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Lacking Desire/Making Drama: The Theatrical Meets the Prosaic in a Post-Puritanical World

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.

Genesis III.7

I should have observed that for an hour and more before they went off, they went to dancing, and I could easily discern their postures and gestures by my glasses. I could not perceive, by my nicest observation, but that they were stark naked, and had not the least covering upon them; but whether they were men or women, that I could not distinguish.

Robinson Crusoe (180)

In the Bible, the idea of paradise is based on the denial of difference between the sexes. Without difference, both man and woman are complete and the same. Without difference, there is no desire. With the discovery of difference, man and woman come to recognise lack. Lack leads to need. Need to desire. Desire to sin and exile from paradise. In the novel *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, there is, on the island, perhaps an Adam but no Eve. Robinson Crusoe exists in an undifferentiated state, undisturbed by sexual lack, need or desire for over twenty years. It is a paradise of sorts. He labours, but his labours are requited with ample food and shelter. Giving up the hope of being rescued by a passing ship, Crusoe's desire for salvation is directed toward an unseen, disembodied God as father, who replaces the earthly father from whom he ran away to sea. This God as father exists only in the Word of the Bible which Crusoe consumes, a God that he seeks to please and emulate nonetheless.

When Crusoe at last encounters others on the island, he watches intently through his spyglass; yet he denies the possibility of sexual difference in what he sees and, therefore, the possibility of sexual desire for an other. He remains in this paradise even with Friday, for whom he feels the desire of the colonial rather than of the sexual persuasion. Reproduction of himself takes place through cloning – re-making another man, Friday, in his own image by clothing him and providing lessons in language, behaviour and religion – rather than through the physical meeting of self and other, of man and woman. In fact, the possibility of woman

(or of man) as a source of difference and an object of desire is denied in the novel's narrative.[1]

Theatre is based on desire born of recognition of difference. In fact, the Aristotelian definition of drama is grounded in the notion of *agon*, the representation of a mythic struggle between irreconcilable opposites. The Puritans in denying the sexual body repudiated theatre, replacing the drama of difference with prosaic accounts of man's tortuous relationship with work and God. The *Robinson Crusoe* text was strange to me when I re-read it three years ago. I didn't like it. I was put off by its emphatic prosaic-ness. It is a boring and completely undramatic text. But by seeing it as alien, as "other," I could see the truths in its representation of the colonial condition in a way that might not have been possible with a more congenial text. To me, as a German immigrant, the Pakeha[2] New Zealander is a native that I try to see clearly in my theatrical experiments. In my production of *Crusoe* – which was an attempt to confront the question of the post-colonial in New Zealand – I came up against the refusal of the prosaic, the puritanical – in the text as well as in life – to recognise and examine both difference and desire: man and woman, coloniser and colonised.

Crusoe (which was subtitled *A Lapsarian Mass in Twelve Movements*) began in 1996 as part of a postgraduate class inquiry into the possibility, and the problem, of the theatrical in post-colonial New Zealand. The story of a man (English of German descent)[3] who flees civilisation and is stranded on an island in the Pacific Ocean was meaningful to me as someone living on just such an island. The link between the novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, which is immediately recognisable as one of the first tales of colonisation, and the contemporary discussion of post-coloniality is obvious. The year's study culminated in a full-scale production: *Robinson Crusoe or: I, That Was Born To Be My Own Destroyer*.[4] Staged environmentally in a facsimile of a colonial church, the play emerged from a puritan prayer

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[1] In my production, a homoerotic reading of *Robinson Crusoe* was a real possibility.
[2] Pakeha is the term used to refer to non-Maori New Zealanders of European, primarily British, descent.
[3] Crusoe's father is "a foreigner of Bremen" (9). His original name, Kreutznaer, derived from the German word for cross, can be read allegorically and Crusoe as an Everyman in the *successio Christi*.

meeting in which Robinson's public confession was performed in a pantomime style by the ten student actors as a kind of highly physicalised story theatre.

From this work, the final production – *Crusoe: A Lapsarian Mass in Twelve Movements* – emerged. Using five of the original ten actors, the project was rehearsed sporadically from the beginning of 1997 and performed at the July 1998 Festival of New Zealand Theatre (FUEL).[5] The performance of *Crusoe* was conceived as a mass which staged the desire for grace.[6] The experiment was to explore if and how the religious faith represented in Defoe's novel might be mirrored or replaced by a faith in the theatrical. The mass was lapsarian in that the actions and gestures prescribed could not, in themselves, lead the actors (or the audience) to grace – that is, transcendence of the prosaic – however, it was only through performance of the prosaic that transcendence was to become possible.

From the start, the actors showed varying degrees of distaste for both text and task. In the end, they hated it. What the actors resented and resisted initially was the insistence that all perform the role of Crusoe, the coloniser, which was in fact the truth of their position in New Zealand, including that of the one woman who is part Maori.[7] The point of crisis was situated in the moment where Crusoe spies the natives in a cannibalistic ritual and saves Friday from the altar. Two women, half-naked, poured blood over the naked body of the third (the woman who was part-Maori) and consumed it in a literal representation of the notion of communion as eating the body of Christ. The male actor playing Friday, as the next to be sacrificed, was also naked. The male actor playing Crusoe was clothed, his exaggerated, heavy breathing amplified through a microphone as he watched in theatrical representation of the voyeuristic scene cited above. The cannibalistic communion had been staged as a place where sensuality might lead to spirituality, in the same way that in the mass transubstantiation

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[4] An earlier task, in the middle of the year, was given to three groups of postgraduate students: Use *Robinson Crusoe* as source text to create a nine-minute "Robinsonade."

[5] In Hamilton, New Zealand. The project was a Free Theatre Christchurch production. The actors, formerly students, were paid as professionals for their work in the production: Greta Bond, Peter Currie, Michael Cusdin, Oliva Lory Kay, and Kate McAnergney. I am the founder and Artistic Director of the Free Theatre.

[6] The theatricality of the medieval mass has been thoroughly explored, most notably by O. B. Hardison, Jr. in *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (1965).

invokes the presence of the sacred in the consummation of the wine and bread. At the technical rehearsal for *Crusoe*, which doubled as an opportunity to film the work, the actors grew increasingly uncomfortable; when it was over, the actress who had been the sacrifice screamed, and the others joined in. By the following day, the actors were seriously in revolt, and in the end the performances of *Crusoe* were underscored by their refusal to accept the worth of their, and my, work.

Nudity had not been a problem in the previous production.[8] Nor was it necessarily the problem in *Crusoe*. Instead it became the rallying point, symbolic not only of a psychological and spiritual crisis, but most importantly of the actors' sense of violation. They had experienced their own nakedness, in the eye of the camera and in anticipation of the audience, and bereft of faith in the production and its meanings, they fled what had to that time been for them a paradise, the theatre. They were New Zealanders, "God's Own." And they had been cast out from paradise, tempted into betrayal of themselves and their peers by a German director who insisted on the performance of the prosaic against the desire for something more – for a transcendent spiritual and theatrical moment. Paradoxically, then, at the exact point that the performance staged the possibility of transcendence, the reverse occurred. The blasphemy of the cannibalistic communion, with its recognition of the primal link between loving and eating,[9] was intended to provoke a theatrical recognition of something beyond the prosaic (in the Grotowskian sense); what occurred instead was a re-lapse into the puritanical.

"There are no sunsets and no sunrises; there is no solitude and no soul"(45). 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

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[7] It is generally assumed that there are relatively few persons, if any, who can claim to be 100% Maori.

[8] I had, as a matter of policy, left all costume decisions, especially about the degree of undress, in the hands of the female actors. The actress playing the sacrificial victim volunteered nudity before I ever had a chance to suggest it.

[9] See Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (p 8 and elsewhere).

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. To make a play of *Robinson Crusoe*, one must deal 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. While the indigenous peoples here, the Maori, have traditional performance practices – such as the haka and waiata[10] – theatre in the western sense was brought to New Zealand as part of the civilising process. 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 truth, for most of us, actors and audience, of our position as colonisers. New Zealand is a Protestant country, emphatically prosaic in its cultural doctrines. 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.

The protagonist in *Robinson Crusoe* doesn't seem to have any kind of passion or sexual desire. What drives him 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 station" (10). 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.

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[10] Performed dances and songs with defined ritual functions.

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," "cultivated" and "civilised" an island, of which large parts seemed empty and where the natives were supposed to be fearsome cannibals.[11]

In my production of *Crusoe*, I explored the myths and ideologies at the heart of post-colonial New Zealand culture. The play examined the idea of the "other" from the point of view of the coloniser and asked: 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 also to ask if such an escape is possible any longer. Where is one to flee, if one is already on a remote island?

In theatricalising Defoe's novel, an attempt can be made to 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 is mainly perceived and received as an escapist fantasy for children and adults, as a dream of running away from the civilised world to an isolated island where a new and better world can be created. In constructing the performance, I 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.

[11] It is interesting to note that the natives in Crusoe don't actually live on "his" island, don't "own" it, but instead use it as a site for performing their cannibalistic rituals.

The theatricality of the play was grounded in a tension between Artaudian and Grotowskian principles. That is, from beginning to end, the performance was conceived of in terms of the breath, which simultaneously provided the rhythm for the performance, represented the motion of the sea and served as a manifestation of the spirit. Sculptor Graham Bennett designed a metallic table which was both utilitarian and a work of art: stood on end it was a totemic structure using Pacific Island patterns, and light projected into it was reflected from the holes in the pattern into space; as a table it was used for the first and last last suppers; it also became the altar on which the sacrifice was performed, with the bench upright as another totemic structure. Similarly, the crosses carried by the five actors resembled the banners of the Crusades, but were also used as masts with sails in the ship scenes, and later as tent/shelters or as the wings of the Angel in the Annunciation. The company sat to supper sipping water from plastic bowls which later became the sea into which the Robinsons tossed their heads, drowning. Throughout the production, the upright forms of the three metre high crosses were deliberately contrasted with the circular holes in the table, the circular seats on the bench, the bowls, and even the circular black cloaks which enveloped the actors, explicitly setting masculine against feminine symbols.

The microphone was used as a central symbol for "modern" civilisation, the object at centre in the first scene and retained as a remnant after the shipwreck on the island; as the only overt technological object in the performance, it stood in for God and the power of the Word, as well as for the patriarchal and the phallic, and for colonisation itself. The disciplined ritualised gestures and actions of the actors were in a tension with the symbols of civilisation: the plastic and metal microphone, but also the metal table, the aluminium crosses/masts, the sails made of old parachutes, and the water in plastic bowls. 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. Similarly, the Robinsons almost "drowned" and at the same time were "baptised" by submerging their faces in the bowls of water until they could no longer hold their breath. The whole was structured through ideas of ritual and its

transgression, through containment and release, through simultaneity and divergence, through performance of the sacred and the profane.

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, although it 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 18th and 19th 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.

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. Robinson spends a great deal of time in isolation before he meets Friday. For whom does he clothe himself and labour? 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 gave 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, was a Lapsarian Mass in which the fall was inevitable and grace impossible. That is to say, it blasphemed. I took the idea of the Last Supper and Holy Communion as the underlying theatrical structure. I staged the supper as a family dinner from which Robinson fled at the beginning and to which he returned as the father at the end. At the first last supper, the father recited the story of the Prodigal Son. This "father" became Friday, the savage redeemed by Robinson who then took Robinson's place as the son at the last last supper. The three women, who formed part of the original family and who with the two men became five Crusoes stranded "alone" on the island, became the celebrants of a cannibalistic communion. Two women placed the third on the table; they stripped, washed, poured blood on and then "ate" her – that is, licked the blood from her body. Friday, as the sacrifice to follow, was prone under a cross. Crusoe watched from the audience's perspective. The microphone in his hand amplified his heavy breathing which set the rhythm for the ritual. The woman rose from the table, and all three, bloody, began to repeat the sacrifice with Friday in the woman's place. This was interrupted when Friday's body was exposed. At the sight of Friday's penis, Robinson shouted "no," and the action shifted to the encounter between the two men.

When Christ says "eat my flesh, drink my blood" this can be interpreted 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."[12] 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.

For my own part, I refused to abdicate the position of the coloniser in the staging of this story, and I refused to allow my company to do so. I wanted to explore the Crusoe in us, not as something we can deny, but as a truth that we repress in a post-colonial country. I wanted to explore what "post" might really mean, how "post" we really are. I felt that only by taking this role seriously and enacting it truthfully, could we – director, actors and audience – experience a kind of recognition which would allow us to move into some new place, a genuinely "post-colonial" frame of reference. As a result, the vision of savagery remained Crusoe's. With Crusoe as the man who looks, what is seen – the "other" – is necessarily feminised – both those who performed the cannibalistic ritual and the one who was threatened by it. In this production the women were the literal embodiment both of the savage and of God, both what Crusoe feared and what he desired, at the point of convergence between cannibalism and communion. Friday was the missing link, sexually ambiguous until naked, and once he was recognisable as a "man" by Crusoe (and the audience) the action became hermetic, exclusive to the two men as Robinson remade Friday in his own image. The women stood 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 sat down to supper with the two men.

In my production the women embodied Crusoe's repressed desire. In the cannibalistic ritual the women enacted the return of the repressed, a sexual consummation from which Friday fled into Robinson's arms. The freedom of the women in the ritual was to represent what men fear most, bodily sexual expression between women from which they are excluded. Like Mary, the women were to be the vehicle for salvation without being touched by a man. Like Christ women bleed and do not die. When the sacrificed woman rose and the

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[12] Young 162 (citing Bhabha 'Signs Taken for Wonders' 145-6).

ritual turned to Friday, the terror of the sacred and the terror of the feminine converged. The Pater Noster which was sung in Latin and in English at the beginning of the play, was sung in Maori by the women at the end. In this way, it was to represent the domestication of the woman and the savage; but it was equally possible to read it as a vital remnant of the sacred which was expressed during the ritual and not fully repressed in the end. Were the women, in the end, like the Maori, those who would keep Christian faith alive or was the faith irrevocably transformed through their mediation? This question was not resolved in the production, but rather left open to an audience.

In the Lapsarian Mass 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: "Ceremony *indicates*, ritual *transforms*" (80). 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 – like the attempt to escape gravity by lifting the foot and holding the breath – have been 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 an 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 festival in which *Crusoe* was performed, audiences were divided. The ambivalence of the audience was expected, indeed desired. The reaction of the actors was not.

The problem was the presence of an audience. The problem was also the fake blood. It was yucky. It was ugly. It profaned what for the women had been until that time a sacred and loving act, as performed in private, an expression of profound woman-ness. What was performed in public became obscene – 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.[13] The act of communion was blasphemed, but so were current standards for representing women and indigenous peoples in performance: three blasphemies. The conflation of the woman with the savage in this inverted religious ritual, the contamination of the whole with fake 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. The original sin of the coloniser was no longer distant, part of the history of other people. It was personal and present, and not pretty. There was no safe place from which to observe, without being implicated. This, of course, was the point of the production.

The crisis called into question my politics and my integrity as a theatre artist. I was accused of having staged the obscenity out of my own desire and for my own perverted pleasure. The conflation of the three blasphemies was intended to disturb spectators in such a way that they might come to recognise the Crusoe in themselves. If they failed to see Crusoe watching, or no longer heard his heavily amplified breathing as it punctuated the women's performance, it must have been their own breathing that they heard. In that moment, they were to suspend their critical awareness and watch as Crusoe did, fascinated and afraid of what they might see. Ideally, this might have provoked them to reflect upon their own ways of watching, desiring, and being in the post-colonial world. Instead, the audience along with the actors for the most part refused to empathise with Crusoe (in an Aristotelian sense) choosing to identify with the women/savages as victims of Crusoe's gaze.[14]

For me, the outcry revealed the contradictions in contemporary cultural and political thought. It is 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, when it includes ideas of the woman and the savage in

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[13] Four blasphemies, if one counts singing the Lord's Prayer in Maori with blood on the faces as a violation of Maori tapu (taboo).

[14] These audience reactions went across gender, with the men perhaps even more adamant in identifying with the women as victims than the women.

this way, is seen to lead 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 – in *Crusoe* provoked 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."[15]

The most interesting response to the performance came after I presented a preliminary version of this essay at Waikato University.[16] Rai Rakatua, the Kaumatua – a Maori elder responsible for ensuring that Maori protocol was observed in the rehearsals and performances of another, bicultural, Free Theatre production which was being performed at the same festival[17] – was one of the few Maori to see *Crusoe*. At the conference, he 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 in Maori, performed a formal response according to Maori protocol. He turned to me and "applauded" 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 was 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 added:

> As far as colonialism is concerned, it's happened, throughout the world. And it is happening today. But what we do have is this, the empowerment both of the spirit and the body, of forgiveness and of reconciliation, whether that be with you, or you, or you. And I believe that empowerment is not only by way of the medium that's used, as well as the language but also the form, the expression that you have by action or movement, whatever that may be but in the spirit.

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[15] This is a vulgar summary of the response of many to the paper I presented after the performance at the conference of the Australasian Drama Studies Association.

[16] Australasian Drama Studies Association 1998. The quotes which follow are taken from a video tape of the conference session.

He explicitly spoke as “a native, as an aborigine of New Zealand, Aotearoa.” Referring to his cane as a taiaha,[18] emblematic of the war between the Maori and the Pakeha, he went on: “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 cane on the floor in a line between us. He then raised his very big and old Bible, said “I choose this” and placed it on the floor next to the cane. He paused and then offered the Lord’s Prayer. He closed his performance with the ritual Maori words. Afterward he hongi’d 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 as the Prodigal Son 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, although I am encouraged by this response; the production was not aimed at a Maori audience, and it was not “culturally safe” by New Zealand standards.[19] I must, however, reconsider the possibility – or impossibility – of making radical theatre in post-colonial New Zealand. By radical, I mean a theatre which takes embodiment literally as a way of exposing what is repressed and routinely denied. It seems that 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. If one tries to maintain that the current status quo, which is dominated by a correctness to which “we” all already subscribe, is not so correct, then where is the political conflict, the *agon*, to be found? If to represent the problem is understood simply as replication, then how is a challenge to the status quo to be constructed? The conflict is perhaps to be discovered within

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[17] Mervyn Thompson’s *Songs to the Judges*, directed by Lilicherie McGregor.
[18] A Maori spear.
[19] Cultural safety is the term used in New Zealand to refer to the need to be respectful of Maori customs and taboos.

ourselves. Are we paying lip service to a politics that is impossible for us to embody? Are we in denial of our own racial, national, and/or sexual differences so that we may remain identified with/as one or more of the preferred victim groups, rather than admit to belonging to at least one of the designated oppressor groups?

In the Lapsarian Mass, the foot is lifted towards heaven, the breath inhaled and held until the breaking point, when gravity and the need for air claim the body, the foot falls and the breath escapes. And again. And again in a potentially endless cycle of aspiration and failure. The participants must continue to desire and to act against the knowledge that flight is impossible, to deny in the lifting of the foot and the taking in of breath the inevitable need to touch the ground. This is a very hard thing. The illusion of grace led the actors to insist on performing its attainment. But only the song, the Pater Noster in Maori, was left to them, and that was of an older faith, one which had lost meaning for them. To continue to lift the foot and breathe became unbearable. The experiment was to begin with hope, to recognise the inevitability of lapse, and to offer the possibility – to both actors and audience – in the final procession of discovering something else.

The idea of God's Own (the God Zone) is that of a paradise where the post-colonial, post-puritanical, post-modern, politically correct world has been achieved. The coloniser and the colonised live in relative harmony, and what conflicts remain are resolvable. My production exposed rather than smoothed over differences, proposed that the war between the coloniser and the colonised, like the war between the sexes, is still being waged, even if it is disguised. Indeed, the response from the Kaumatua made it clear that there may be only a temporary truce, and this truce may be suspect, based as it is on the Bible which is after all a primary instrument of colonisation. It may be comforting to believe that we now know what is right and wrong in relations between Pakeha and Maori, and between men and women, or at least that we can assume we are in agreement about what ought to be. It may be, instead, that in the post-puritanical world we have arrived at a "middle station" not unlike that urged by Robinson Crusoe's father in an insistence on the prosaic rather than the passionate or the dramatic. The challenge and the need is to distil the theatrical from the prosaic, to embrace

desire in the face of complacency or despair, to confront the inevitability of failure and to sustain irreconcilability rather than maintain indifference. The challenge for Robinson Crusoe as he stares at the dancing savages is to learn to see himself as well as them clearly – in terms both of racial and of sexual difference – and in so doing to open his eyes to his own desires and to accept the consequences of differentiation: to be driven out of paradise.

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