two. During game two my ensemble recited parables, some of which were true stories and some of which complete fantasies with no distinction between the two categories. In game three the ensemble read text that was a statement of something “we” had done or something “we” believed, however when we wrote these statements we wrote them about many different people and these “we” statements hardly ever actually applied to the person reading them. Also in game three, the significant phrase, “that’s true” had to be uttered by a justifier for the game to move forward. Although the justifier would generally wait for a significantly satisfying phrase to be shared before saying “that’s true,” they would not always be replying to things that could be described as strictly ‘true’. While they would sometimes validate statements one could define as facts, more often than not the statements were opinions, jokes, or exaggerations. Saying “that’s true” in response to all of these statements, regardless of validity, erased the line between true and false and made witnesses question the concept of truth in general which is a significant concept to be questioning within a piece about our educational system. This structure, which involved repeating phrases over and over again for hours, caused performers to push against, and audience members to question, the meaning of the phrases and the confines of the structure itself.

While this production of new content and pushing again definitions is engaging as an audience member, it was also a major weakness within our piece. This was a performance that was based off research with the intent of having some of that information reach our audience. To do this, we put some of our research directly into our piece: in the scripted transitions, in a few of

the parables, in some of game three's statements, and occasionally it would come bubbling up on its own in our improvisations. However, by allowing for unsupported statements to be shared in the same context as this research, we invalidated these facts and didn't allow for any audience members to figure out what was research and what was unfounded. This structure created too much content that was unrelated to the subject matter to ignite a conversation about anything except the structure itself.

While this inability to share our research through this structure was our largest problem when it came to successfully engaging our audience in a discussion, the largest flaw in the quality of the performance itself was having too much mapped out content. The pre-decided arc of the show disrupted and constrained the natural emotional journey of my performers which was a far more compelling thing to witness than the idea of passing through the university. I could feel the frustrated energy rising to a peak at the end of game two, but it was cut off by the need to perform their transition and move on to the next game. This kind of energy inherently appears when performing in a durational piece because "you are on stage all the time, you do the thing all the time, you get very tired, you get very frustrated in a way with the rules" but these emotions are valuable because they make "you do different, interesting things" (Helmer 53). This strong negative energy is not constant – sometimes performers are optimistic and enjoy the game because they're sure "about people's power to change themselves, their power to re-see themselves" and with this confidence, "they transform things" (Etchells 44). But other times there's a certain rage in the work, with people "bashing against the edges of the world they're born into, bashing on the edges of the language that they have" (Etchells 44). No matter what emotion they're riding, it is heightened by the fact that they've been performing for such a long period of time and thus becomes both the most engaging part of the piece and an uncontrollable

force that will shape the piece at will. Within our piece, this was an example of the structure failing to serve the content.

The emotional impact of this structure was not limited to the ensemble members, in many ways the audience was having the same experience as the performers. “It’s an endurance exercise for the audience as well,” I wrote in my notes on the full performance. This is a unique element of durational performances. When someone has decided to commit their whole day to watching your performance it’s as if they have “come to share their time with you” and “their presence is less a demand to be entertained as an audience and more a gesture of individuals supporting you” (Heathfield 88). In addition, since it is an improvisational performance, the audience knows as much about what is going to happen next as the performers do. This alignment between the audience and the performers allows for a unique connection. A unique opportunity that *School* did not take full advantage of. We allowed for our audience to come and go, we invited our audience members to do homework in the back of the classroom as they watch, and we had a live-stream set up for those that couldn’t make it. All of these factors lowered the sense of camaraderie between the audience and the performers. While these conditions did allow for more people to see the show, it lowered the impact on each of these people. We failed to use the structure to its full potential for engaging the audience and didn’t spend enough time considering the impact that our performance might have on a witness.

The most significant weakness in our engagement with the audience was our failure to define our relationship to them. Although we discussed our various options frequently, we never truly decided what our relationship was to the audience and what it meant that they were watching us – what they were implicated in. Forced Entertainment is very interested in this idea of implication. This concept of audience responsibility for the events that they view is nothing

new. The most frequently referred to work that held these implications is *Shoot*, a performance art piece in which Chris Burden was shot in the arm in front of a group of witnesses. Burden performed this in 1971 and yet, today we are still exploring this concept of audience as witnesses. Perhaps because this kind of work “leaves us, above all, unable to stop thinking, talking and reporting what we’ve seen” because the audience now has a certain responsibility for the event that occurred (Malzacher 125). Not strictly a duty to stop any event they deem immoral, but a “responsibility to see actively, to observe himself while he is (often voyeuristically) watching, and to make his own connections” (Lehmann 111-12). This level of involvement leads to this relationship with the audience being ideal for political theatre and call to action pieces. Through bringing attention to the position of the audience and the fact that “they are in the majority,” a performance cracks open the possibilities because you’ve just added an auditorium full of new variables (Malzacher 121). This expansion of the possible allows that anything might happen and therefore demands that the audience have an opinion on what happens. It demands that they “feel the ‘weight of things,’” insists that they feel their “presence ‘in some fundamentally ethical way,’” and “produces a ‘pressure for attitude’” (Malzacher 134). Utilizing this kind of relationship to the audience was our opportunity to start a conversation about the university. If we had clarified and addressed our relationship to our audience, then they may have felt implicated in my ensemble pushing themselves to their bodily limit for eight hours which certainly would have made the piece more engaging.

Our failure to do this might have been avoided if we had learned more from Forced Entertainment’s evolving relationship to their audience and the impact it has on their performances. In Forced Entertainment’s earliest work, they did not address the audience at all, then they started addressing the audience in some fictionalized way. It was only more recently,

with their durational work, that they began do acknowledge audience as audience “without [any] kind of fictionalization or misrecognition, just as the people who are there, the people who’ve come along to see you, to hear about something” (Heathfield 83). This move towards recognizing the audience and then recognizing the audience as audience is a result of a desire that Forced Entertainment has: “We come closer to them. We want them closer to us!” (Heathfield 83). Along with this transition of acknowledging the audience came a transformation of Forced Entertainment’s attitude toward the audience from being “rather concerned or worried” wanting “them to be alright” to an attitude that “can be quite abusive, and some negative assumptions are made playfully about them – that they’re drunks, that they’re just interested in tits and ass, that they’re stupid” (Heathfield, 84). Since we did not know what our relationship to our audience was, we could not establish a perspective on them.

This confusion of what our relationship to our audience manifested itself in our relationship changing constantly throughout the performance. During game one the ensemble’s focus is entirely on each other while in game two both the parable and the bookworm song are certainly for the audience. However, the parable appears to be an autonomous choice on the performer’s part, to inform the audience of some larger concept through this story. Meanwhile, the bookworm song appeared to be something that the audience was forcing them to do as enthusiastically as they possibly can and then again and again even more enthusiastically. Our relationship to our audience was the most interesting in game three because our audience started trying to take part in the show itself by yelling “that’s true” from the back of the room. While we had not decided who the audience was to us, we had decided that we couldn’t hear them, so my ensemble members attempted to ignore them. This decision made sense in the context of our piece since the one thing that we had decided about our audience was that there is a fourth wall.

However, ignoring things that are being shouted at you changes the position of the audience and the performer. Suddenly, we were not in the same room or the same world as them and they could have no effect on us. Ignoring these statements erases all possibility of implementation because they did try to take responsibility for what was happening in the performance, and were unable to. A clarification of our relationship to the audience would have helped us avoid this confusing situation in the first place and this failure of communication between ourselves and our audience.

To avoid failure, we had to have been less afraid of failing. We made three games instead of one because we didn't believe we'd be able to make one game last eight hours. We kept on adding elements to the games because we wanted to make it more engaging to watch. We were interested in having the game break down but walked the other way because we didn't know how to make that happen naturally and we didn't know where we could go on a broken machine. The success of Forced Entertainment's pieces lies in their embrace of failure. They make games as simple as possible and find moments in which individuals break from the game and ride their vulnerability to the very edges of performance. Truly, it is the simplicity of the game that is the most difficult part to create, as company member Claire Marshall states: "It took us a long time in the rehearsal for *Emanuelle Enchanted* to get the game with the signs as simple as it is... It was frustrating that you get such a little of it in the show" (Helmer 52). It is scary and difficult to commit to very simple rules and believe that that will be enough. During *School's* eight-hour rehearsal I began to ask myself the question: why does anyone do durational theatre? You can't possibly create an eight-hour long piece, from which audience members are free to come and go as they please, that is constantly giving the witness new information without leaving some people behind. And this is what I've been taught in theatre: that there must always be new

content – everything on stage is a chance to communicate. The ingredient that I was missing in this line of thought was that moment when the audience invests themselves. With the typical audience member, they will crave more at first, “people initially resist if you offer them a pared down vocabulary/economy. They think, ‘Oh please, give me something new!’” (Heathfield 79). However, if the new information they’re receiving is the infinite number of ways to play within the given boundaries, they’ll eventually buy into, accept and understand “the limits and [start] to work inside it, too” (Heathfield 79). But for the audience to get to this point of commitment within a frame, the performers must commit as well. They must find a compelling vocabulary and stick to it, “it’s a question of live by the sword, die by the sword” and it’s a level of investment that makes things harder for everyone, but the payoff much greater (Heathfield 78-9). It would have been difficult to continue generating new content within one game for eight hours, but the fact that we were too scared to attempt it was certainly a failure on our part.

However, our failures, when paired with an acknowledgement of our failures, is in its own way an accomplishment. Truly, the most successful aspect of our process as a whole was the learning and the learning about learning that never ceased, and still hasn’t. We stated that the main research phase of our process would end in November, but we did not stop digging. Some of the most compelling observations about education and the system that we are within were revealed during hour 7 of our performance by an ensemble member so exhausted they could no longer say anything but the truth. My ensemble and I are still so interested in this structure of creation that we are performing two more durational pieces before the end of the semester. I created a solo piece on April 8<sup>th</sup>, that went down S Main from Clementine to The Golden Pony with a piece of sidewalk chalk, further exploring the statement from our piece “that’s true.” I hung notecards (some of which had true statements written on them, some had false statements,

and some were blank and had a marker hanging next to them) and no matter what the notecard said I had to write “That’s true, because…” and defend it in a stream of consciousness style of writing until I reached the next card. It took about seven hours, exactly twenty-four pieces of sidewalk chalk, and all of my energy but it was worth it for the experience of engaging and entertaining a huge variety of people. In addition, on April 15<sup>th</sup> my ensemble and I will be performing a piece in a local show house that has a venue in the basement, further exploring the question “why?” I do not believe that *School* would have spawned these additional pieces if we were fully satisfied with our performance. It is through our failure that we learned more, not only about education, but also about the structure of long-form games, because, as Tim Etchells says “any system is best understood by an investigation of its failure” (Matzke 172).

Now that we have learned how this structure works in relationship to the content of the educational system, I am able to come to the conclusion that I do believe this form could serve this content. The key appears to lie in doing what you’re doing. Instead of trying to layer something else on top of it; create a performance “where what’s happening is what’s happening,” and there’s “a certain kind of ‘it is what it is what it is’” (Heathfield 90). If Forced Entertainment’s durational pieces are each a different kind of game (a game of questions, a game of confessions, a game of stories) then we need to find the game of school - just one game, not three – simplify it as much as possible and then push all the way up against its borders. As long we are playing the game of school, it doesn’t matter that the content is practically uncontrollable because everything within school is part of school. When I met with one of my readers, Dennis Beck, after the performance he expressed an interest in what a game of research would look like if we had no idea what we were going to be researching and asked the audience for topics. Anything created in a game of research would be unplanned but it would also be part of the

research process. Not only could the content of education fit within a durational structure, but I believe that it is, in fact, the ideal pairing. Within a long-form improvisation everything is being made up and everything is being learned anew. The performers aren't acting, they're playing and the performer "learns through play" (Quick 163). The fact that "learning is inevitably [haunted] by anxiety" is not a detriment to the work, but an addition because "the terrors and uncertainties of play can be liberating, rather than constricting" and within our theatrical structure we can learn to learn in a whole different way than our traditional educational structure (Quick 163).

Within *School*, the form did not serve the content and the content did not serve the form. In the moments where the research was well communicated, the game failed and vice versa. As a result of this and a lack of consideration for our witnesses, we also failed to fully and consistently engage our audience. However, within the failures of this particular performance there is a much greater success because we continued to learn and create. And in the future, I believe a durational structure to be the ideal form through which to explore the concept of education.