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**Lacking Drama, Making Theatre:  
Why Can't *Robinson Crusoe* Play?**

‘There are no sunsets and no sunrises; there is no solitude and no soul’ (Woolf 21). Such, Virginia Woolf tells us, is the reality of the text that meets the reader of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. This is not material for theatre or film. The story of a man alone for twenty-six years on an island, counting his stock, numbering the rainy days, and reading the Bible would not be considered dramatic by most basic definitions, beginning with Aristotle’s. Yet, in recent theatrical experimentation on the problem of post-colonial theatre in New Zealand I have taken *Robinson Crusoe*, a non-theatrical colonialist text, as a starting place. To make a play of *Robinson Crusoe* one must engage with what is largely absent: action, antagonist, woman, psychology, inner life. Lacking the materials for drama, what kinds of theatre become possible?

Sooner or later one has to acknowledge that making theatre in New Zealand is at least initially an act of colonisation. To create a performance piece using Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as the primary text is to attempt to re-mark what often remains unmarked in New Zealand theatre – that is, the enduring presence of the colonising force and the presence of ourselves as colonisers. The novel is resistant to theatricalisation. It is Calvinist – by definition repressive of bodies. The theatre is embodiment, expressive in ways that are more Catholic than Protestant in its underlying assumption of transformation through action. Further, in the making of this piece of theatre, the actors have been resistant to the theatricalisation of the text. Or rather, what they resist is the role of Crusoe, the coloniser, which is in fact at least partly the truth of their position in New Zealand, including the one woman who is part Maori.

*Robinson Crusoe* is an astonishing novel. It doesn’t seem to have any kind of passion or sexual desire. What drives Robinson is to go to sea, to get away from the land as well as

from the conventional fate prescribed by and represented in his father – a career in law, marriage and family, the middle state. What he gets instead is to be stranded on the land, and once there he explores the land but not the sea. He doesn't seem to have a body, except for his need for food and shelter. But if hunger and protection are the first drives, why doesn't sex follow? In some ways, this makes sense. There is no one else available to be desired. But his only dreams are of servants, and his nightmares are of savages: fear of being dominated, desire to dominate. Any other form of human interaction he has effectively evaded by running away to sea.

*Robinson Crusoe* may be read as a master text of colonisation. After the Bible it is the most published book in the world, and indeed, in New Zealand it was the first book after the Bible to be translated into Maori. By implication the Maori were to understand their role on the small Pacific island as savage Fridays in need of civilising and salvation by their English colonisers. In light of New Zealand's history, the story of Robinson Crusoe could be their own – a tale of the colonisers who “found” and “cultivated” the “desert” island in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and of the colonised men and women whose fertile land it was. In this production, I have explored the myths and ideologies at the heart of post-colonial New Zealand culture. *Crusoe* the play examines the idea of the “other” from the point of view of the coloniser and asks: What remains to us, the remnants of the colonisers and the colonised, in contemporary New Zealand? What defines and drives us now? What faith is left? To examine the dream of escape from the vantage point of the island – that is, New Zealand – is to ask is such an escape possible any longer? Where is one to flee, if one is already on the island?

In revisiting and theatricalising Defoe's novel now, it is clear that one can interrogate the impulses and effects of colonisation as a historical process and as a residue in the post-colonial world. It is also interesting to revisit this text which until recently was perceived and received as an escapist fantasy for children and adults, the dream of running away from the civilised world to an isolated island. In constructing the performance, I have read the book in a literal way, thus attempting to look past, and to insist that an audience see past, assumptions

about the story which all but efface the actual novel. The performance text for *Crusoe* was composed primarily of bits and pieces from the novel and passages of the Bible which are read by Crusoe in the novel, in particular the story of the Prodigal Son, which he recognises as his own. The theatricality of the play is grounded in Artaudian and Grotowskian principles.

The flight from England to the open seas implies a desire not only for another place but more importantly for an undefined “other” which is not necessarily a woman, but which might be. This is the aspect of the story which makes a success of the novel. The finding of an “other” in the form of Friday has become the centerpiece of children’s versions as well as in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century pantomimes and in Derek Walcott’s *Pantomime*, which is set in the Caribbean. In the early pantomimes, Friday was often played by a woman; the exotic savage and the woman conflated into a single representation of “other”. Even in recent novelistic revisitings of the *Robinson* story, the idea of the “other” is represented in sexual terms: In Koetzee’s novel (*Foe*), this is with an actual woman who not only narrates the story but makes love to Robinson. In Michel Tournier’s version (*Friday, or The Other Island*), the island itself becomes the other, the mother earth with whom Robinson fornicates.

Even a casual rereading of the original novel, though, reveals that Robinson spends a great deal of time in isolation before he meets Friday. Of whom does he dream? For whom does he clothe himself and labour? A man alone on an island has no body. In the *Robinson Crusoe* of Daniel Defoe there are no female characters to speak of, and contrary to what might be expected, desire for a woman is never expressed. Lacking a woman, what Robinson Crusoe lacks above all is an “other”. Lacking this “other” Crusoe has no way of comprehending his own body, his “self”. As the theatre is a medium which constructs its meanings through the presence of bodies, expressions of desire and dialogue with an “other”, *Robinson Crusoe* would seem to be an entirely inappropriate text for staging. Yet paradoxically, this lack in the novel creates an opportunity for the theatre. The absence of desire can be interpreted as repressed, and this repressed desire can become material for theatrical representation.

The “other” that Robinson Crusoe constructs in order to survive on the island is God. The way in which he desires God mirrors the development of the society he comes from, a civilisation that also works via the repression of sexual desire and results in neurotic fervour for domination – in effect, a sado-masochistic relationship with God. The desire for God’s love and the fear of hell take the place of sexual desire, driving Crusoe to cultivate his island and his soul. He subjugates the island as he seeks to subjugate himself, with grim determination.

I have given my production the form of a Catholic Mass, which is a physical representation of the consummation of the love between Man and God. This production, however, is a Lapsarian Mass in which the fall is inevitable and grace impossible. That is to say, it blasphemes. I have taken the idea of the Last Supper and Holy Communion as the underlying theatrical structure. I have staged the supper as a family dinner from which Robinson flees at the beginning and to which he returns as the father at the end. At the first last supper, the father recites the story of the Prodigal Son. This “father” becomes Friday, the savage redeemed by Robinson who takes Robinson’s place as the son at the last last supper. The three women, who form part of the original family and who with the two men become five Crusoes stranded “alone” on the island, become the celebrants of a cannibalistic communion. Two women place the third on the table; they strip, wash, pour blood on and then “eat” her – that is, lick the blood from her body. Friday, as the sacrifice to follow, is prone under a cross. Crusoe watches from the audience’s perspective. The microphone in his hand amplifies his heavy breathing which sets the rhythm for the ritual. The woman rises from the table, and all three, bloody, begin to repeat the sacrifice with Friday in the woman’s place. This is interrupted when Friday’s body is exposed. At the sight of Friday’s penis, Robinson shouts “no” and the action shifts to the encounter between the two men.

When Christ says “eat my flesh, drink my blood” this could be seen as a pagan residue of human sacrifice and cannibalism – Crusoe’s own obsessions on the island. In his discussion of *Colonial Desire*, Robert C. Young recalls Homi “Bhabha’s illustration of a Christian missionary trying to teach Indian Hindus about the Christian communion service:

the missionary is quite confounded when he finds that the vegetarian Hindus react with horror to the idea of eating Christ's body and drinking his blood. Suddenly it is the white English culture that betrays itself, and the English missionary who is turned into a cannibalistic vampire." To view the central ritual of Christian faith in this light is to rediscover one's own culture as strange, rooted in practices that are no less pagan for being centred in the West.

I have refused to abdicate the position of the coloniser in the staging of this story, and I have refused to allow my company to do so. As a result, the vision of savagery remains Crusoe's. With Crusoe as the man who looks, what is seen – the "other" – is necessarily feminised – both those who perform the cannibalistic ritual and the one who is threatened by it. In this production the women are the literal embodiment both of the savage and of God, both what Crusoe fears and what he desires, at the point of convergence between cannibalism and communion. Friday is the missing link, sexually ambiguous until naked; once he is recognisable as a "man" by Crusoe (and the audience) the action becomes hermetic, exclusive to the two men as Robinson remakes Friday in his own image. The women stand apart, unassimilated by the civilising force yet effecting the completion of the cycle by re-setting the table for the final Last Supper. Re-cloaked in their black ceremonial robes, the blood still visible on their faces and hands, they sit down to supper with the two men.

In my production the women embody Crusoe's repressed desire. In the cannibalistic ritual the women embody the return of the repressed, a sexual consummation from which Friday flees into Robinson's arms. The freedom of the women in the ritual represents what men fear most, bodily sexual expression between women from which they are excluded and which can only be controlled by men as long as it remains imaginary. Like Mary, the women are the vehicle for salvation without being touched by man. Like Christ women bleed and do not die. When the sacrificed woman rises and the ritual turns to Friday, the terror of the sacred and the terror of the feminine converge. The Pater Noster which is sung in Latin and in English at the beginning of the play, is sung in Maori by the women at the end. In this way, it might represent the domestication of the woman and the savage; but it is equally possible to read it as a vital remnant of the sacred and the carnivalesque which has been expressed during

the ritual and not fully repressed in the end. Are the women, in the end, like the Maori, those who might keep Christian faith alive or is the faith irrevocably transformed through their mediation? This question is not resolved in the production, but rather left open to the audience.

The Lapsarian Mass of *Crusoe* began with a procession – a pilgrimage or crusade in which the five celebrants lifted their crosses to the heavens. The foot was suspended with the breath until a return to earth was unavoidable. The actors strained for faith, performed the required gestures. But like the faltering steps of the faithful, the Lapsarian Mass remained Lapsarian. The ceremony never became ritual (in Victor Turner's terms). The blood was fake. The actors never came to speak in tongues. If theatre, like Catholic communion, is to effect transformation via bodily and spiritual action, then this production must have been a failure.

Why a failure? By the dress rehearsal the actors were in full revolt. They insisted that the possibility of proceeding was to be contingent upon the response of their invited audience, which they clearly hoped would be so critical of the work as to stop it entirely. But this invited audience was actually quite positive, engaging in a lively discussion about the project. At the New Zealand theatre festival in which *Crusoe* was performed last week, audiences were divided. The ambivalence of the audience was expected, indeed desired. The reaction of the actors was not.

The problem was the blood. It was yucky. It was ugly. It profaned what for the women had been until that time a sacred and loving act, an expression of profound woman-ness. What was performed instead was obscene, blasphemy – not the critical sacrilege of the play as a whole, but something more offensive. In this scene three taboos were conflated and violated: religious, feminist, and post-colonialist. The act of communion was profaned, but so were the current standards for representing women and indigenous peoples in performance. The conflation of the woman with the savage in this inverted religious ritual, the

contamination of the whole with blood, was simply unacceptable to the actors and to many of the audience. For them it replicated rather than exposed and critiqued the colonialist offence.

This crisis calls into question more than my politics and my integrity as a theatre artist. For me, the outcry reveals the contradictions in contemporary cultural and political thought. It's acceptable to attack conservative religious beliefs, to perform blasphemy in the traditional sense. It's even sexy. In theory – on paper – it is acceptable to critique the ways in which ideas of the woman and the savage are repressed and distorted by the dominant – male, heterosexist – culture. In performance, however, this is more problematic. The representation of what is repressed leads to its return. That is, the violation of prohibitions against representing women as savages – or savages as women – from the coloniser's perspective – as voracious sexualised cannibals – provokes a neo-puritanical response: “This just isn't done, and if it's to be done we can fix it so that it will no longer offend.”

This reaction could mean, then, that my production was not a failure at all but a success, in my own terms at least. The conflation of the three blasphemies disturbs spectators in such a way that they might come to recognise the *Crusoe* in themselves. If they fail to see *Crusoe* watching, or no longer hear his heavily amplified breathing as it punctuates the women's performance, it must be their own breathing that they hear. They suspend their critical awareness and watch as *Crusoe* does, fascinated and afraid of what they might see. Ideally, this might provoke them to reflect upon their own ways of watching, desiring, and being in the post-colonial world.

The most interesting response to the performance came after I presented a preliminary version of this paper at Waikato University last week. Rai Rakatua, the Kaumatua – a Maori elder responsible for ensuring the spiritual safety of another Free Theatre production which was being performed at the same festival – had seen *Crusoe* and sat through the papers and discussion with his head bowed, cane in hand to one side, silent. When everyone else appeared to have had their say, he stood and, beginning formally in Maori, greeted us. He turned to me and thanked me for *Crusoe*. He paused as if searching for words, haltingly, with tears in his eyes for a very long time. He spoke the word “forgiveness”, shook his head and

bowed it again several times. He said: “We are all Prodigal Sons. We all need forgiveness.” Addressing the primary criticism of *Crusoe* – that the performance of the women’s rite is a male fantasy, as such (literally) gratuitous and (by definition) sexist – he spoke of the truth of a man alone on an island: “I have no problem with the nudity. For so long alone, of course a man would have dreams, wet dreams.” Then he returned to forgiveness. “Forgiveness. Forgiveness.” He referred to his cane as a taiaha, emblematic of the war between the Maori and the Pakeha (Europeans): “We’ve now put down our guns, and if we take them up again you can be sure ours will be bigger.” Facing me, he put his walking stick on the floor in a line between us. He then raised his very old Bible, said “I choose this” and placed it on the floor next to the stick. He paused and then offered the Lord’s Prayer. He closed his performance with the ritual Maori words. Afterward he hongid with me – holding my hand, pressing his nose to mine – and we both thanked each other many times.

How am I to understand this man’s response both to the performance and to my explanation of its ideas? Was he the oppressed speaking back to the oppressor who is me? Was he Friday, the noble savage who preserves the faith transmitted and then abandoned by the coloniser? Was he the father, forgiving me for my blasphemy? Was he the Kaumatua, re-sanctifying the people and land which had been violated in the performance? Was he one older man speaking to another frankly about sexual desire?

I don’t know the answers to these questions, and I cannot answer for him in his absence. I must, however, reconsider the possibility – or impossibility – of making radical theatre in post-colonial New Zealand, where theatre which takes embodiment literally can be viewed as exploitative and where the urgencies of political correctness prescribe performances which provide ready-made answers in the form of a utopian vision of what ought to be rather than what is. Is a radical critique of the existing order – whether conservative or liberal – possible in the theatre any longer?