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**Theatre after an earthquake:
what's it worth?**

Thank you to Michael Smalley and Rebecca Scollen for their generous invitation to speak here at Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies.¹ The topic of this conference is 'resilience'. So I ask myself why this topic is relevant to us. What seems to be expected from a topic like this is good news: some reassurance that everything is all right, that we are all right, that things may be hard, but we are surviving. This seems to be a topic that is relevant for a theatre conference because it seems that both theatre and theatre and performance studies are somehow under attack, and it is not as a matter of course that we thrive. This attack comes from either our institutions, or from the world around us. It comes from communities that we feel are somehow not appreciating the benefit of having our services – an often Philistine world in which we have to defend ourselves for what we are doing. In fact, this defensiveness seems also to come from a possible guilty conscience, a feeling that we are actually having fun (always suspect in a Protestant work ethic). We are doing things that we enjoy, but which are not necessarily necessary – which may be good to have, but perhaps only in good times. In our chosen profession, we need resilience in order to do work that we feel is not seen as morally and economically viable in comparison to the work of our fellow academics and our fellow citizens.

When our lives are put to the test in crises and catastrophes, are we still worth having? Or can we even say that in these times we are especially necessary and therefore they become a *raison d'être* for our existence as theatre artists and academics? I assume a reason I was

¹ Portions of this talk were first presented in 'Quake Space as Avant-Garde Time' (PSi18 Stanford University 2013) and in '*Canterbury Tales: Between Bakhtin and Benjamin*' (ADSA 2014 Victoria University of Wellington), which was published as 'After the Rupture: Restoration or revolution?' by Thea Brejzek and Peter Falkenberg, in *Performance Research* 19.6 (2014) 22-29. Thanks also to Sharon Mazer for her invaluable assistance.

invited to give this talk is that I've been working in the theatre after a catastrophe in Christchurch. My talk here is called 'Theatre after an earthquake: what's it worth?' I further assume that as this conference takes place in Toowoomba, you chose the topic of resilience also because of the flood that took place the same year as the earthquakes in Christchurch.

I asked myself if there was any kind of theatrical reaction to the flood in Toowoomba, and after a superficial look, I found two examples. There was, and I quote, 'A new Australian opera [called *Floods*] inspired by the resilience and courage of Queenslanders during the 2011 floods'.² The director of the show states: 'We are particularly targeting the idea of resilience that we exhibit in the face of those catastrophes, be it natural or physiological'.³ He adds: 'a regional tour to flood affected communities was a driving force for getting the opera off the ground' in Brisbane.⁴ In this view, theatre gets its relevance by consoling and uplifting distressed communities. But the director then extrapolates from this the relevance for all of us, by saying that the 'idea is universal' and that as a director he 'established an every-person character, who is a woman'.⁵ This points to the general understanding of European theatre that by staging catastrophe in drama one also creates a cathartic healing process for the catastrophe outside the theatre walls, and that theatre uplifts us in so doing. Theatre is thus both a kind of psychological medicine and a kind of quasi-religious vehicle for redemption.

The other example of a theatrical performance inspired by the floods was performed in Melbourne's LaMama Theatre called *Nothing Extraordinary Ever Happens in Toowoomba Ever*. Here the author and solo performer tells 'a beautiful story about a little boy growing up in Toowoomba who finds his "inner extraordinary"'.⁶ The author adds:

² Jessica Hinchliffe, 'Queensland's flood devastation captured in travelling opera', *ABC News Brisbane* (16 September 2014). www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-15/floods-queensland-devastation-captured-in-opera/5743332.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Sally Bennett, 'Theatrical message is so relevant to Toowoomba flood victims', *Herald Sun* (13 January 2011) www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/theatrical-message-is-so-relevant/stoary-eyfrfhqf-1225986642925.

The message is that we all have something extraordinary in us. [. . .] The people in Toowoomba are incredibly resilient. It's the drought that's really tested them. This is completely different, the extreme opposite, but they'll do the same for this. It's the kind of town that comes together. It's very community minded and spirited.⁷

Here again, we have a mixture of the universal and the local. The catastrophe is used to find out how extraordinary we all are, with the additional benefit of raising the profile of a small town and a people that might otherwise just be ordinary.

We had a similar experience in Christchurch, also a rather ordinary town. When the first not so devastating earthquake struck, my theatre group was touring a production in Wellington. One of the Free Theatre actors, when she heard of the earthquake, complained: 'Nothing ever happens in Christchurch, and when it does I'm not there'. The talk about the resilience and community-mindedness of Christchurch citizens after the earthquakes was much the same as after the floods. For example, in 2013, the Court Theatre presented *Groundswell: Stories from the Quake* – a play where actors sitting in chairs facing the audience described experiences of the earthquake, created from the words of people who were there at the time. The theatre called it 'a tribute to the spirit of those who lived through that moment' and promised a 'direct and honest performance [that] is in turn funny and heart wrenching'.⁸ So it is the catastrophe that brings the more latent community spirit to life, and the theatre tries then to identify with this spirit and sees itself reinforced in so doing.

I want to talk here today about two productions that I created in direct response to the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. Both took classical literary texts as starting points: Heinrich von Kleist's 'The Earthquake in Chile' [1807] and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* [1478].

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Elizabeth O'Connor and 12.51, *Groundswell: Stories from the Quake*. Court Theatre 9-23 March 2013. <https://courttheatre.org.nz/show/groundswell/>

Amongst other reasons this was a kind of distancing protection device, as the memories of the earthquakes were still so raw; the first play we staged in the same year the major earthquakes happened and, in fact they have not even stopped to this day.

Let's start with some theory, an academic distancing device: In the first chapter of *Fatal Strategies*, Jean Baudrillard introduces the idea of the earthquake as the most apt form of catastrophe in the postmodern era. He writes:

Time is no longer evident in its normal passing, since it has been distended, enlarged to the floating dimension of reality. [. . .] Nor is space any longer illuminated by movement. [. . .] This kind of play of systems around a point of inertia is illustrated by the catastrophic form congenial to the era of simulation: the seismic form, where the ground is missing, that of fault and failure, dehiscence and fractal objects, where immense plates, entire layers slide one under the other and produce intense surface tremors.⁹

He adds: 'We dream of capturing that energy, too. But that is pure madness'.¹⁰ And then he compares 'that symbolic energy of rupture' with terrorism.¹¹

Looking through the eyes of Baudrillard, we in Christchurch could regard ourselves as 'lucky'. The earthquakes have provoked the sort of rupture essential to breaking free – at least momentarily – from the circularity and unreality of simulation. Again, I turn to Baudrillard, this time in his response to 9/11, in which he writes:

The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of the spectacle upon us. [. . .] This is *our* theatre of cruelty, the only one we have left – extraordinary in that it unites the most extreme degree of the spectacular and the highest level of challenge.¹²

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, translated by Phil Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (1983; Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008) 39.

¹⁰ Ibid 40.

¹¹ Ibid 41.

¹² Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism: And Other Essays*, translated by Chris Turner (2002; Brooklyn & London: Verso 2012) 23. Italics in original.

Invoking Artaud, Baudrillard compares the actions of the artist as an aesthetic, social and political revolutionary with those of the terrorist.

Henri Lefebvre made a similar comparison, in *The Production of Space*, writing: ‘The space developed by avant-garde artists, by those artists who registered the collapse of the old points of reference, introduced itself into this fabric or tissue as a *legitimizing ideology*, an ideology that justifies and motivates’.¹³ After an earthquake, these old points of reference don’t appear to collapse just for the avant-garde artist, but for the whole community. When a city falls – as in Christchurch following the earthquakes – it is not only the buildings that collapse, but also (at least temporarily) the social and ideological structures these buildings formerly upheld. A disaster may be seen to disrupt, or rather open up and reveal the dialectics of history. People can find themselves in a kind of prelapsarian state, where they feel free from the confines prescribed by society: the boxes and routes, the hierarchies of church and state, the Darwinian demands of capitalism, where – having survived the quakes – the fight for survival is momentarily suspended. Avant-garde theatre is equally ephemeral, fleeting, trying to create a different time from daily reality. Like a disaster, it tries to create a space where the paradoxes of late capitalism may be overcome temporarily by the experience of a communal/communist levelling of differences or a synthesis of contradictions.

Earthquakes are terrifying, but they are not acts of terror per se. Nonetheless, as with acts of terror, earthquakes demand the production of meaning. The earthquake in Lisbon on All Saint’s Day in 1755 dramatically challenged the foundational certainties of European thought and philosophy, and prompted Voltaire’s famous refrain about this (not) being ‘the best of all possible worlds’ (*Candide*). When Kleist wrote his short story ‘The Earthquake in Chile’ in 1807, his first point of reference, almost certainly, would have been the earthquake in Lisbon. Kleist’s story is set in Santiago in 1647. The lead character, a tutor, is preparing to

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991) 308, italics in original.

hang himself in prison, where he has been sent for impregnating the daughter of a nobleman, just as she is being led through the streets towards the site of her execution. At this exact moment, an earthquake strikes, and both are saved.

The earthquake seems to be divine intervention, even as it disrupts the dominant moral and social order, as defined by the hierarchy of the Church. People from all walks of life, including the lovers with their child, gather together outside the city walls, looking after each other, sharing food and stories, mourning the dead and marvelling at their survival, as if

in the midst of this horrifying time in which all earthly possessions of men were perishing and all nature was in danger of being engulfed, the human spirit itself seemed to unfold like the fairest of flowers [. . . and] as if the general disaster had united all its survivors into a single family.¹⁴

To the lovers, it appears that the ‘old order of things’ has undergone a complete ‘upheaval’.¹⁵

In Christchurch, too, the feeling of community struck us with unexpected force. The warmth and support of neighbours and strangers was an experience that broke through all the formalities, passivities and alienations – the norms that we took for granted and regarded as natural. The possibility of a different way of living, a sense of commonality and communality that defied both Christchurch’s unacknowledged class system as well as the depersonalisation of globalised capitalism became, for moments at least, experiential reality rather than abstract utopian thought.

But Kleist’s story doesn’t stop here. The whole community gathers at the cathedral at the end of the story to thank God for their salvation from the earthquake. The preacher in his sermon takes up the subject of the city’s depravity – in particular the outrage perpetrated by the two lovers – as the cause of the earthquake, stirring up a mob that kills the lovers and

¹⁴ Heinrich von Kleist, ‘The Earthquake in Chile’, *The Marquise of O – and other stories*, translated by David Luke and Nigel Reeves (London: Penguin, 1978) 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid*

their child. The sacrificial blood is shed. The old order is restored. (Except that that mob kills the wrong child.) Life goes on as before.

The Free Theatre production of *The Earthquake in Chile* was staged in October 2011, when February's earthquake experience was still raw for both performers and audiences. We wanted to recreate the moment of possibility after the earthquake, when life and history seemed to stand still. Henri Lefebvre talks of the potential of the artistic sphere to create 'a space of counter-culture, or a counter-space in the sense of an initially utopian alternative to actually existing "real" space'.¹⁶ We staged *The Earthquake in Chile* at St Mary's Church in Addington. St Mary's was one of the few churches to come through the earthquakes unscathed, because it was a wooden colonial structure, not made of stone as so many others in Christchurch. It was built in 1867, and sits on Church Square close to the city centre. Its garden includes a bell tower and is often used for community events, fairs and weddings.¹⁷

Churches not only provide space for community gatherings. In effect, they stand in for the idea of community, especially in Christchurch. In Lefebvre's words, the Church offered 'each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage. It constituted a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one'.¹⁸ Christchurch, as a city, of course, has 'church' in its name, and the Cathedral at its centre remains, more than five years on, at the heart of a controversy over whether it should be restored, rebuilt or replaced.

St Mary's in Addington is a smaller, more intimate version of such a community centre, and we worked closely with the congregation to involve them as a communal entity in our production. In the conversation with the St Mary's community, we immediately encountered the old proprieties and fears of an unknown theatrical experience. The church's 'element of repression' (in Lefebvre's words) was confronted also with its 'element of

¹⁶ Lefebvre 349.

¹⁷ Thanks Naomi Campion.

¹⁸ Lefebvre 220.

exaltation',¹⁹ which we incorporated into the performance. The audience was first accepted into the church as a congregation. They were surrounded by sacred music, sung by the actors and accompanied on the church's organ. The service was familiar but also quite strange – echoing Kleist's original setting. It began with a procession and featured performers in red satin robes and pointed hoods that covered their faces, leaving only room for eyes. A preacher, quoting Revelations, denounced the city as the 'whore of Babylon'. The young woman was brought forward with her baby to be judged. The tutor rose above the last pew to hang himself. And then the earthquake: lights bounced and went out, a large rumble of sound reverberated as the company shook the pews. In the silence that followed, the congregation was asked to evacuate in an orderly, calm fashion.

[Show video of opening sequence.]

(A number of people told me they thought it was a real earthquake.)

Outside the church was something different. Richard Gough, Artistic Director of the Centre for Performance Research, had bravely come to post-earthquake Christchurch as a Canterbury Fellow. I asked him to stage a series of stations in which the participants would come together in different configurations to share stories and food (cooked by our Technical Director, the celebrity chef, Richard Till). Upon exiting the church, the 'congregation' walked into a 'Night Market' run by Free Theatre actors with members of the wider community (about forty performers in all) – a rough collation of stalls, tents and tables, lit by lanterns and candles, with performers offering them bottled water, soup and coffee, scarves and shelter, forms to post for missing cats, a new vision of the city composed of sugar lumps,

¹⁹ Ibid

a mad geologist explaining how earthquakes work, an itinerant preacher proclaiming the end of the world and so on.

[Show video of night market.]

One actor roamed the site telling the Kleist story. The Different Light Theatre Group – a company of disabled actors led by Tony McCaffrey – arrived pushing the shell of an old van and, wearing half-sized road cones for hats, loudly begged San Precarious for salvation.

The next station was more orderly: a circle of eight white circular tents, each fitting twelve spectators – the sold-out performances were restricted to 96 people – around a circular table, inside of which stood one or two actors offering their own responses to the earthquakes in highly personalised, idiosyncratic, interactive performances that included small food items containing some surprises. So, for example: an academic used a sweet trifle to explain the layers of sediment ruffled by the earthquake while we ate equally stratified but savoury pieces of lasagne; an embracing couple revolved slowly as they tried to name their favourite restaurants, calling up the visceral memories of those lost places and times; two women dressed as Chinese card dealers ritually invited us to place our bets as if still in the Christchurch Casino as we ate sushi; and so on.

[Show video of tents.]

Spectators could only enter a single tent before being shuffled onto the next station, and so they could only find out about what happened in the other tents by sharing their stories with each other.

The next station was the Bell Tower Café: four long tables set up around the freestanding church tower. Participants were invited to call out their favourite foods as orders to the frantic staff inside.

[Show video of Bell Tower Café.]

Here they were challenged to work together to pull the trays from the staff at the centre to where they sat. And, regardless of what they ordered, stuffed potatoes was what they got.

Finally, everyone was aligned on two sides of a very long, narrow, candlelit table in a long tent, where they were invited by Richard Gough to share their memories of the first foods they ate after the earthquake while using long spoons to feed each other jello.

[Show video of Long Tent.]

In the end, the church was declared safe to re-enter, and the audience once again became a congregation. They were given a kind of communion, with a small glass of sherry and biscotti, while the disabled actors of A Different Light received communion from the ‘priest’ and the company sang hymns of salvation.

The play began again, the child was seized by the priest, and the performance was left frozen at the moment the priest’s raised the child over his head – whether to save or destroy, was left to the audience’s imagination. The actors removed their costumes and invited the audience to join them in singing the hymn ‘Jerusalem’ whilst walking out of the church.

[Show video of closing sequence.]

And so the audience came full circle. It began as a congregation and returned to its original point of departure – albeit transformed in some way, we hoped, by the journey taken. The first station was anarchic – as such, the most open, a do-it-yourself theatrical experience. One could stand aside and make a cellphone call, or talk to the cat lady or the scarf lady, or eat soup and drink coffee in the cold night . . . whatever. The second station was more formally constructed, but structured in ways that forced recognition that different people were having different experiences of the same event. The third brought everyone together on sides, literally, that competed for the attention of the servers and for the food that was provided only if teams worked together successfully. The fourth was a more hallowed experience, with participants joined under one tent, mirroring one another across the table and down to each end, experiencing the act of sharing as something at once intimate and collective – a very moving experience for many. The return to the church brought the audience full circle, perhaps sitting in the same seats, but perhaps also more conscious of themselves as actors in the post-earthquake drama. In this way, the production repeated our experiences of the earthquakes, and in that theatrical repetition offered the possibility of reflection on the lived experience.

Both Kleist's story and our production closed not with a happy ending. Richard Gough actually felt that *The Earthquake in Chile* should close with the moment of grace in the long tent. His utopian idea was that a community was to be created by the theatrical experience of the stations. We, who had experienced the profound rupturing and coming together of the February earthquake, were more concerned with the fear of losing our newfound sense of communality. Richard wanted to give us the experience of community and communality as something novel and new, a social aspiration performed theatrically. We had been there done that. We were trying to preserve the best parts of that profound experience of rupture and repair in lived terms, through the performance of our desire for its memory to be

sustained in us. To return to Kleist and his refusal of a happy ending was designed as a warning to ourselves against returning to where and how we were before.

Reflecting on it now, almost five years later, this warning was prescient. The circular form of the production could be regarded as a kind of cynical comment on our humanity, where the earthquake just brought a disruption and an illusion of transformation, but where a return to the status quo ante was always already inevitable. I prefer to see the form both of Kleist's story and of our production as a dialectical process that also should be guiding the rebuild of our city. In dialectical thinking, we would return to the same space, but with the recognition that this space is always ephemeral, created through us in time, and changeable, and changing.

By the time of *Canterbury Tales*, in 2013, it felt as though a second disaster had hit the city – this time human-made. Left to us, after the government's demolition machinery, was mostly rubble and emptiness. Walter Benjamin writes of the Angel of History:

[A] storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

This storm is what we call progress.²⁰

In Christchurch, any plans for new buildings have been almost uniformly even more alienating than the ruins and the rubble they are supplanting. The Christ Church Cathedral still stands as both object and symbol of this new kind of slower moving catastrophe. With its neo-Gothic, ersatz medieval buildings, Christchurch once boasted that it was the most English city outside of England. What remained to us was largely wasteland. In 2013, the

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books) 257-8.

desolation was acute. After the rupture, it was not enough to talk about bringing people back to the city – in itself not easy. We wanted, we still want, to redefine the city itself. We asked: how can a collapsing world be shown to be a chance for change?

Canterbury Tales was produced by Free Theatre Christchurch for the Festival of Transitional Architecture (FESTA) and involved, on the one hand, performing artists and, on the other, architects and designers, as well as academics, arts organisations, businesses and the general public, coming from Christchurch, Auckland and Sydney. These included, among many others: staff and students from the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at the University of Canterbury and from the Interior and Spatial Design Program of the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS); the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra; and performers from Ngāi Tahu and Pacific Underground.²¹ Designed as a carnivalesque celebration of community in the face of natural and human-made disaster, *Canterbury Tales* took the shape of a procession that led participants in a performative exploration of the destroyed city centre. Here I want to reflect on the dialectical negotiation underlying the project: following Mikhail Bakhtin, as a natural cyclical, temporal interruption, while also facing a catastrophe that helps us create the ‘real state of emergency’ that Walter Benjamin demands for our time.

Taking Chaucer as a starting point, *Canterbury Tales* was centred on giant puppets representing key figures in the Christchurch recovery, joined by masked and other performers, drawn from all levels of the community, including spectators (approximately 15,000 on the night), in a procession past performance and installation sites, with food and drink sold in caravans stationed along the way. In this, *Canterbury Tales* was Bakhtinian, a carnival where ‘feasts were linked to moments of crisis’ and people ‘for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance’.²² We wanted still to reflect

²¹ For a complete list of participants, please see *Canterbury Tales*, ‘Production Credits’ (www.freetheatre.org.nz/ct---productions-credits.html).

²² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (1968; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984) 9.

the sense of community, of *communitas* in Turnerian terms, that people had experienced in the aftermath of the earthquakes – an incredible rediscovery of a sense of living that made the sad and catastrophic aspects of the earthquakes take on some positive sense. We had experienced a radical rupture – as with the Lisbon earthquake – a sign that there was no benevolent God looking after us. A similar tension arose in public discourse. Should our response be to restore Christchurch to the status quo ante? Or had we been given an opening through which to devise a new way of living together here and now?

At the heart of this debate stands the ruined Anglican Cathedral, the nineteenth-century neo-gothic stone edifice at the centre of the city, often seen as eponymous with the city: to be rebuilt exactly as it was, or demolished and replaced into the twenty-first century? Ironically, this pits the neo-liberal – the creative, the academics and the artists – against the neo-conservative – the Anglican Church, the National government and business. The left wants to restore the old buildings while breaking down the hierarchical, social and economic structures that became shaky in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes; the right wants to destroy the buildings in the service of capital and growth while restoring its social and economic dominance. The Anglican Bishop accuses the liberals who oppose her plans to tear down the ruins of the cathedral of acting against ‘God’s purpose in the world’.²³

In this apparent struggle between capital and community, the earthquakes are seen as a means either to accelerate the growth of American-led globalisation and, in so doing, to destroy the remnants of colonial tradition or to conserve the leftover colonial edifices while also trying to resurrect some of the European qualities of the city. *Canterbury Tales* was seen to be firmly on the side of the latter. But it was not so simple as that. We tried to chart a path between, or apart from, the two fantasies: the one, nostalgic for a pure Englishness that never existed; the other, a master plan for a futurised city, sanitised without a past.

²³ Bishop Victoria Matthews. Interview, TV1 News 31 May 2014.

To choose *Canterbury Tales* as the foundation for our production was more than a pun. Following Chaucer, it was an attempt to take up, engage with and even satirise the tradition – the language, the buildings and self-regard, the fantasy of the medieval that had been brought here from the other side of the world. Like Chaucer, we started from the characters that dominate our current landscape. The Minister for Canterbury Earthquake Recovery, Hon. Gerry Brownlee, was first built as a giant friar and (in the end) replicated seven times. The Merchant was designed as an archetype, built of coinage, but reflecting New Zealand's Prime Minister John Key, a former merchant banker, and speaking his lines: 'Show me the money!' The Scholar was modelled on the New Zealand ideal of the English academic, as can be seen performing nightly at the University of Canterbury Staff Club. Here's how preparations of the performance were covered in the national media.

[Show *Campbell Live* video]

(It must be noted that *Campbell Live* – perhaps the most respected current affairs programme in New Zealand – is no more. John Cambell was particularly known for his critical coverage of the Government's response to the earthquake. Earlier this year, his programme was cancelled.)

Following Chaucer's *Tales*, the performance was staged as a kind of pilgrimage from the Re:Start Mall – emblem of economic rebirth to the Bridge of Remembrance – commemorating Christchurch's contribution to the world wars – and then via the banks of the Avon River – where the natives' land was first converted to the pastoral – to the Worcester Street Bridge – itself a neo-Gothic reminder of the original settlers' ambitions – before it finally turned to face and proceed to the Square in front of the ruined Cathedral. Here's what the procession looked like on the night (also courtesy of TV3).

[Show TV3 video]

The performance's staging ground was deliberately juxtaposed to its endpoint. The Re:Start Mall is made of shipping containers, built to sail the seas but temporarily grounded as a commercial centre in the midst of apparently empty land. The first people to perform were Pacific Underground, whose performance included both a small fale (meeting house) and a va'a (boat). That is, we started from where we are, in the South Pacific, brought to this island by ships, some sooner, some later. Pacific Underground sang and recited poetry. More significantly, the Polynesian performance group formally gave the company permission to proceed.

The puppets stopped at stations along the way, telling Chaucer-inflected stories but reflecting on the realities of the places where they stopped. Throughout the journey, the puppets – each operated by five to ten performers – danced and talked, played games and jested with spectators as they spread out, creating a vast, all-encompassing, all-embracing celebratory atmosphere. As such, this wasn't so much a spectacle – like a contemporary Christmas parade – as it was carnival, in Bakhtinian terms:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is the special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.²⁴

The idea was to provoke an experience of communality – not quite what we had felt immediately after the earthquakes, because that was already lost to us, but something like

²⁴ Ibid 7.

that, something still to strive for, not nostalgic, but rather utopian and, at the same time, ‘realistic’ in the way that Bakhtin suggests.

Bakhtin discusses the ‘particular significance’ of the ‘suspension of all hierarchical precedence’ to the spirit of carnival:

People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.²⁵

By temporarily effacing the prescriptive formulas of everyday life, carnival opens a space for people to interact differently with one another. For Bakhtin: ‘This experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms’.²⁶ That the earthquake-destroyed city was actually in such an undefined form should have lent itself to playful, even utopian creativity in order to discover itself anew. This new form should not have to be as rigidly confined either to the abstract gridlines of the old colonial plan or to the current blueprint with its similarly regimented ‘precincts’. It should be more fluid, more tangible, perhaps messier but also more alive.

Restoring the city may not be enough for our present time. At its turning point, the performance veered towards the Benjaminian. In his words:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger. [. . .] The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the

²⁵ Ibid 10.

²⁶ Ibid 10-11.

attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.²⁷

Benjamin does not want the past restored. He wants a revolution. At the same time, he does not want to do away with tradition, but rather he demands that we change the uses to which tradition is put. Beside the river a dancer on a lit platform beckoned us towards a vision of the ‘Angel of History’ who was suspended in mid-air over the riverbank, facing the destroyed Cathedral, singing a lament that rose above the cacophony produced by a sound artist as a kind of acoustical storm.

In Benjamin’s terms, progress itself is the storm, the catastrophe we face. Benjamin tells us that the face of the Angel of History is ‘turned toward the past’ and adds: ‘Where we perceive a change of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed’.²⁸

Standing on the Worcester Street Bridge, we could hear, against the Angel’s voice, a call from Cathedral Square, about 500 metres away. It was a kind of karanga from a Ngāi Tahu performer, a Kuia (female elder) who was on a platform suspended over the plinth that, before the earthquake, had held up the statue of John Godley, one of Christchurch’s colonial founding fathers. Stationed in front of, and contesting the primacy of, the ruined Cathedral, the Kuia was on the same level as the Angel, her traditional feathered cloak reflecting the Angel’s wings, and her song urging the procession onward, still led by the Knight as it made its way across a brightly lit, smoke-blowing ramp.

In the Square, spectators found not only a Kapa Haka performance and a Māori man singing a lament on colonial oppression, but also performers from the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, the Christchurch Wizard (the most passionate defender of the old Cathedral) and a

²⁷ Benjamin 255.

²⁸ Ibid 257.

night market that would not have been out of place in front of Chaucer's own Canterbury Cathedral. It was up to the spectators to take part in this celebratory chaos and carry on from there. I have only some amateur video from the night, but this should give you some idea.

[Show video from Angel to end.]

Benjamin, famously, has described history not as the object but 'the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]'.²⁹ This '*Jetztzeit*', the time of the now, is unpredictable, unfinished and forever emerging. Benjamin says 'that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule'.³⁰ We may be at a time in Christchurch, as everywhere, when we must, like the Angel, confront a catastrophe that, being of our own making, is even more virulent than an earthquake.

So what about resilience? Resilience is defined in the dictionary as 'springing back into shape'. This is not happening so quickly after an earthquake. In Christchurch, the initial blossoming of community feeling created a plethora of ideas for a new city. At the centre of most of these ideas was that the new city would be rebuilt for the people and not just for big office buildings and cars. But what happened was that the National Government in Wellington took over the jurisdiction for the rebuild, taking it away from the Christchurch City Council. There was an almost wilful desire not to restore but to flatten the old colonial buildings that made Christchurch. The Minister for Recovery, Gerry Brownlee, openly expressed his contempt for what he called the 'old dungs'. With them went the identity of the city as an English outpost, with its roots in the nineteenth century and proud of its history.

²⁹ Ibid 261.

³⁰ Ibid 257.

Some academics applauded the demolition of the colonial structures, seeing it as an overdue breakdown of colonial mindedness. Out of the rubble now arise tilt-slab, glassed palaces that look the same as anywhere else. Global capitalism plays its double-sided role: on the one side, doing away with old attachments, but in another way, maintaining, and reinforcing in fact, the existing power structure. Capitalism shows that it is the most resilient presence in our lives, overcoming earthquakes and other adversities, and using them to advantage, profiting no matter what.

My own institution, the University of Canterbury, was engaged before the earthquake to install a rigid business culture. Shared governance and collegiality were to be replaced by line managers, who were accountable only to the Vice Chancellor – now cast as a CEO. The destruction of some of the buildings was used to justify getting rid of parts of the library and its books, clearing way for a new food court, shops and computer terminals. The new buildings going up are designed to do away with academic offices in favour of open plan and hot desking. In the Faculty of Arts, the Pro Vice Chancellor loved to say to us many times that one shouldn't let a crisis go to waste. What he meant was that dozens of Arts staff were to be eased out or forced into redundancy. My own department of Theatre and Film Studies was disestablished, after a long battle, although in the almost three years since we have maintained responsibility for a dozen thesis students – eight of them PhDs. Resilience at the University of Canterbury is a narrative owned by the Vice Chancellor and those who report to him. We are offered psychologists and counsellors, courses in 'Growing Personal Resilience', and so on, in order to help us through the crisis caused by ongoing restructuring, which has been, for five years, legitimised by the fact of the earthquakes. So resilience is part of the new economy at the University, as in the city and beyond. This kind of culture of resilience is designed to lead to passive acceptance of management's will. Lip service is given to the Charter, which has at its core that academics are 'the critics and conscience of society'. But to

be critical of the proposals and plans put forward by university management is to find oneself on the way out.

The Free Theatre is also now under threat. Creative New Zealand says that it will only fund the companies that already fit into consumer culture and serve to support the restoration of the previous, middle class status quo: the Court Theatre, community musical theatre groups, and so on. People want to be reassured by performances of resilience. Looking at it in this light, resilience becomes problematic. It could be that the arts and theatre can become complicit with the ruling ideology, and will become service providers like the counsellors and psychologists who are employed after a catastrophe. Only good news is allowed. This is an old predicament for those of us who make theatre. We always have to decide if we want to become part of an entertainment industry, or if we consider art-making in the theatre as part of a larger emancipatory process. Schiller says that only where we play can we be free and fully human. If we are not free, how can we play? Perhaps we have to think about replacing resilience with another word: resistance.