
FORCED ENTERTAINMENT: AND ON THE THOUSANDTH NIGHT (2000) HOW DO ACTORS DEVIATE FROM THE THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS IN AND ON THE THOUSANDTH NIGHT?

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ABSTRACT

The performance "And on the Thousandth Night" by Forced Entertainment is a captivating exploration of endurance, storytelling, and the transformative power of narratives. Premiered in 2000, this production is characterized by its ambitious scope: an uninterrupted, improvised six-day performance where six performers undertake the daunting task of narrating stories continuously for 144 hours.

Central to the performance is the notion of storytelling as a fundamental human activity—a means of making sense of the world, connecting with others, and creating meaning amid chaos. The endurance aspect of the performance reflects a profound investigation into the limits of storytelling and human resilience.

The production's title, "And on the Thousandth Night," suggests a cyclical, endless narrative journey—an invitation to dive deep into the vast possibilities of storytelling. Each performer takes on the role of a storyteller, weaving together diverse narratives, genres, and characters over the course of the performance.

This experimental format challenges traditional notions of theatre, inviting audiences to reconsider the boundaries of performance art and the nature of spectatorship. The absence of a fixed script or narrative arc foregrounds spontaneity and improvisation, emphasizing the raw, unfiltered nature of live storytelling.

Moreover, the performance underscores the communal aspect of storytelling, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between performers and audiences. As spectators witness the unfolding stories in real-time, they become active participants in the creative process, co-creating meaning through collective engagement.

"And on the Thousandth Night" exemplifies Forced Entertainment's signature blend of innovation, risk-taking, and conceptual rigor. By pushing the boundaries of duration and improvisation, the production challenges conventional norms and offers a profound meditation on the transformative potential of narrative.

Keywords: Thousandth, theatrical, Night, Entertainment, Forced.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a mirror that reflects the socio-economic and political issues in a fictional and/or realistic frame. It takes up events to formulate them in a refined, polished, attractive, and entertaining work. One of the classical genres of literature is the drama which can be traced back to Greek and Roman times. In this small research, I will try to explore and clarify the potential and capability of Forced Entertainment Theatre Company in implicating the audience/spectator in their performance *And on the Thousandth Night*.

Forced Entertainment is a theatrical company founded in Sheffield in the UK in 1984. I will also talk in more detail about the Forced Entertainment Theatre Company and explain the nature of its production *And on the Thousandth Night*. *And on the Thousandth Night* is a performance created in September 2000 in Beirut by Forced Entertainment Company. In this paper, I will explain what kind of performance *And on the Thousandth Night* is, and I will analyze the performance *And on the Thousandth Night* shedding the limelight on the metatheatrical aspects of that performance. The aspects I will discuss to analyze the performance are the three codes: Vestimentary, Kinesic, and Cosmetic. I will try to define these three codes, their meaning, and discuss their theatrical classical conventions. I will also discuss how Forced Entertainment Theatre Company actors break and deviate from the classical theatrical conventions in their performance of *And on the Thousandth Night*.

Forced Entertainment Theatre Company

As mentioned above, Forced Entertainment Company is an experimental theatre first appeared in Sheffield in the UK in 1984. The company has six core members who work in the field of theatre, performance, installation, digital media, and film. They develop their projects through a collaborative work that is rich in improvisation and debate. The theatre won International Ibsen Reward in 2016 for its new artistic contribution to the world of drama and theatre. (Forced Entertainment).

We're interested in making performances that explore the contemporary world, performances that excite, challenge, and entertain other people. We're interested in ideas at the same time as seeking to create confusion, silence, questions, and laughter. (And On The Thousandth Night 2000)

From the quotation above we can understand the nature of Forced Entertainment Company that indirectly confuses the audience and forces him/her to raise many questions and think introspectively to link such questions to recent social issues. From my own perspective, Forced Entertainment Company is a theatre company that leaves the audience in a maze dislocated by the storm of thoughts that can be raised in his/her mind by the disintegration of plot, dialogue, and actors. Their performances are confounding and beyond the spectators' expectations. In his book *At The Sharp End*, Billingham states that Forced Entertainment Company has been described by the Guardian as "one of the most influential new British theatre companies of the last twenty years." (Billingham: 2007, 180). The same writer mentions that "The Times observed, Forced Entertainment has been pulling the rug from under theatregoers' feet for twenty years" (ibid). Forced Entertainment Theatre Company has more than sixty performed projects around the world making use of historical theatrical texts and modifying them to cope with everyday life matters and treat recent social and political issues. *And on the Thousandth Night* is one of their projects. I will try to analyze and figure out the three metatheatrical aspects formerly mentioned in the introduction.⁴

The Thousand and One Nights (Thousand Nights and One Night)

Thousand Nights and One Night is a Middle Eastern collection of stories. In her book *The Arabian Nights*, Byatt states that the English title of the collection is taken from the Arabic translation "the title comes from the Arabic, "Alf Layla wa Layla" a thousand nights and one night"(Byatt:2007, 1). The stories are folk tales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age. The stories reflect different cultures of different countries and to be more precise mainly from the four countries of Persia, Iraq, Egypt, and India. The Britannica website starts

describing *The Thousand and One Nights* as “a collection of largely Middle Eastern and Indian stories of uncertain date and authorship” (Britannica: 14 Nov. 2022).

The collection of *The Thousand and One Nights* is also named by some scholars *The Arabian Nights*. I will summarize this collection from what I have found on Britannica and A.S. Byatt in her book *The Arabian Nights*. The story simply starts with a Persian King named Shahryar who used to join his army in most of his forays. One time when he came home, he discovered that his wife (the queen) was unfaithful to him. She made use of his absence and made a forbidden sexual relationship with some men in the palace. As a king, Shahryar had to keep his honour and therefore he decided angrily to execute his wife with all men with whom she betrayed him. Consequently, hostility and loathing were created in him against the women kind. King Shahryar indignantly decided to marry a woman each night to tell him a story and as soon as the story ends, the woman will be sent to be executed claiming that the story was unpleasant. King Shahryar by this scheme intended to kill all unmarried women in his kingdom to feed up his revenge. Marrying and killing a huge number of women, no single woman is left without a man but the two daughters of his *Vizier* (prime minister nowadays). The two daughters of the vizier are *Shahrazad* (Scheherazade) and *Dunyazad*. *Shahrazad* the elder daughter of the vizier had devised a scheme to save herself and her sister from the sickly angry king. She insisted that her father accepts her marriage to the king. Eventually, the vizier accepted the marriage and *Shahrazad* became the queen of *Shahryar*. Each night she used to tell King *Shahryar* a story; but she deliberately used to leave it incomplete promising to finish it the following night. The stories were so entertaining, and the king was very eager to hear the end, but *Shahrazad* deliberately prolonged the stories, and the king was obliged to postpone her execution. After one thousand nights the king finally forsook his awful scheme.

Although the collection is being described as a literary work of uncertain date, most critics approximate the date that the stories were told many centuries before they were written. Byatt states that “the stories are Indian, Persian, and Arabic, and were told in many forms many centuries before they were written down” (Byatt: 2007, 1). However, Britannica refers to the 1830s as the approximate date of collecting and writing down the stories:

The Arabic text was first published in full at Calcutta (Kolkata), 4 vol. (1839–42). The source for most later translations, however, was the so-called Vulgate text, an Egyptian recension published at Bulag, Cairo, in 1835, and several times reprinted. (Britannica: 14 Nov. 2022).

Forced Entertainment And on the Thousandth Night:

And on the Thousandth Night is a performance first performed in Beirut in 2000 and later in many countries around the world “A performance created in September 2000 for Festival Ayloul in Beirut and draws on one section from Forced Entertainment’s epic twenty-four-hour performance *Who Can Sing A Song to Unfrighten Me?* (1999)”. (*And On The Thousandth Night* 2000).

And On The Thousandth Night is a storytelling performance that starts with eight characters putting on kings and queens’ costumes. They come directly on a simple stage that lacks many aspects of the traditional stage, carrying chairs to sit at the very end of the stage. Without any prologue or any traditional theatrical opening, they start telling their stories. The stories are improvised on the stage by the performers “A story is told, made up live, dragged from memory by a line of eight performers” (*And on the Thousandth Night* 2000). The stories are a mixture of real, fantastic, political, social, and economic blends, and no single story is finished because the performers interrupt each other. The performers are playing a marathon game by stopping

each other to start his/her own story “It is a long, mutating, and endlessly self-canceling story” (“And On The Thousandth Night 2000). The performance runs for six hours, and the performers have the full freedom of moving in and out of the stage, eating at any time they want, or even taking a nap during the show. The competition between the performers stimulates me as a spectator to take part in the performance and motivates me to expect who is the next storyteller. I think the performers are successful in provoking any spectator to feel as eager as King *Shahryar* to hear the end of the stories.

What are Drama and Theatre?

Drama is a literary genre or a literary art form consisting of a story being performed by characters. Drama can be defined as “a composition in verse or prose intended to portray life or character or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue and typically designed for theatrical performance” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Drama is a dramatic text (verse or prose) written to be filmed or acted on stage by characters through actions, dialogue, soliloquy, and conflict to address social matters and issues related to human nature such as morality. The characteristics of the dramatic genre are plot, events, character, setting, linear temporality, and teleology. Drama includes many sub-genres such as tragedy, comedy, religious, and historical. The conventional drama should be divided into acts and scenes, begins with a chorus, and involves interludes. While drama is a text, theatre is a performance. Theatre is a place where the drama (or any theatrical text) is performed. Oxford Dictionary defines theatre as “a building or an outdoor area where plays and similar types of entertainment are performed” (Oxford Dictionary). Classical theatre should involve a wooden stage, curtain, prompter box, lighting, sets, actors, costumes, stage designer, and stage director.

What are Metadrama and Metatheatre?

Metadrama is a play that draws our attention to its nature as a play. In other words, metadrama is a term that describes the play or the theatrical performance as a self-reflexive. Although, metatheatrical aspects existed in the ancient Greek and Roman theatre but were not distinguished or characterized until the term was coined by Abel in 1963. In his *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form*, Lionel Abel describes metadrama as “a drama about drama” (Abel: 1963). From my perspective, I can summarize Metadrama as a self-referenced dramatic text that draws the attention of the audience/spectators to itself as a drama. Metadrama is a play (or any dramatic text) that features characters who are aware they are in a play or movie and who are able to break the fourth wall and speak directly to the audience. The metadramatic play turns out to be another play through disintegrating the characters, the plot, the dramatic text, mise on page, or not following the typology of theatre codes. Metatheatre is also a theatre that involves a self-reflexive performance. Lionel Abel defines metatheatre as “theatre about theatre” (Abel 1963). In other words, metatheatre is a self-referential theatre which means it draws our attention to the theatre itself. Just like metadrama, metatheatre does not abide by the conventions of traditional theatre that I have mentioned previously.

The performers of Forced Entertainment in *And On The Thousandth Night* try their best to break and deviate from the classical or traditional theatrical and dramatic conventions. The performers in *And on the Thousandth Night* performance encourage and stimulate the audience to think about the materials (text and performance) which are presented. Consequently, the audience will be pulled in and warmly invited to take part in the performance by speculation and imagination.

**Semiotics in Performance (Metatheatrical Critical Analysis)
Vestimentary Codes**

Old approaches in the field of theatre studies conceptualize theatre as a sign system and these so-called semiotic approaches. Kier Elam, in his book *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, defines semiotics as “a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society” (Elam: 2002, 1). There are many different principles, signs, and codes that are all used to describe a performance. Some of these codes are the Vestimentary, Kinesic, and Cosmetic codes that I will focus on to analyze the performance of *And On The Thousandth Night*. Vestimentary code simply means dress or clothing etiquette. It refers to the expectations that govern a suitable dress for a special or specific event. In a theatrical performance, the spectators expect appropriate clothing that suits the situation and communicates the status or identifies the identity of the character the performer acting.

The title of the performance *And On The Thousandth Night* indicates that the performers will enact the characters of the very wealthy and mighty King Shahryar and the very clever, polite, and beautiful Queen Shahrazad. As a spectator, I was expecting the kings’ performers will enter the stage putting golden crowns embroidered with jewels on their heads, wearing expensive furry cloaks, and putting on shiny leather slippers and the king is carrying a golden sceptre. On the contrary, the kings and queens came on stage shaking the audience with their very simple and poor clothes. The eight performers were putting brown cardboard crowns over their heads in a very satirical way. The stage was opened by eight kings and queens who were carrying very simple and cheap wooden chairs without the help of stagehands. They walked toward the edge of the stage with their short loose garment showing their bare feet and directly started to improvise their own stories without any preliminaries.

At the very beginning (0.01-0.35) I was surprised when the four queens’ performers with four kings’ performers came on stage putting on very cheap red cloaks, and funny cardboard crowns. The performers were even wearing very simple casual clothes under the sleazy red cloaks.

The performers started their improvised stories encompassing diverse dimensions and elements to encapsulate stories of different subjects and different cultures. The stories are comprising absurdism, political, socio-economic, everyday life, vulgarity, and obscene jokes. I have focused on the performance to seek the relationship between the storytellers and their costumes. Is there any coherence or consistency? What I have found is that the performers do not act and yet their costumes represent the king and queen of *The Thousand and One Nights*. As a spectator, I was shocked by their simplicity and deliberate ignorance of the theatrical conventions. The actors played with the expectation of their audience but added jocosity and entertainment. Many questions were raised in my mind such as whom were the performers acting? Whom did the performers represent? Were they acting any character? Did they play themselves on stage? These questions came to my mind when I watched the performance. I think the performers in *And On The Thousandth Night* are neither presenting their own persona nor any characters from *The Arabian Nights*. Through their plain, comic, and poor costumes, the actors of Forced Entertainment confuse and challenge their audience’s instability. As a spectator, I started questioning myself about the funny, simple, and cheap costumes of kings and queens’ actors. I can say that they pulled my leg and provoked me to take part in the performance. I admit that I’m confused and unable to identify the characters of the performers. Through their inconsistent and maladjusted costumes and everyday life clothes, the performers openly challenge traditional theatre conventions.⁹

Kinesic Codes

Kinesic is a terminology that refers to body language which involves gestures, movements, and facial expressions and their relationship to the theatrical text and performance. Kinesic code I can say it is a study of non-verbal language. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines kinesics as "a systematic study of the relationship between non-linguistic body motions (such as blushes, shrugs, or eye movement) and communication" (Merriam-Webster). Kinesic code can convey a range of emotions, attitudes, and intentions, often without the need for words. A performer or an actor can use body posture to communicate confidence, relaxation, or tiredness, while facial expressions such as a smile and frown can convey happiness or disagreement. Eye contact can communicate interest, attentiveness, mistrust, astonishment, exclamation ...etc. In classical theatre, the Kinesic code is an important aspect of communication, as it can reinforce or contradict the verbal message of the theatrical text.

In *And On The Thousandth Night*, spectators can very clearly see the incoherence between what the performers say and their movements and especially their facial expressions. They improvise plenty of stories ranging from political, children's stories, fictional, scientific non-realistic, to horror ones. The normal and conventional expectation of a spectator is that when somebody tells a horrible event or a terrifying story, his/her face reacts to the story (un)consciously to integrate and be unified with what is being said. What one can see is quite the opposite. Laughing while narrating a horrible event, turning their faces towards the ground when telling children stories without any eye contact.

They start their stories by saying "Once Upon a Time" and then little by little they accelerate the racing between them. The way the performers talk does not reinforce the stories they tell. The stories cover a wide range of different subjects and a variety of themes. Some stories are sad or woeful; others are horror, and others are serious and scientific. However, in each type of story, I have not noticed any facial reaction or facial expression of any performer. For example, one of the queen performers was telling a horror story about a queen whose heart was made of ice (2:19) but did not do any facial expressions or shiver her body to reinforce her story. She did not do any movement to show feelings of fear or to frighten the spectators. Another example is that at (7:33) one queen performer was telling a story of six teenagers who decided to play a game of dreadful death. When someone tells a terrifying sad story, the normal and expected facial reaction is fear expressions such as lifting the eyebrows high or opening the eyes wider to draw the attention of the listeners. Quite the opposite, while the performer was telling a death story, she was smiling and trivializing the seriousness of death stories.

The abnormality of the performers' gestures was striking to me. The performers, on purpose, did not follow the normal conventions and went beyond the normal expectations. The unexpected odd and peculiar reaction (especially facial expressions) confused me as a spectator and brought both laughter and deception.

Cosmetic Codes

Cosmetic code is a term used to refer to the use of cosmetics, such as makeup, fragrance, hair products, body care ...etc. Cosmetics are used for many different purposes depending on the occasion and culture. In other words, the "Cosmetic codes" in the field of performance studies refer to the various techniques and devices used in theatrical performances to enhance or alter a person's appearance. Cosmetics can be used to reinforce beauty or to indicate social status. Cosmetics are designed and chosen by the stage director to reinforce the need of the scene and hence the performer wears it accordingly. Cosmetic is mostly applied to the face, hair, and skin to boost the actor's appearance to resemble the character he/she is acting. In *And*

On The Thousandth Night I could not see any cosmetics that can indicate a special status. The eight performers were not wearing any cosmetics which can tell us something about what characters they were impersonating. Neither the kings nor the queens were putting any cosmetics to reinforce the characters or the theatrical text. Simplicity is the heart of *And On The Thousandth Night* performance. The plainness is in everything starting from the simple stage, the clothes, the performance, the dramatic text, as well as makeup. The simplicity (or unavailability) of cosmetics is another example of breaking the principles of conventional theatre.

2. CONCLUSIONS

I consider *And on the Thousandth Night* performance as a clear example of metatheatrical performance as it is beyond the expectations of the spectators. The performers deviate from most of the traditional theatrical conventions. For example, a spectator cannot see who is acting whom, what characters they impersonate, how actors react or relate to each other, the inconsistency between the text and performance, the maladjusted costumes etc. All these deviations represent a clear depiction of metatheatrical aspects.

The performers left me discomfited by their patchwork of non-ending stories. The never stop challenging competition between the performers could keep any spectator in suspense to hear the end or to imagine an end. This contest, improper interruption, and leaving the stories unfinished, engender a huge narrative cavity that captures my mind, and I was participating in the performance in expecting who is the next speaker. The performers succeeded in placing the spectator in the place of king *Shahryar* who was eagerly seeking the end of the stories of queen *Shahrazad*.¹²

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