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Getting a swamp-on: translating and adapting Werner Fritsch's *Jenseits* to Christchurch, New Zealand

[Clip – opening to *Hereafter*]

Hereafter is a translation of German playwright Werner Fritsch's text *Jenseits* (1999). Translated, adapted and directed by Free Theatre Christchurch's Peter Falkenberg, *Hereafter* is based around the recollections of a man whose place is indeterminate: he appears at first on a bed that may be a massage table or a morgue table, above him a framed picture of a mostly naked woman hangs – she reclines, dressed only in stockings. Before he begins to speak, a figure dressed in a Frankenstein mask draws deep, resonate sounds from a double bass, joined by another figure that wears a carnival mask of Hitler. She responds to the double bass with a sonorous lament-like incantation that fuses into a chant, phrases of Maori and then German opening a passage into another world.

This gives way to the liminal male figure between the two, who proceeds to recount fragments of his life to the audience, his exact situation unclear: he may be dead, he may be alive, he is maybe somewhere in-between. But as the fragments are recounted, the male protagonist, Wolf 'Sexmachine' Bold, reflects a life inextricably linked to his social circumstance, and images that dominate our pictures of sex and violence come to the fore. At the same time, the still image of the women in the frame (a painting by Egon Schiele) morphs into a series of moving pictures juxtaposed: porn images overlap with maternity videos;

documentation of pig slaughter crosses with idyllic family togetherness; instructional images of how to murder a prostitute in *Grand Theft Auto* are combined with images of artist Jackson Pollock at work.

The audience learns that Wolf was once an aspiring artist, who became a butcher, and then a member of the underworld, a pimp, a hustler, an untouchable – a series of dark images appear through which shine cracks of light as he remembers the loves of his life: his wife, the murdered Cora and their child Felix. Throughout, the figure in the Hitler mask repeatedly lifts a pistol to Wolf's head – the mystery of who is behind the mask, the reasons for threatening Wolf and the actual place, state and context of the situation remain deliberately ambiguous and unresolved.

As I shall discuss in this paper, although this is a creation that emerged in a specific socio-historical context, the reasons for choosing to translate and adapt this performance to Christchurch New Zealand in 2012 relate to a resonance with this particular place and time. I want to discuss how through the translation process with the director and actors, the performance is already being developed, driving from an initial intuition that in this text lies a performance that questions a male identity that is at the heart of the New Zealand's sense of self and that in Christchurch, in particular, is performed in ways especially brutal and violent. By exploring the creative process of translation in this way, which leads to a conversation with designer, filmmaker (and the original writer) in the making of the performance, I aim to articulate an idea of theatre that is relevant and efficacious, questing for a connection with its community.

I am perhaps particularly keen to defend this idea of theatre as I live in a city slowly dusting itself off from a major natural disaster and questioning the

relevance of art. When people are without houses and still struggling to come to terms with loss on an enormous scale – a loss of lives, of livelihoods, of homes, and a way of life – isn't it insensitive given all this to be making art? This question was raised when we chose to première *Hereafter* on 22 February 2012, the year-on anniversary of the 2011 February earthquake that killed 185 people in Christchurch and that subsequently led (driven by man-made economics) to the destruction of 80% of the inner city and the red-zoning of numerous neighbourhoods, particularly in the east of the city. Those few that questioned our choice of opening – one of them a manager of the city's major arts festival – suggested that this was no time for frivolous entertainment. Not only was it immoral she suggested, we would probably not get many people along – that is, the Box Office would suffer.

Première (to a full house) on the anniversary was not deliberate – it was decided by schedules, availability of space, etc. – but when we realized the coincidence, we decided to continue. The desire to present this production, which was postponed following the February 2011 earthquake because we lost our theatre in the Christchurch Arts Centre, was driven by the original impetus for choosing to stage our translation of Fritsch's text – that it resonated with a Christchurch identity where male to female violence reflected a wider socio-historical and economic culture that marginalizes and excludes. We felt that in the context of Christchurch, a city shaken to its core, physically and socially, theatre such as this has a role to play in engaging with this time of questioning of the city's identity.

Sociologist Greg Newbold, commenting on a perception of Christchurch as the most violent city in New Zealand, says that even though the statistics don't

support such a status, there is a “special twist” to murders in the city that distinguish it from other New Zealand cities – especially in relation to male to female violence. He suggests that this reflects something very deep within the community psyche – a socio-historical repression that does not simply reflect bad weather or some strange atmospheric anomaly (although our famous summer nor-westers are scientifically proven to drive you mad) but rather this behavior reflects the well established but unacknowledged class system that serves as the foundations to the city. That lying beneath the euphemistic branding of Christchurch as the ‘Garden City’ – an identity driven by the image of the genteel English settler identity – is a murky swamp of libidinal malice.

Indeed Christchurch was built upon a swamp, something that we became all too aware of during the earthquakes as large volumes of liquefaction spewed forth from the earth, drowning neighbourhoods, swallowing cars and houses into the ground. That this happened especially in the east of the city, where the poorer in the community live in dodgy subdivisions built by the affluent in the west who survived relatively unscathed, speaks to the significant social divide in the city that has been over a century in the making. It was with this in mind that we decided *Hereafter*, in post-earthquake Christchurch, might engage with this murky underbelly, not to titillate in the way the Australian/New Zealand TV *Underbelly* series does – but to raise a wider question about how this identity is inextricably linked to socio-historical context of this city. We staged the work in Woolston, a working-class neighbourhood on the eastern side of the city, in a former tannery, a shell of a building that is currently being transformed into an arts-based emporium. It seemed an apt place to question the place of art in this society at this time.

I want to be clear here that we did not set out to present a piece of ‘Social Realism’ attempting to present a penetrating naturalistic portrayal of an underworld figure. This was not why we decided to translate and adapt Fritsch’s text, which was created in a style that he refers to as ‘tape-realism’, a kind of recording of common speech that he learnt from his mentor, playwright, novelist, painter, filmmaker and actor Herbert Achternbusch. Tape-realism reflects a historical tendency to return to folk traditions where the language of the commons becomes the centre of art-making in search of a sense of authenticity beyond generic formulas. But unlike the verbatim style of theatre that has become popular in recent years, where the aim, generally speaking, is to present an objective account that aims to distance the author’s subjectivity, the tape-realism in the German sense reflects a performative poetic style where writer and subject become inextricably intertwined.

Jenseits is based on Fritsch’s recordings of life and people within an apartment block that he lived in, where pimps, prostitutes and drug-dealers lived and worked. Fritsch recorded the ways of speaking in the apartment block and from this crafted a text that reflects his own ruminations provoked by the material; in other words he comes to speak through these voices – not to moralize or explain the subject but in a sense to question his own existence in such a way that what becomes apparent is not the psychology of the subject nor a simplistic indictment of ‘social inequality’ but rather a provocative challenge to the audience to recognize our place within this story – to recognize that the images that emerge from the murky swamp of his imagining are ingrained within our cultural identity. In this way, he calls for a particular kind of empathy that is

unusual and challenging in that it invites recognition of a wider social context through images that are both seductive and repulsive.

It was this performativity within the language and imagery of the text that I found exciting, quite unlike anything I had read from New Zealand playwrights. I can make comparisons with the solo performance *Michael James Manaia*, which through the recollections of the title character to the audience, a sense of a bicultural New Zealand identity is portrayed as something diseased and deformed. In adapting the Maori ritual tradition of *whaikorero* into a text, playwright John Broughton and actor Jim Moriarty created a striking challenge to the myths of our national identity, working with director Colin McColl and designer Tony Rabbit to position the audience to re-examine our recent past. But perhaps the ending to the performance, where Moriarty-as-Manaia details how he killed his son, deformed by the agent orange that poisoned him during service in Vietnam, and then proceeds to break character and talk to the audience, limits the effectiveness of the original challenge. It turned the experience into a form of therapy – which Moriarty is well known for with his performance company Te Rakau – and intervenes in the potential political readings that the performance has provoked. It was this sense of resolution that we wanted to avoid in the process of creating *Hereafter*, a desire to unsettle the audience in a way that raised questions rather than offering answers.

This process began during translation of Fritsch's text. Director Peter Falkenberg worked to reconsider the text to engage with our time and place with Emma Johnston (the person behind the Hitler mask) and myself. We kept the original names of some figures (eg Klostermeyer) to maintain a sense of otherness but made changes to reflect local vernacular and inserted a number of

references to the Christchurch location. For example, when Wolf reminisces about his mother (a prostitute) the locale is in Lyttelton, a port village on the margins of the city well known for its Russian seamen and sex trade, mixed with a bohemian arts culture that is unique to the city. These choices were made to allow for a sense of strangeness, of otherness that was also somehow familiar, close at hand.

We also maintained a number of allusions to the unresolved past of the Nazi regime that pervade Fritsch's text. Although we excluded a number of passages of text that referred specifically to the German locales and history, we did not want to lose the sense of a culture repression leading to social violence and destruction as this translated well to the crypto-fascism of a Puritan Kiwi culture. In particular, the images that Wolf conjures in relation to his experience with women, speak to a male ethos that is familiar to Christchurch, not just in the working class neighbourhoods of the east, but in the gyms, bars and cafes of the middle class west.

In *Male Fantasies* (1987), Klaus Theweleit examines the fascist consciousness evident in the violence-laced literature of the Weimar-era Freikorps, the precedents to Hitler's brown shirts and black shirts. Theweleit, driven by a question as to how this kind of culture reflected a wider socio-historical development, suggests that in the narratives these men construct, particularly around women, it is possible to discern a consciousness that arose due to a series of specific cultural factors before¹ and after the Great War. But far from being a staid study of a past left behind, Theweleit's analysis suggests that

¹ A cultural milieu brilliantly captured in Michael Haneke's recent film *White Ribbon* (2009).

such consciousness is discernible in contemporary images and socio-political reality.

Discussing this during the translation process, it served as the basis to a series of choices in the development of the performance, including the decision to offset the perspective of the male monologue with the female actor singing from beneath the Hitler mask and the juxtaposition of film images. These choices were not suggested in the original Fritsch text, but were employed to counter the inarticulate ramblings of the male voice with reflections and contrasts that raised questions about a male perspective that is familiar within narratives relating to domestic violence in Christchurch.

Again, what I don't want to suggest is that we were somehow targeting and exploiting the male figure that features in domestic violence campaigns; we wanted to lay bare an ethos that underlies the provincial Christchurch identity, which manifests in different ways depending on where you grew up. This aim can be seen in the choices that led to the development of the Wolf persona and the revelations that came through the process. Through translating the text, I continued to have memories of a man I had become friends with at a freezing works that I worked at just after leaving secondary school – a job I took up to raise money for acting school in Australia. I remembered a tall, muscular man in his late 20s, early 30s, a golden gloves boxer, whose large frame seemed out of keeping with a high-sing voice that was ever-present in the form of endless lewd jokes and sometimes overwhelmingly graphic tales, punctuated with a piercing cackle.

What I remembered most of all, was that his endless stories, often interlaced with strange, unexpected insights (and sometimes surprising

tenderness), suggested an attempt to confide and befriend, and that when this was ignored, or rebuked, or worse, made fun of, it could result in sudden and spectacular violence. I remember in a local pub one night, a group of us pulling him off a man he had beaten to the ground with a bar stool – the beaten man had told my friend to “shut-up” as he was sick of hearing his voice. My own sense of this was that in the company of other men, the endless stories, jokes and anecdotes were a way of trying to make some sort of contact – his hurt was immense when he learnt that he was not included in a gathering such as after-work drinks, or if he was told to butt out of a conversation. In other words, he was strangely vulnerable for all the bravado. Or perhaps it was precisely because he felt vulnerable that he acted up with his deliberately grotesque stories for the boys.

I say this because I related to this sense of vulnerability and in a way I think this is what made us friends despite our quite different backgrounds. Perhaps what we shared in common was this attempt to break into the male cult – albeit in quite different ways – which looks to exclude and demands that any chance of inclusion means a macho-masculinity that distances itself from all things female or anything considered feminine. I had experienced this very same thing at the middle class, all-male private school I attended immediately before getting a job at the freezing works. It was here that I first heard the term *swamp-on* – a term we added to our translation –slang that refers to female sexual excitement, and references the idea of the male *hard-on*. It was usually said in a way that suggested knowledge of the female body (and supposedly therefore a marker of experience and even skill) and it was said with a degree of disdain –

the notion of a swamp being somehow repulsive, reflecting an abject and fearful female body. One learned to use the term with aggression and penetration.

Theweleit suggests that the male culture of the Freikorps was driven by this kind of ethos, a hatred – or dread – of women and anything considered feminine; a fear that it would consume and annihilate maleness: “women’s bodies are the holes, swamps, pits of muck that can engulf” (Barbara Ehrenreich). This ideology also extended to the intellectual or the artistic, both considered anathema to the strict dichotomies of fascist thought because they introduced ambiguity and uncertainty; rather the desire was for a rigid, upright order, of smooth surfaces (architecture), contained and explained. In both the boarding school and freezing works, I experienced this mentality as someone who was a university student involved in theatre. I learned to make fun of myself, either playing up the stereotypes the men expected in an attempt to distance myself from them, or by acknowledging what might be truthful in what was being said about art and life.

For *Hereafter* we retained a passage from Fritsch’s monologue which for me became central to the whole performance – a mixture of social prejudice and personal insight that speaks to a much wider notion relating to ideas around art and reality:

clip 2: “in reality everything is fakes, fucks and bucks”

Here Fritsch is perhaps the most naked in his own questions around art as a reflection of society, and of this figure, who through his machismo and aggression reveals something that rings true: a notion of art as meaningless distraction or entertainment, a commodity that is part of the same exploitative consumer unreality of “fakes, fucks and bucks” – but via the imagery, some sense

of truth is touched upon – one wonders what might have happened had Wolf become a painter, his “clear” insight allowing him to see the “Devil in everybody”?

In these moments of clarity, like the moments of fleeting tenderness as Wolf talks about the loves of his life, perhaps a special kind of empathy is provoked. He is all too familiar in New Zealand, this male figure with language so loaded with self-hatred and anger, but what Wolf conveys is not simply the inarticulate ramblings of a psychopath but the expression of a dysfunctional social order that operates as a machine and turns us into machines. This self-described “Sexmachine” conveys a misunderstanding of his own class exploitation – a working-man made machine, alienated from his own feelings.

Might Wolf “Sexmachine” Bold in *Hereafter* be a kind of prophet, laying bare an image of the world that is predicated on those crypto-fascist power structures at the core of our society that shape and define? To consider a fascist ethos in relation to Christchurch – to suggest that the Hitler mask might represent the brutality of this city – is of course provocative. But the typical kiwi notion of an egalitarian Eden continues to be driven by strong social control that leads – like earthquakes – to striking outbreaks of violence. And it is this ethos that theatre might help expose and challenge. The machine that does not function can be used to point out that the functionality of the human machine itself is in question.