

Foe may not be vintage Theatre de Complicite, but this adaptation by Mark Wheatley of J. M. Coetzee's 1986 counter-fiction to *Robinson Crusoe*, co-produced with the West Yorkshire Playhouse, exerts an insidious and beguiling spell.

Whose life is it anyway? Or rather, whose story? *Complicite* give visual statement to the unsayable in Coetzee's novel. The sound of silence washes over his narrative like a thin, clear tide. His heroine, Susan Barton, cast away in a storm while travelling from Bahia, recounts her days on a desert island where the taciturn Cruso (sic) and his dumb servant Friday are locked into dull routines of survival and antipathy.

Cruso dies en route to London, where Susan, with Friday in tow, sells her story to the author Daniel Foe. She herself chooses to remain silent on the topic of pre-cast-away moans. As played by Kathryn Hunter – small, sensuous, dark, inventive – Susan becomes an urgent seeker after contact, speech, sex, being.

There is a beautiful *Tempest*-like quality in the production by Annie Castledine and Marcello Magni (who also appears as a pipe-smoking, 12-year-old accomplice to Foe); the play opens with a great storm and Hunter materialises on a stage of slabs and boulders gutted with rivulets. A fire burns, and the island apathy is disrupted by her fiery presence, her defiance of Cruso's indifference to the possibility of escape.

Foe's London study is represented by a tall iron contraption, a desk at one end of it, a tall-backed chair at the other, which looms over the island like a giant stork of literary extrapolation and distortion. When the mute, black Friday (Patrice Naiambana gives a performance of glorious dignity and non-expressiveness) dons Foe's guild robes – the author has done a runner to avoid creditors – he twirls ecstatically like Caliban and Co crying freedom and liberty on Prospero's patch.

The performance faithfully reproduces Coetzee's idea of a life redefined in a story without really improving on it; the imaginative world is not as fully elaborated as you would expect from *Complicite*. Rob Pickavance stalks the action as an unfriendly Foe and Hannes Flaschberger seems totally at sea as Cruso. The mystery of Susan's 'daughter' (Selma Alispahic) is inadequately researched and projected.

Coveney on Foe

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