

British Theatre Guide

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Real Magic

Devised by Tim Etchells with Jerry Killick, Richard Lowdon and Claire Marshall with input from Robin Arthur and Cathy Naden

Forced Entertainment

HOME Manchester

29–30 November 2017

The latest production from Forced Entertainment takes its inspiration from TV game shows, or stage mind reading acts, or perhaps TV programmes for very young children with their constant repetitions.

On stage, surrounded by fluorescent lights on stands and scattered chairs and props, are the three actors, who have two costumes between them—a sparkly dress and a man's suit—and a chicken costume each. One sits on a chair, blindfolded; one stands at a microphone on a stand; the third holds up a piece of cardboard with a word written on it.

The host asks the contestant to guess the word of which the third person is thinking. He guesses wrongly three times. The host tells them to "swap" and they all change roles and repeat exactly the same scene but with each playing a different part and interpreting it in a different way. The new contestant makes the same three incorrect guesses. And they swap again, over and over again, for an hour and a half.

The style of playing varies enormously: from slow and drawn out to swift and offhand; from chummy and encouraging to dark and sinister; from wildly enthusiastic to bored and weary. The odd language of game shows is cleverly pilfered, often to comic effect, such as the encouraging "good answer" from the host to responses from the contestant that are clearly wrong. The recorded soundtrack includes loops of laughter and applause that don't line up with anything happening on stage, like the canned laughter in cartoons or the applause in *Strictly Come Dancing*.

Director Tim Etchells says in the programme of the show that though "its raw material comes from pop culture, it seeks to question things more broadly, picking at the complex political place we find ourselves in these days—down the bumpy road to Brexit, in the dark realm of Trump." I get the pop culture part but, even looking back on it, I have no idea where those other associations came into what I saw. Maybe it's me, but I suspect they were left behind in rehearsals somewhere.

With its roots in surrealism, it comes across with dreamlike logic: breaking its own form in places, changing costumes for no obvious reason, repeating the same thing but differently. It could also be a nightmarish vision of Hell, where the three are condemned to repeat the same actions until one of them answers correctly to free themselves—and the audience—but they never can. It reminded me of being in the waiting room at A&E, where the same ritual of the door opening and a name being called is repeated hour after hour, but the name is never yours.

It is more entertaining than that, however, with humour in parts, even if as a whole it is rather bewildering and any link to the real world beyond the TV game show is, at best, obscure.

Etchells ends his programme note by referring to "the triple-bind of destructive capitalism, escalating globalisation and economic austerity, the freedom that is not really freedom at all, the rigged game."

With his prompting, it is possible to see how that reading of the show could be applied to it, but it doesn't come across just from the performance and it has no greater validity than any other reading of its meaning or meaninglessness. Such as, with its endless repetition—and the occasional break to "do the dance"—a *Teletubbies* or *In The Night Garden* for adults.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)