

Reviews

MICHAEL BILLINGTON on Theatre de Complicité's ambitious new work, Foe

Staging the unstageable

IS ONE a friend of Foe? Watching Theatre de Complicité's version of J M Coetzee's novel of that name, premiered at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, I found it difficult to get enthused. In their versions of stories by John Berger and Bruno Schulz, Complicité brilliantly married physical expressiveness with powerful fables: here they are wrestling with the intractable problem of turning a multi-layered novel about storytelling into a piece of gripping theatre.

The ideas themselves are interesting. To whom do stories belong? Is silence as potent as language? Is there any such thing as historical truth? The adapter, Mark Wheatley, plays fair with Coetzee's basic intent. He shows a desert island castaway, Susan Barton, encountering the shipwrecked Cruso and his mute black companion, Friday, and, once back in London, telling her story to the writer Daniel Foe (the original family name). Because Cruso has

died on the voyage home and Friday's tongue has been cut out, Susan inescapably appropriates their stories just as Foe manipulates hers. As in a way does Coetzee himself.

The novel works both as a hall-of-mirrors Borgesian conundrum and a political metaphor for the author's native South Africa: in particular for the way the disempowered are, literally, rendered speechless. But inevitably it undergoes a sea-change when staged. The inverted commas, in which Susan's story is permanently told, are submerged. Characterisation is simplified so that Foe, by paying someone to impersonate Susan's lost daughter, becomes more nakedly exploitative. And gnomic utterances, such as "Writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech", begin to sound like exam discussion-topics.

The production by Annie Castledine and Marcello Magni strains every nerve to give the story theatrical life. The desert-island section, with its master/slave



Cast adrift . . . (left to right) Patrice Naiambana, Hannes Flaschberger and Kathryn Hunter

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relationship and bolts of thunder and lightning, is like a compressed Tempest. Foe's London is evoked through a towering desk and chair precariously perched on Peter Mumford's fissured mud-caked stage. And the acting is never less than good. Kathryn Hunter's Susan has the desperate urgency of a woman with a story to tell who finds herself confronted by the insatiable demands of fiction. Patrice Naiambana hauntingly implies both Friday's silent strength and belated access of power when he

dons the writer's furred guild-ropes.

But Foe, lacking much interplay of character, is theatrical without being dramatic and cannot match the shock-effect of the novel, in which we are finally reminded that Coetzee is the controlling authorial voice who has all along been telling the story. It's all done with great style but Complicité have simply chosen an unstageable book.

At West Yorkshire Playhouse (0113-244-2111) until March 30, then on tour.

Billington on Foe

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