

The Slow Hurry of Figuration

Giulia Palladini

The Latin motto *Festina lente*—or its equivalent in ancient Greek, *Σπεῦδε βραδέως* (*Speûde bradéōs*)—is what Erasmus of Rotterdam has described as an ‘adage’: a rhetorical figure expressing a timeless wisdom, doing so, in this case, in the form of an oxymoron. Its most common translation in English is ‘Make haste slowly’, or ‘More haste, less speed’.¹ The use of the motto can be traced back at least to the emperor Augustus, who often used the phrase in his daily conversation and would insert it into the language of his official letters. With these two words he advised his ministers to perform their duties with both the dispatch of efficient business and the slowness of careful reflection. In Augustus’s time, golden coins were minted bearing an image to express the gist of *Festina lente*: the image of a crab and a butterfly.² ‘Butterfly and crab are both bizarre, both symmetrical in shape, and between them establish an unexpected kind of harmony,’ says Italo Calvino.³ Their combination constitutes an emblem of the *slow hurry*: a figuration composed of a time crab, capable of walking sideways, or even backwards, and a time butterfly, capable of flying away, in all directions. The emblem itself is, therefore, a time creature: an image of a supposedly impossible temporality, a little monster of timeless wisdom, yet also a form of practical advice for everyday life.

The combination of the crab and the butterfly was only the first in a series of figurations which, especially in the sixteenth century, came to represent *Festina lente*. These are ‘emblems that throw together incongruous and enigmatic figures, as in a rebus,’ commented Calvino, who, like Erasmus, was fascinated by their fairy-tale-like quality.⁴ Among them, there also features an anchor entwined by the twisted body of a dolphin, notably used by the great Venetian humanist publisher Aldus Manutius as a symbol printed on all the title pages of his books. As explained by Erasmus, ‘the anchor, which stays and moors a ship and keeps it in place, indicates slowness. The dolphin, the fastest of all animals, and the animal of keenest reflexes, expresses speed.’⁵ In this case, the time creature is constituted by a combination of an animal and an inanimate object, a hybrid form expressing a temporality of movement (the speed of the dolphin) interwoven with stasis (the anchor holding still at the bottom of the sea). Manutius placed this emblem at the beginning of every print as a reminder for the reader of ‘the intensity and constancy of intellectual work’ standing behind every book.⁶ This was a figuration of the labour of producing books: not only the writer’s work but also the craft of those publishers who, like Manutius, devoted their life to bringing writing to the world in the form of individual items: publications. Especially with the advent of the printing press, the time of fabricating books had accelerated, and definitely so in comparison with activities such as thinking and writing. The emblem, then, conjured both those temporalities of human labour—thinking and making—as united in figurative cooperation, in the project of building a ‘library [that] shall be contained by no limits other than those of the world’.⁷

Other emblems of *Festina lente* included a diamond ring entwined with foliage, a hare inhabiting (or else wearing, like a costume) a snail shell, and a turtle with a sail hammered onto its back, famously an emblem of Cosimo de’ Medici. Such symbolic figurations appear in drawings, are carved on columns or archways, and depicted on everyday objects like coins, plates, or vases: all surfaces bearing the images of incongruous temporality. The most common interpretation of the motto is that it is advice for ‘good behaviour’: a saying meant to praise a particular balance of time in action, decision-making, and strategic thinking. Erasmus appreciated, in particular, the capacity of *Festina lente* to conjure, in its brevity, ‘a certain ripening of action and moderation blended together from both wakefulness and gentleness’.⁸

A Bestiary of Time Warps

In these pages, I conjure the motto *Festina lente* not as a maxim for ‘good behaviour’ but as a rhetorical figure of a time portrayed through hybridization. The motto and its emblems stand for a time encrusted on an image, and blending together different durations, diverse measures of speed, rhythms, and historical vectors, not always leading to a condition of stability but capturing, instead, anomalies, discontinuities, or distortions. Put another way, *Festina lente* designates a time *bearing an image*, like the one pictured on the coins minted in the epoch of Augustus.

I am interested in employing the idea of ‘slow hurry’ as a lens for reading a series of practices I consider distinctive of Forced Entertainment’s work, imagery, and theatrical language. I propose that *Festina lente* characterizes their oeuvre in various ways: it is a tempo we often encounter onstage, it participates in certain structures of recognition for the returning spectator, and it also affects the collective, long-lasting creative process behind the work as a whole. In Forced Entertainment shows, slow hurry functions as a technology which strives to open up the potentiality of oxymoron: time is haunted, punctuated, invigorated by contrariety. Besides, ‘forced entertainment’ is itself an oxymoron: at the core of the name the group chose for themselves nests a temporal paradox, encompassing the conflicting ideas of an enduring hospitality toward the pleasure of making and witnessing performance, and the phantom of obligation and confinement, that one might wish to escape as soon as possible.

In Forced Entertainment *Festina lente* is a distinctive engine of theatre magic, capable of turning the stage into a surface, deemed to bear on itself ever returning images of an incongruous time. This often happens through the production of peculiar *figurations* which, by virtue of their appearing, allow a distinctive kind of writing to take place onstage. More precisely, such figurations participate in Forced Entertainment’s long-lasting desire to invent a mode of writing which seemingly *can only happen onstage*; a writing done with bodies and behaviours, with modes of appearing, moving, speaking; a writing exceeding (although not excluding) the textual dimension and specific to theatre. It is a writing realized with and, in turn, realizing ‘a language outside of language’.⁹ This method of writing explored on the stage can be seen as a form of *hieroglyphic writing*: one made up of enigmatic characters, first appearing as images but participating in a broader system of transmission, conjuring a wisdom which is not immediately given as ‘meaning’. It will be up to the spectator to make image collide with other forces, other symptoms,¹⁰ other scraps of knowledge within their selves, and to corroborate the figuration *as language*, albeit not necessarily organized through sentences, not postulating or delivering a message. This corresponds to the orchestration of many bizarre figurations of creatures in conditions of hybridization, as they come in contact with humans, with objects, with speech, with music, with fragments of scenic discourse and their alleged temporality. It is also a language telling an impossible story, whose duration coagulates in the density of the image itself.

Discussing the emblems expressing *Festina lente*, Erasmus mentions hieroglyphic writing, recalling in passing its sacred function in the earliest ages (still resonating in the etymology of the term),¹¹ but emphasizes especially how this method of symbolic figuration was employed as a disguise for wisdom: ‘If they judged something worthy of the name of wisdom, the Egyptians wrote it down in pictures of various animals, so that not everyone could guess their significance.’¹² Rather than sentences, the combination of hieroglyphs engenders riddles, characterized by ‘a gem-like grace’.¹³ Invoking the idea of theatrical hieroglyphs inevitably resonates with Antonin Artaud’s use of this concept, crucial in his quest for a language of the stage, ‘truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of the spoken language’,¹⁴ and ‘capable of creating kinds of material images equivalent to word images’.¹⁵ In the ‘Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)’, Artaud proposes hieroglyphic writing as a model for a ‘naked language of the theater’¹⁶ in which ‘ordinary objects and even the human body’ are raised to the ‘dignity of signs’.¹⁷ As extensively discussed by Jacques Derrida—himself long fascinated with the hieroglyph’s potential to awaken combinations outside of the alphabetical logic¹⁸—Artaud’s interest in hieroglyphic writing was born from the desire not to get rid of

language altogether but to have the stage governed by other principles than the alphabetic order, understood as a system of wilful communication and dramatically entangled with notions of representation.¹⁹

Artaud located examples of such ‘pure theatrical language’—where sounds, lights, gestures, and attitudes have an ‘ideographic quality’²⁰—not only far from Western stages²¹ but also in certain ‘unperverted pantomimes’, where gestures disavow representation and ‘in which man, to the extent that he contributes to their formation, is only a form like the rest, yet to which, because of his double nature, he adds a singular prestige’.²² This points to a quality of appearance capable of not only dissociating meaning from particular forms but enhancing their unforeseen recombination within another system of intelligibility. One such appearance, Artaud suggests, is a scene from a Marx Brothers’ film, where

a man thinks he is going to take a woman in his arms but instead gets a cow, which moos. And through a conjunction of circumstances ... that moo, at just that moment, assumes an intellectual dignity equal to any woman’s cry.

Such a situation, possible in the cinema, is no less possible in the theater as it exists: it would take very little—for instance, replace the cow with an animated manikin, a kind of monster endowed with speech, or a man disguised as an animal—to rediscover the secret of an objective poetry at the root of humor, which the theater has renounced and abandoned to the Music Hall, and which the Cinema later adopted.²³

The density of the riddle produced by this scene strikes me as a curious prefiguration of some of the hieroglyphs carved on the stage of Forced Entertainment, which likewise encompass animal costumes or fabricated beings ‘made of wood and cloth, entirely invented, corresponding to nothing, yet disquieting by nature’,²⁴ alongside humans, featuring as signs among the signs but crucially enduring ‘the singular prestige of a double nature’²⁵ in the theatre. Here, hieroglyphic writing functions precisely as in ‘unperverted pantomimes’: the figurations are riddles, and there is no effort, on the authors’ part, to offer a hint of their interpretation. They are devices of pleasure: pleasure in the play of producing them, pleasure in the play of receiving them, pleasure in the enigma which the ‘language outside of language’ stages but does not explain. Such language, in fact, is never compact as a system of communication: it is itself hybridized with theatre’s metamorphic capacity, with theatre’s prerogative to be first and foremost a place of display, rather than of communication. Forced Entertainment’s hieroglyphic writing is carved upon the stage which displays it.

Over the years and across their oeuvre Forced Entertainment have produced a *bestiary of time warps*: a multitude of figures which are emblematic time creatures, dragging on previous temporalities of performance, other times serving to open a crack in which certain modes of speaking and listening unexpectedly sneak into a situation, as if, for a moment, the temporality of theatre hybridized with that of literature or film or television or other spectacular genres, and then suddenly returned to theatre, abruptly, almost in oblivion. These time warps serve to expose some incongruities which are inherent in the temporality of theatre itself: in theatre’s very destiny to cope with the predicament of existing in a limited time frame, while continuing to pretend that onstage there is in fact *all the time in the world*. Also, this exposure has a paradoxical quality to it: on the stages of Forced Entertainment performers are often obliged to dwell in an uneasy position, *to endure the costumes of theatrical time*, while inhabiting, as humans, their own lifetime.

I wish to suggest that Forced Entertainment’s figurations function as contraptions for temporal rupture: seemingly, the figural play participates in a long-term project to both create and expose dysfunctions intrinsic in the temporal framework in which the time creatures are deemed to appear, in theatre, and in life. Echoing Georges Didi-Huberman’s thoughts on the work of figurability, such figurations might be seen as ‘rends’ in the time fabric of the stage:²⁶ a fabric crucially interwoven with the time of theatre (a place of display, an economic machine, a site of witnessing) and its outside. The temporal politics at stake in such rending does not just interrupt a supposed horizon of temporal progression; it introduces a logic in which it is possible to

figure, hence to fabricate, time itself: an all-too-human capacity that, however, the logic of capital governing both theatre and its outside is keen to obliterate.

The Art of Figuration: Wearing Costumes of Theatrical Time

It is not unusual, on the stages of Forced Entertainment, to encounter actors wearing costumes of theatrical time. Sometimes these are highly visible, some others not immediately apparent, but they participate nevertheless in hieroglyphic writing: they are the enigmatic characters of the group’s enduring art of figuration. As in the emblems representing *Festina lente*, animal figures recur in this oeuvre, often placed in relation to explicitly human productions, such as dialogue, or specific traditions of display, like pantomime, or game shows from TV or even conventions of traditional drama, like the soliloquy. Many of the creatures making up the emblems of Forced Entertainment are sort of animals, sort of giant toys, sort of children’s funny outfits: they are essentially non-human figures. As Angela Carter suggests, a convention long established in both children’s picture books and the nursery (settings often enough evoked by the set design of Forced Entertainment shows) is that ‘the toy both is, and is not, the animal it represents’.²⁷ Likewise, the animal suits in which performers move do not purport to be animals at all: although they bring forth well-known features of the evoked creature, such as a dog’s barking, still the dog is obviously not a dog, not even in the theatre. In place of the animal itself, what is figured is an image of the animal, one already domesticated, to be introduced in a playful world created for children or, for that matter, for adults who want to behave like children: an image of the non-human which is wholly artificial, a fantasy representation of the animal exposing the clumsiness of representation.²⁸

And yet, this evocation of the non-human is a giving of access to another temporality, a way to drag in (echoing Elizabeth Freeman’s conceptualization of the term drag: to literally wear on one’s body, while pulling the past upon the present) certain historical theatrical antecedents, albeit with no trace of heritage.²⁹ As in children’s picture books or the nursery, pantomime, game shows, and traditional drama are evoked onstage, but only in passing, seemingly conjured with the aim of borrowing a certain poetic license: the quality, as it were, of making a crack in human time.

Those non-human figures are also likely to appear only partially, or in a condition of incongruity. In *Showtime* (1996), the dog suit leaves out most of the performer’s body while she barks and moves around a stage shared with actors as well as with cantankerous cardboard trees, giving up from the start their silent function of setting the scene in order to walk, move hands frantically, or insult each other and the audience. Not by chance, time is a recurring and explicit obsession in this particular show, a topic to which a long monologue by Robin Arthur is also devoted.

In *Pleasure* (1998) the pantomime horse appears only as a head, stuck on the body of a drunk naked man, who has lost his pantomime horse trousers while crawling onstage and drinking whisky from eyeholes in the horse’s head, while old tunes are played slowed down to 16 rpm: his desperate crawl is also the melancholic metronome of the hallucinated tempo of the show. In *Bloody Mess* (2004) the gorilla continuously speaks to the audience about its body, evoking intense images of female sexuality, and often takes off its gorilla mask to appear onstage with a woman’s head. In *Real Magic* (2016) the yellow chicken costumes constantly change their occupants, they appear and disappear for no clear reason, sometimes they are evoked with little dances performed by the actors even when they are not visible onstage: little dances of frightened birds which, seemingly, are the only other option, the only possibility to escape for a moment the neurotic ordeal of the game show.

These animal suits are the engines of particular time warps within the shows. I am thinking, for example, of a scene in *Showtime*. Cathy Naden has been playing in an incomplete dog costume since the beginning, fully ‘pretending’ to be a dog (although wearing a dirty dark-green coat, trousers, and shoes): walking on her

hands and knees, barking, with no access to spoken language.³⁰ At some point, Claire Marshall gets close to her, holding a microphone, and asks her a few questions. Surprisingly, Naden/the Dog starts answering with human language, and a long session starts, marking access to a radically different temporality than the one experienced up to that point in the show. It is not so much that Naden/the Dog slows down the pace but that the density of time itself, onstage, transforms. It is an affective transformation too, the hybridization of a time of play with a focused time of dreadful imagination. Answering one of Marshall's questions, Naden/the Dog starts fantasizing about how she would commit suicide, if she (because it is immediately 'she' doing the talking, albeit still inhabiting the dog's suit) were to. She takes her time describing the preparation of her suicide: she follows patiently the path of her thinking, adding a plethora of details. She takes time in her story too, before getting things done: almost as if she is in no hurry whatsoever to get to the point. She supposedly has an urgency to be done with life, but she wants to leave slowly, very slowly, enjoying each of her last moments.

Her description—a literary practice, in origin, seldom a protagonist on the theatre stage—saturates all the scenic space, as a distinctive expression of *Festina lente*: the sudden and prolonged zooming into the time preceding Naden's imagined death seems to take *all the time in the world*, while in fact Marshall's presence beside her, as well as the dog suit, reminds the spectator throughout that this time warp is part of a larger frame, of a longer time in which the climax-like quality of this moment has no justification, that this moment is infected with another rhythm, and it is infecting, on its part, another duration beyond show time. The other rhythm is the atemporal stillness of death, which is perhaps impossible to imagine from within life. The other duration, which the scene infects in turn, is the spectators' lifetime: the present of those who, during life, watch someone impossibly imagining death.

In *Certain Fragments* Tim Etchells comments on this sequence, emphasizing to what extent this is indeed a meditation on theatre's time:

And then Claire says, at a certain point, 'Cathy don't you think it's about time you took that dog's head off now?' and the dumb blank dog looks at us (questioningly) and Cathy's hands come up and lift off the dog's head and we see her face for the first time in the piece—must be around 50 minutes into it—and she's sweating and still a little out of breath I think but the only thing that's for certain is that in the ruins of the dog game, she is more present than she could ever have been if she'd just walked onto the stage and sat down—Cathy is very here, and very now, very here and now, in the ruins of the dog game she's very present.

The game pauses and it's like you need to see her take the dog's head off in order to even begin to understand what it was, what it meant to pretend that dog for so long, like only now, when the head comes off and the game stops can you measure it, and as Cathy talks ... we measure the distance/difference between real and fictional, human and animal, real time and playtime ...³¹

Marshall's presence at her side is crucial to the figuration producing the time warp in which Naden/the Dog's suicide story takes place. Her distinctively human listening, her inquisitive questions, her *other* temporality enter in combination with the Dog's non-human time, with Naden's out-of-breath, slow, and detailed description of time happening 'in the ruins of the dog game'. The two performers become, as it were, a time creature: a distinctive figuration in the 'language outside of language' of *Showtime*. This time creature stands at the edges of presence and disappearance, producing a peculiar atemporal intensification: a figural comment on the temporal odds at stake in the incidental coinciding of theatre and life, or perhaps on the very act of imagining the stage as the incidental space for such a coincidence.

This kind of time creature is, in fact, a trope in Forced Entertainment's hieroglyphic writing: the combination of two or more performers appearing very close to each other, one holding a microphone and asking questions, the other speaking, often stuck in an incongruous condition. A figuration of this sort appears again in *Showtime*: it features Arthur, barefoot and with a naked torso, his face distorted by bank robber's



tights, laying on the ground and pretending to die (his innards coming out as cheap canned spaghetti), and Terry O'Connor asking insistent questions, while Richard Lowdon, in a dark coat, stands beside the dying thug, supporting and comforting him throughout, holding the microphone so that Arthur can answer the questions. Again, spectators are mirrored into the scene as the uneasy witnesses of an act of imagining death: childish, theatrical, humorous, and yet both situated in and instituting a disquieting temporality.

Bloody Mess is, likewise, full of examples of this sort: this is not surprising, considering that from the beginning the actors announce the particular quality of performance they will endure in throughout the show, each entangled in a specific tempo, all together quite conflicting among themselves. The show is populated by time creatures, combinations of anomalous temporalities becoming even more distorted in their contact with each other. For instance, we encounter a three-headed time creature: it is Arthur, this time holding the microphone in front of the mouth of John Rowley, while the latter is on the floor, encumbered with the weight of Bruno Roubicek's body, both of them laying exhausted, after performing a fierce fight. In the long sequence, Rowley, who has endured in the role of the clown until then, breathes profoundly, as in a post-orgasmic state, then keeps weeping loudly as he asks: 'But I am still funny, aren't I?' His fragile temporality, already posthumous to his enduring effort to entertain, collides with Arthur's cheerful and quiet bouncing, with his casual listening, with Roubicek's silent and ironic standing, still pinning Rowley's body to the floor.

This trope inherently brings about a temporality of slow hurry: one of the performers, in the time creature, acts with urgency (prompting questions, being in charge of keeping 'show time') and the other lays down, slowly lingering on details, diversions, or affective detours. Somehow, around these figurations, the theatre becomes the space in which there is a demand that you get on with things, hurry them along, but the space of the other person—the person interviewed, Naden/the Dog, the agonizing thug, the weeping clown after the fight, perhaps even the spectator watching the whole thing from her seat—is imagined as outside the theatre,



and outside the temporality of needing to get on with things. This seems to expose and reverse the unspoken rule according to which 'theatre time' is oblivious to the economic dynamics of productivity which actually sustain theatre as an economic machine: the rhythm of show time winks to such demands, while strangely suggesting that another possible temporality might exist, that it lurks somewhere, and can be glimpsed within the play of theatre. The figuration, as it were, makes a crack in show time, from which this very outside time momentarily dribbles.

All the Time in the World: The Burden of Theatre's Time

Other costumes of theatrical time are, instead, almost invisible. I am thinking, for example, of the typical circumstance featuring one of the actors standing alone onstage, perhaps at the beginning or at the end of the show: figures explicitly bearing on themselves the weight of theatre's time, the onus of inauguration (or conclusion). Their burden is loaded with audience attention, with a certain responsibility for the show about to start, and moreover with embarrassment for the whole situation. A very literal example of this predicament is the beginning of *Showtime*, where Lowdon appears onstage with the burden of time stuck around his chest, almost like the anchor entwined by the dolphin in the emblem of *Festina lente*: he wears a kind of dynamite corset, his costume makes him appear as a time bomb. With a growing awkwardness, Lowdon inhabits the oxymoronic condition he is somehow obliged to bear: he speaks with an apologetic tone, almost as if somewhere else, in a parallel time dimension perhaps, the very theatre work he is performing would exist as an efficient business, whereas the show he is part of is deemed to be out of sync, it is already figured as a *waste of time*. He must, however, get on with things anyway, even if the going wrong of the performance is somehow already expected by all, actors and spectators, notwithstanding that the beginning—any beginning, perhaps, and especially at the theatre—must always promise that the best is yet to come. 'The first thirty seconds of any performance', the actor says, 'are the most important, because it is in the first thirty seconds that you



have an opportunity to establish a rapport with the audience.’ And yet, the significance of those seconds, the urgency to get them right, turns into a growing anxiety, accelerating the supposed waste of time Lowdon pretends to ward off. The ‘slow hurry’ is made here not only through the words he pronounces but through the combination of phonic language with body attitudes, along with a series of pauses and silences, which from the start have constructed his figuration onstage as an anomalous time bomb.

The time warp produced by this figuration is somehow kindred to that particular performance delivered by Michel Foucault in the inaugural lecture of a series held at the College de France between 1970 and 1984. Foucault, facing an audience keen to listen to him speak in public, declared that he really would have preferred not to have to begin. Paradoxically resisting the demand of inauguration, Foucault commenced with staging his own desire to enter speech ‘almost surreptitiously’ and ‘be carried away beyond all possible beginnings’.³² Being ‘freed from the obligation to begin’, however, was an impossible desire: staging such impossibility, then, meant for Foucault the exposure of the artificial measurement that institutions assign to beginnings, as well as the anxiety that such measurement creates in both the institution and the one who is supposed to speak from within it: an anxiety towards discourse in ‘its material reality’, existing ‘according to a time-scale which is not ours’.³³ Foucault wanted to expose the paradoxical institutional regime according to which ‘a place has been made ready for discourse’ but not for the human finding herself participating in it, and having to pretend to be the origin of it, rather than being immersed in and dazed by the echoes of the ‘struggles, victories, injuries, dominations and enslavements’ that lurk behind any form of discourse—even at the theatre. The conventions that institutions attribute to beginnings, and the desire of individual voices not to begin, are therefore ‘two contrary replies to the same anxiety’.³⁴

Forced Entertainment’s figurations narrate again and again this very anxiety, and it seems not by chance that, likewise, it is an anxiety implicating directly the institution of theatre, solemnly marking the show’s beginnings and endings. A figuration of this sort is also produced at the start of *The World in Pictures* (2006), where Jerry Killick is obliged to wear an invisible but cumbersome suit of theatrical time, delivered to him by his own colleagues, who are standing in a group at one side of the stage. One by one, they offer advice to Killick, in charge of ‘the beginning’, and then they hurry away: far from encouraging, their tips only emphasize the unease of his task of having to begin. It is perhaps precisely to overcome this unease that Killick starts by telling a story: it is maybe a story to ‘unfrighten himself’³⁵ from the monster of beginning, but also a story which slowly becomes frightening, as it tells about a growing desire to take one’s own life. This idea starts almost by chance, out of the curiosity of someone arriving on the top floor of a building and then measuring the distance from there to the ground, after which this curiosity turns into a morbid desire to figure one’s crushed image from above, to fall down, to end one’s life. As in Naden/the Dog’s slow suicide description in *Showtime*, Killick lingers on a ‘long and intimate pornography of detail’,³⁶ which almost accidentally draws the spectators into the show.

The figuration of Killick speaking alone on the empty stage, wearing ordinary clothes, will return at the end of the show, after the group has carved onstage a ‘theatrical picture-book’³⁷ of the ‘History of Mankind’. This is a merry-go-round of figurations appearing at an absurd speed, moving forward in epochs through diversions and digressions, as if all that mattered was to frantically change flashy costumes, activating cheap special effects, and swinging on history like oblivious, nasty brats. This ‘Story of Man’, as narrated by Terry O’Connor, is told in a hurry, and often the narrator asks the others, ‘How are we doing with time?’, and the answer is, regularly, ‘We are a little bit late.’ At some point, however, she and all the frantic performers running about suddenly slow down, evoking the image of ‘a long, hot, summer afternoon at the end of the nineteenth century’. Again, it is almost as if a crack in time had opened, urging the general hurry of history to loiter on its own anticipation, to slow down the pace in the idle foretaste of the yet-to-come, right there, a moment before the acceleration of capitalist modernity, a few decades before World War I, in an instant of rest before the start of the century which, at the time the show was created, had just come to an end. In the story of the world, of course, there can be no measure: an afternoon can be as long as a century. But then

again, suddenly, the tale of history in pictures starts at doubled speed, and quickly, abruptly, it ends: the tale has reached the present. In the ruins of historical time, Killick appears again in his plain clothes, wearing the same costume of theatrical time he had on before, hence signalling that the show is coming to an end.

Killick starts speaking, taking on the theme of measuring man’s time but bringing it back into the room, breaking it down into miniature units. He asks the audience to remember the hour before the show, then he slowly zooms into the very time of the show—entering the foyer, reaching the theatre seat—then moves on to evoke the future that is about to begin: an hour after the show, a day, months, years later, when an oblivion of this very ‘now’ will occur, and so the progressive loss of what the audience just saw but also the loss of life itself. He goes on accelerating and expanding time until, fifty years on, quite a lot of people now in the room, he says, will have died. Then he imagines when, in a faraway future, all of the people now in the theatre will be dead, and so, further on, even the people capable of remembering all of them. He goes on to imagine the disappearance of everything material and immaterial surrounding the present, until he reaches the impossible imagination of ten thousand years into the future, when nothing will be standing, and the space will look just like a vacuum. At this point, Freeman appears, still wearing the costume of a grotesque prehistoric man, asking Killick to take a moment to think of another, more positive way to finish the show, while the rest of the group performs, instead, the ‘grand finale’: a long sequence in which all the actors labour to empty the stage, sweep the floor, cancel all traces of human time, while ‘Harmonium’ by Stereolab³⁸ plays at loud volume and Wendy Houstoun, with a wig and sunglasses, still in her cave-dwelling early-human fake fur (hence, a hybrid creature of old and new) dances convulsively around Killick.

Throughout, the latter stands pensive onstage, having been part of the flurry of history in pictures shortly before, while inhabiting his human time, which for some reason looks all the more human now that he is sinking into the flurry of the future history he has just described, now that he is encumbered with the costume of theatrical time obliging him to ‘finish the show’: to measure the end of the oxymoronic time of theatre, in the background of what, now, looks like a post-apocalyptic void.



In the crack opened by this figuration, while a strange creature dances madly and a strange creature is pondering onstage, the audience is again softly drawn in, to inhabit for a short moment a deeply affective time, running at a slower pace and conflicting with the swirl of the show just witnessed. The sensation here is that of a sudden, long fall into the dark: an echo comes back from Killick's initial monologue, when, describing the fantasy fall from the building, he mentioned 'some of the things that might go through your mind when you're falling'—almost as if the whole 'History of Mankind' is just 'some of those things': nothing but quick images glimpsed during your fall. Because, indeed, the suicidal scene was not told in the first person but in the second: the one doing the imagining, the one doing the falling into the oblivion of historical time, was you, you listening and watching, you forcedly entertained. It was you, just about to confront the non-human time of theatre, while slowly, and yet too quickly, consuming your own too-human time, falling into the void of the future.

The temporal rupture of this figuration functions to perturb the logic of the ending: another passage usually organized, meaningfully and emotionally manipulated by particular regimes of temporality. The slow zooming into the future blurs the possibility of any measurement: not only in the temporal economy of the show (as it denies any climax) but also in that of theatre production. Returning to think of Foucault's desire to undo beginning, one more element seems at stake and resonates quite precisely here: the desire to resist the way institutions hosting human activity confer upon it a particular value in terms of time, establishing temporal vectors for processes which supposedly exist within an idea of development, which have beginnings and endings and thus are containable, recognizable as individual units of production, rather than part of a continuing, incommensurable, unfinished labour. The unease towards beginning and ending, that is, amounts to an unease towards the attribution of 'value' to a particular production happening in public: the production of thought, in the case of Foucault's lectures; the production of theatre, in the case of Forced Entertainment's shows.



On Collective Appearing, Working, and Enduring

As Aldus Manutius insightfully suggested with the emblem placed on all the books he printed, *Festina lente* is also an instant condensation of a long process of thinking, of imagining, as well as the quick crystallization of such enduring work in an image. I wish to suggest that such a long duration of labour, manifesting in a figure as well as in individual shows, has specific resonances with respect to theatre work onstage and the labours going on backstage, in preparation. Hinting at such complex entanglements of temporalities, and to the way these are seemingly smothered, or else neglected, in the temporal order of theatre as an institution, brings forth yet another dimension of the slow figuration in Forced Entertainment's labours, one that in turn brings us back to Italo Calvino's long fascination with the adage 'Festina lente'. Discussing the motto in his lecture on 'Quickness', Calvino refers to a twofold temporal dimension of creative labour: he meditates on the necessity of a writer's work 'to take into account many rhythms'. Conjuring the mythological figures of Volcano and Mercury (standing, respectively, for the focused labour of concentration and the aerial lightness and diversions sustaining creative labour in its long duration), Calvino ostensibly connects his fascination with *Festina lente* with an inquiry into creative labour's complex relation with the forms and the laws that organize it in the completion of individual works. Finally, Calvino also points to the pleasure he, as a writer, took in inventing or encountering, in literature, images that are themselves figurations of story-telling:³⁹ glimpses of stories condensing in a short form a trajectory which is potentially much longer, and that is crystallized in quickness while winking towards the past or the future.

All these dimensions are implicated, in different degrees of intensity, in Forced Entertainment's shows, and even more so when they are considered all together, as the corpus of a thirty-seven-year-old oeuvre that sustains the slow hurry structuring individual, specific pieces. In *And on the Thousandth Night ...* (2000), for example, the Kings and Queens know that while they are telling their stories, they can be interrupted any moment. They know that while they are supposed to elegantly unroll the artfully wound skein of their tale, they must also move quickly toward its gist. They might, however, also want to linger on details because, in fact, their tales are not supposed to have an end at all. Like Scheherazade, the Kings and Queens also know that the endurance of their act of storytelling fatally depends on their capacity to deliver their stories fast, but not in a hurry. They are indeed constantly in a hurry to seduce the listener, but they cannot act in a hurry: if anything, the long duration of the show is a reminder of that. Their quixotic hope, one might suppose, is that not only the spectators but the other storytellers too will get caught up in the tale's seduction, entwined in it like a dolphin around an anchor, wishing to linger on its details for a dense moment in which the speed of storytelling will dwell in the stasis of collective listening. But then the potential interruption, which is the basic rule of the game, acts upon each story, imposing always a different duration than the one imagined, whatever that was, performing an external montage on its narrative tempo.

In a sense, each storyteller performs the role of a sail hammered onto the back of a turtle's body: she or he will violently interfere with the body of the tale and sail the show forward, very fast, although the show will anyhow move slowly, deferring its end. The starting again of the next tale will impress on collective time another rhythm: it will maybe slow down the show, walk backwards, if the story, as often happens, resonates with previous ones, and bring back figures and laughter which have already inhabited the stage, during the very same evening, or it will suddenly accelerate in an improvised duel of interruptions.

Such unpredictable, albeit carefully orchestrated, collective doing and imagining is not only affected by the work of storytelling onstage but also by the thirty-year-long collaboration between the members of the group. The long duration condensed in images is produced by echoes, resonances, and returns of ideas and attempts, sketched out by someone from the collective in improvisation, then for some reason passed on and crystallized in figurations enacted by someone else or resonating in someone else's voice or gestures. The images we encounter in the work of Forced Entertainment bear on themselves also the endurance of a creative process of production that is a combination of various subjectivities, diverse temporalities of work, various phantasmatic bodies hybridized in a unique corpus, in a shared collection of riddles.

The figuration of the pantomime horse in *Pleasure* is a good example of this dynamic of endurance and hybridization. Lowdon recalls that the incongruous figure of the pantomime horse head stuck on the naked body of a man, crawling along the floor, while painstakingly opening and closing the curtains onstage, was produced during an improvisation of his.⁴⁰ Then the material was rearranged, and ended up being performed by Arthur. ‘We often used to joke’, Lowdon said, ‘that I had made all this material that Rob actually had to inhabit, even though he hadn’t made it in the first place, and how terribly unfair and cruel this was.’ The crawling horse is therefore a time creature in yet another sense: it is a double-headed monster, in that it bears a multiple temporality, the labour time of at least two bodies, possibly two or more intuitions, the touch and nuances of many hands. It also combines the invisible, long labour of imagining, improvising, trying out, rearranging the material, re-performing it, learning to inhabit it, and the quick, icastic,⁴¹ memorable form of appearance, onstage.

Lowdon reports that many years after *Pleasure* he found himself playing in *Tomorrow’s Parties* (2011), a piece performed by two actors that was ‘a game about possibilities for the future’.⁴² The piece was performed by many members of the group, but Lowdon recalls that Arthur had been very influential in generating text for that show, so much so that he had deposited his voice, his tone, the phantasm of his body on the particular theatrical suit Lowdon ended up wearing when he performed in the show:

I remember thinking it was very strange to find myself trying to inhabit Rob’s words, because all of the text he had created pretty much comes from improvisation, and so in my head I could always hear Rob’s speech patterns, and it felt like this was some kind of payback for the crawling horse of years ago.⁴³

These figurations, and sure enough many others, bear on themselves also the distinctive slow hurry characterizing the strange balance between ‘rehearsal time’ and ‘show time’, the relation of violence and flirtation between the two, their binding of human time and theatre time. They write in hieroglyphics another story, at the margins of every show, longer than the time of any show. In a sense, this is a story about a desire for the immeasurability of theatre labour as production, going alongside the necessity, the circumstance, the destiny of framing ‘theatre’ in individual moments of performance, hosted by institutions, witnessed by other bodies in the audience, perceived as having proper beginnings and proper endings. It is a story featuring each body of the members of Forced Entertainment as a time creature, bearing on themselves the density, the endurance, the diversions, the detours of a collective creative process, persisting in offering the unease of one’s human time to the always new riddles displayed in the space of the non-human, or of the all too human, populated onstage and offstage by strangers, people who know nothing about each other except for the fact of being commonly humans and being together in a limited time and space. In such space, in such time, incongruous ‘possibilities for the future’ get repeatedly figured, through slow and quick glimpses of stories, carved on the theatre stage as on golden coins. These stories, these golden coins, are not to be spent or understood but to be passed on, donated, collected, or even lost, hidden in an invisible ‘library [that] shall be contained by no limits other than those of the world’.⁴⁴

1. Desiderius Erasmus, ‘Festina lente’, in *Adagia* II.1.1 (1525). Hypertext edition by Otto Steinmayer, <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/speude/>, accessed 2 October 2020.
2. Waldemar Deonna, ‘The Crab and the Butterfly: A Study in Animal Symbolism’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 17/1–2 (1954), 47–86.
3. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 48.
4. Ibid.
5. Erasmus, ‘Festina lente’, (see n. 1), 11.
6. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (see n. 3), 48.
7. Erasmus, ‘Festina lente’, (see n. 1), 17.
8. Ibid., 3.
9. An expression used by Tim Etchells during a public conversation with Sara Jane Bailes, which I attended at the Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts in Brighton, 12 November 2016.
10. For a discussion of the idea of symptoms and their relation with figuration, see Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘The Image as Rend and the Death of God Incarnate’, in *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005), 139–94.
11. From Greek: *hieroglyphikós*, composed of *hierós* (sacred) and *glyphein* (to carve).
12. Erasmus, ‘Festina lente’, (see n. 1), 9.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. Antonin Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’, in *The Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1950), 37.
15. Ibid., 39.
16. Artaud, ‘The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)’, in *The Theater and Its Double* (see n. 13), 93.
17. Ibid., 94.
18. See, in particular, Jacques Derrida, ‘La parole soufflée’, ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’, and ‘The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’, in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
19. Derrida, ‘La parole soufflée’, (see n. 17), 191.
20. Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’ (see n. 13), 39.
21. The most important example of theatrical hieroglyphs Artaud discusses was the Balinese theatre that he saw at the Exposition Coloniale in the Bois de Vincennes in 1931, and to which he devoted the essay ‘On the Balinese Theater’, in *The Theater and Its Double* (see n. 13), 53–67.
22. Artaud, ‘Metaphysics and the *Mise en Scène*’ (see n. 13), 40.
23. Ibid., 43.
24. Ibid., 44.
25. Ibid.
26. See Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘The Image as Rend and the Death of God Incarnate’ (see n. 10), 139–94.
27. Angela Carter, ‘Animals in the Nursery’, *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 299.
28. Nicholas Ridout, for example, suggests that in Forced Entertainment shows ‘the animal suits transform the adult humans into silly bumbling beasts of erotic fixation’, in Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 154.
29. For a definition of ‘drag’ and its etymological relation with time, see Elizabeth Freeman, ‘Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations’, *New Literary History*, 31/3 (Summer 2000), 728.
30. For an interesting critical take on the figure of the dog in *Showtime* see David Williams, ‘Inappropriate/d Others or, The Difficulty of Being a Dog’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 51/1 (Spring 2007), 111–15.
31. Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1999), 57.
32. Michel Foucault, ‘The Order of Discourse’, in Richard Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 52.
33. Ibid., 53.
34. Ibid.
35. This echoes the title of another piece: *Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me?*
36. Etchells, *Certain Fragments* (see n. 30), 63.
37. From the description on the website <http://www.forcedentertainment.com/project/the-world-in-pictures/>, accessed 2 October 2020.
38. From the compilation *Refried Ectoplasm [Switched on Volume 2]* (Duophonic Records, 1995).
39. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (see n. 3), 54.
40. Forced Entertainment and Hugo Glendinning, #FE84–14 No. 6 *Pleasure | Tomorrow’s Parties | Sharing Material*, Richard Lowdon, online clip (2014), <https://youtu.be/cKr5h6pHkBY>, accessed 13 October 2020.
41. The adjective ‘icastic’ is defined by Italo Calvino in his lecture on ‘Exactitude’ as describing ‘the evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images’. See Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (see n. 3), 55.
42. Forced Entertainment and Glendinning, #FE84–14 No. 6 *Pleasure | Tomorrow’s Parties | Sharing Material*, Richard Lowdon, online clip (see n. 38).
43. Ibid.
44. Erasmus, ‘Festina lente’ (see n.1), 17.