

PRESS FILE

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# How Goes the World - Histoire(s) du Théâtre V

TIM ETHELLS & NTGENT  
(FROM 16/11/23)



© Hugo Glendinning

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# NTGent

After forty years of theatre making, British artist Tim Etchells reflects on the history of (his) theatre at NTGent's request. In [How Goes the World – Histoire\(s\) du Théâtre V](#), four performers engage in an absurd orgy of entrances and exits, sound cues, and feverish memories

They exit and enter through doors somehow separated from walls, rushing to be part of a play that either hasn't started or else ended decades ago. They slump to the sofa, weeping. They rise from the armchair in anger, then collapse again like amnesiacs. They head downstage to stare from a window that doesn't exist anymore. A piano plays the same tune repeatedly, grinding and warping its' melody.

With Tim Etchells, Belgian city theatre NTGent adds a great name to the list of international artists creating a brand new play for the [Histoire\(s\) du Théâtre](#) series. Since 2018, the series started by current NTGent house artist Milo Rau, gives artists with an impressive track record in the performing arts the chance to reflect on theatre as an art form. Etchells follows in the footsteps of Swiss director Milo Rau, Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula, Spanish performance artist Angélica Liddell and Belgian visual artist Miet Warlop.

Tim Etchells is a British theatre director, visual artist, author and professor. He is the artistic leader of the renowned collective Forced Entertainment celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2024. For *How Goes the World*, Etchells joins forces with British actors John Rowley and Neil Callaghan, and Belgians Aurélie Lannoy and Aurélie Alessandroni.

Four performers come and go in a confusion of roles, costumes, scene changes, and light effects. Butlers, servants, messengers, soldiers, doctors, lovers, murderers, dancers, drunks, scoundrels, liars, and innocents are all here, along with queens and kings in tattered robes, all of them wailing in the fake snow that falls. A storm outside. A war in the distance. The sound of applause.

*Spoken in English, subtitled in Dutch.*

**WHAT IF THE STAGE WAS HAUNTED BY ALL OF THE THINGS  
THAT HAVE HAPPENED ON IT? WHAT IF THE STAGE WAS  
HAUNTED BY THE SOUND CUES OR THE MUSIC  
THAT'S BEEN PLAYED ON IT?"**

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**CREDITS**

with: Aurélie Alessandrini, Aurélie Lannoy, John Rowley, Neil Callaghan /  
direction: Tim Etchells / dramaturgy: Matthias Lilienthal / music composition: Graeme Miller  
/ light design: Dennis Diels / costume design: Jo De Visscher / production: NTGent /  
co-production: Tandem Scène Nationale (Arras-Douai), Wiener Festwochen

**TOUR DATES**

- 2023/11/16: [world premiere](#) - Minardschouwburg NTGent (Ghent, BE), 8pm
- 2023/11/17 & 18: Minardschouwburg NTGent (Ghent, BE), 8pm
- 2024/02/9, 10 & 11: Minardschouwburg NTGent (Ghent, BE), 8pm
- 2024/06/04: Tandem Scène Nationale (Douai/Arras, FR)

*This performance will be touring in season 24-25 mostly. Tour dates will be announced later.*

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# INTERVIEW WITH TIM ETHELLES

**'How Goes the World' is the fifth part in the NTGent series Histoire(s) du Théâtre, in which established artists reflect on theatre as an art form. Am I right to say that's exactly what you have been doing for the past 40 years?**

Tim Etchells: "For sure, theatre itself has always been a topic for me. I've concerned myself with the questions: What is it? How does it work? And why is it so magical and cruel at the same time?"

"The work I've made in the past decades has somehow always reflected on what it means to stand in front of people on a stage, present as a real person but also doing things that are fictional. Let's be honest, it's a very strange profession! For me though, digging into the theatre also involves a reflection on who we are as people and the world we live in. Theatre might be about the mechanics of pretending and play acting - and therefore about itself - but at the same time, it's unavoidably about life as well. As human beings we are performing to ourselves, to other people, even the space that we live in is already a performance. When you make something about theatre - about what's real or not - you automatically talk about the world."

**This performance is not the first one you created in Belgium. How strong is your connection to the Belgian art scene and public?**

"Belgium had always been very important, both for me and for Forced Entertainment [the company Tim Etchells co-founded in 1984 of which he is still the artistic leader]. It was one of the first places we went as a young company. When we had only made a few pieces, we got invited by STUK in Leuven, by Beursschouwburg Brussels, Monty in Antwerp and by the Nieuwpoort theatre in Ghent. Very early on, we felt a strong connection to the Belgian scene. So yes, it feels exactly right and very exciting to be making another piece here."

"I don't especially see myself as a playwright, I see myself as someone who works with other artists to create theatre. The sense that theatre can be made in a rehearsal rooms by equals; that's something that's very present in the Belgian scene as well. And I guess Brits and Flemings share a love for slightly dry and absurd humour as well."

**'How Goes the World' is a performance driven by a range of sound cues to which the performers are constantly reacting, often seemingly without knowing why. Something that's both very comical and unsettling at the same time. How did you come up with this idea?**

"I am fascinated by the idea of a collective memory build up in audience members, actors and venues over many years. What if the stage was haunted by all of the things that have happened on it? What if the stage was haunted by the sound cues, or by the music, that's been played on it? *How Goes the World* is made up of fragments of remembered, or rather almost forgotten, performances. It's a recycling bin in which many things have ended up in, and we're swirling it around. The people in the piece, rather figures than characters, inhabit this world where the sound is constantly arriving and telling them to do something. 'Pick up the phone, play the piano, answer the door...' There's a sense that they become puppets to the machinery of the sound."

**“PRODUCING A DEEPLY PROFOUND PLAY  
WITH MATERIALS THAT SEEM POOR AT FIRST SIGHT,  
IS A LIFELONG PROJECT”**

**What's the meaning behind this choice? What is the play trying to tell us?**

"For me, theatre is a machine. It needs to produce events, tension, something that is happening or going to happen... the way we use the sounds refers to the relentless desire of theatre to create urgency. To change the situation."

"There's something rather cruel about theatre. In this performance, the actors become puppets to the sound score, and as a public we know we won't be happy until they are exhausted and almost can't carry on."

"At the same time, this kind of machinery reflects how we live our lives. Life as well as theatre has its pressures – it is structured by cues, demands and interventions in the space we inhabit. So although *How Goes the World* is about theatre, it's also about the great machinery of capitalism that is constantly prodding and stimulating us to be passionately doing this, that or the other."

**Probably this is also the reason why many of your projects have a minimalist scenography?**

“Starting from small things or not so fancy materials, is saying: ‘we are on the same level as you, dear audience’. Nothing fancy, it’s just what it is. That way, you bring people on and can take them on a journey more easily. It’s a classic manoeuvre, isn’t it, where you say: ‘look, this isn’t very much’, ‘this is nothing really’, and then you try to work it in a magical way into something the audience couldn’t have expected from the initial proposition.”

**An article in the French magazine Les Inrockuptibles described you last summer as “possibly the funniest guy in the UK”. Humour and absurdity have always been a big part of your work. How much humour is there in ‘How Goes The World’ and what purpose does it serve?**

“My work usually engages with humour. It can be ridiculous or even stupid at times, but proudly so. If you can be funny and suck people into the performance, you get an opportunity to confuse them. Suddenly you turn a corner and what was funny becomes tragic or disturbing... I’m obsessed with that uneasy flickering between being funny, and then seconds later making the work awkward, painful or upsetting. It’s a shift that makes you question yourself as a viewer: Hey, how am I responding to this, and why?”

“The humour is never an end in itself, it’s part of a complicated game we are playing with the audience. What we want to do with this piece, as with other projects of mine, is make something where the material can be frothy or light, almost nothing at times. And meanwhile the play can be very complex, emotionally and philosophically entangled. That’s the ambition anyway!”

**In the piece, there’s a role for what you might call background figures: archetypical characters like doctors, mailmen, firefighters... why did you decide to put them in the spotlights?**

“Drama can be about the protagonists and central narrative figures, but it’s interesting to look across the stage at the background figures – the ones in excess of what’s necessary. What is it to be there on stage dressed as a butler in a scene with nothing much to do... or as an ‘extra’ in a crowd scene? It’s funny but there’s a pathos about it too. It’s a tension I love.”

“One of the big dynamics in *How Goes the World* is that we create scenes in which all the performers are extremely busy, but then the machinery stops. All of a sudden the performers are just there, and you can look at them from the top of their head to the tips of their toes. As fellow human beings. Theatre can do this extremely powerfully: bringing us together in a shared space, in which we can hear and see each other breath. There’s a huge strength, a shared vulnerability and fragility when the machine stops.”

**Besides a theatre maker, you are also a writer and a visual artist. Do you sometimes feel stretched in combining these very different art forms?**

“I have been creating visual art pieces with neon and led lights since about 2008, I make installations and works that either go in galleries, or in public space, on the outside of buildings for example. These days, I tend to think that everything I do, is fully connected. It's all part of the same practice. A neon piece of mine might only consist of eight words, but even then you are thinking about the possible interactions it can have with people visiting the gallery or crossing it in the street. The task, also in theatre, is always manipulating material in order to form relations, ask questions or open spaces.”

**“THEATRE CAN BE A CRUEL MACHINERY.  
BUT WHEN THE MACHINE STOPS, A BEAUTIFUL  
VULNERABILITY APPEARS”**

**What's next for you, after this project?**

“With Forced Entertainment, we are making a new production that will open in April 2024 to celebrate our 40th anniversary. It's incredibly rich and extraordinary to have spent all of this time working together. It's an amazing resource, we have this shared language, this shared history, and a very valuable collaborative ethos.”

**As a kid, you felt theatre was both compelling and horrifying. How do you feel about it after almost 40 years of theatre making?**

“I have exactly this relationship of loving and hating theatre. Being very compelled and amazed by it's possibilities but also finding it tyrannous and weird. Fascination really. Still, after 40 years.”

**Has it gotten any easier to make after four decades?**

“In many ways, it's gotten harder. But there's something about throwing yourself into the materials and letting them circulate in your brain that I just love. I was up at 4am this morning, wide awake, madly having ideas of how to push How Goes the World further. It's a rush that doesn't stop until you've opened the show.”

*--- interview by Jonas Mayeur*

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# ON TIM ETCHELLS

[Tim Etchells](#) is a British director born in 1962. He co-founded the company [Forced Entertainment](#) in 1984 and almost 40 years later is still the artistic director of the collective, now world-renowned for its minimalist, experimental and thought-provoking theatre. Under Etchells' reign, Forced Entertainment won the International Ibsen Award in 2016, among other awards.

Etchells' work often explores themes such as language, communication, and the relationship between performer and audience. His performances have been presented on major stages and festivals worldwide. In the summer of 2023, his play *L'addition* was an important part of the Festival d'Avignon. In addition to being a theatre director, Etchells is an author, a professor at Lancaster University and a visual artist. In recent years, he has exhibited solo at Ebensperger-Rhomberg (Berlin), VITRINE (London), Bloomberg SPACE (London), Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver) and Kunstverein Braunschweig.

**"ETCHELLS IS A MASTER OF CREATING COMPELLING  
WORLDS THAT CHALLENGE OUR ASSUMPTIONS  
AND MAKE US QUESTION OUR OWN PERCEPTIONS"**

--- THE TIMES



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# CAST



**Aurélie Allesandroni** is a theatre actress. She studied at the Conservatoire de Liège and graduated in 2014. Since then, she has performed for Frédérique Lecomte, Compagnie Ontroerend Goed and Collectif Kusfi.

As a multidisciplinary artist, she produces sound creations and has been an associate artist with Le 140 since 2020. As an author, she is currently working with Pierre de Lune.

**Neil Callaghan** has been making performances since 2002 with various constellations of people, between dance, theatre and visual art. He works alone, in collaboration numerous others and has previously worked for: Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods, Lea Anderson's Featherstonehaughs, Doris Uhlich, Requardt & Rosenberg, Janina Rajakangas and Vlatka Horvat a.o. He is involved in an on-going collaboration with Simone Kenyon, with whom he has undertaken numerous projects in theatres, galleries and specific sites.



**Aurélie Lanny** is an actress based in London, Brussels and Ghent. For the last 20 years, she has been a member of the multi-award-winning theater company Ontroerend Goed and performed across the globe. Major shows she was part of include *Funeral*, *£¥€\$*, *Fight Night*, *Sirens*, *A Game of You*, *Internal* and *The Smile Off Your Face*. On film she has played lead roles in several short films by (among others) Ann Sirot and Raphaël Balboni, Xavier Seron, Charlotte Dupont, and Christophe Granger and Alex Verhaest.

**John Rowley** is a theatre-maker, performer and visual artist. He has been involved professionally in the creation of experimental and site-specific theatre for nearly 30 years, working with companies such as Brith Gof (under the direction of Mike Pearson), Forced Entertainment, National Theatre Wales and, most recently Heiner Goebbels. He has toured extensively throughout the UK, Europe, America and Russia. John is co-artistic director of the performance company good cop bad cop. In August 2023 he was awarded the Gold Medal for Visual Arts at the National Eisteddfod in Wales.



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