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Staging Past and Present Simultaneously: Andrew Bovell's *Holy Day (The Red Sea)*

Andrew Bovell's play, *Holy Day (The Red Sea)*, takes part in Australia's 'history wars,' the ongoing argument concerning the proper relationship between the country's past and its present, particularly regarding the dispossession of the Aborigines and other injustices. While conservatives insist that history is past and we are better served by contemplating the future, others assert that properly moving forward involves a careful consideration of what needs to occur to remedy the injuries of our past. Part of the latter group's case is that the past is ever with us, that then cannot be conveniently annexed from now. *Holy Day (The Red Sea)* demonstrates this by weaving the present into its depiction of the past. How it does so is the business of this paper.

Holy Day has a gothic prologue: "Black clouds loom over a vast desert plain. Lightning cuts the sky on the horizon. Thunder rumbles in the distance" (1). Standing on a promontory, a bleeding woman intones a savage prayer:

Do my justice, Lord, and fight my fight against a faithless people. From the deceitful and impious, rescue me. From the impure, protect me. For You, Lord, are my strength. Why do You keep so far away? Send forth Your light and Your fidelity. They shall lead me on and bring me to the Holy Day. Then I will go to the altar of God. Then I shall eat of His body and drink of His blood, the blood of my gladness and joy ... (1)

"A single gunshot" (1) interrupts her cannibalistic frenzy.

Immediately after, we shift to the main setting of the play, an inn called the Traveller's Rest occupied by Nora, the innkeeper/prostitute, and Obedience, the Aboriginal girl Nora regards as her daughter. We learn that Nora stole Obedience after making her mother drunk. Three itinerants come upon the inn. One of them, Goundry, is an escaped convict who, when assigned to a farm, murdered the farmer and his wife and stole their son to be his sex slave/companion, after cutting out his tongue.

A woman arrives claiming that her child has been abducted and that her husband is missing. It is the woman from the prologue, Elizabeth, a missionary's wife. Eventually, suspicion that local Aborigines may have taken the child and a desire to rid the land of its original inhabitants precipitate the massacre of Aborigines near the end of the play. Obedience witnesses the massacre and before she returns to the inn her tongue is cut out as well.

The opening allusion of *Holy Day* demonstrates a way in which the past remains present. The play begins with an evocation of the madmen and visionaries who went into the desert to do battle with demons, both internal and external, and those who later followed their example as Christian zealots and missionaries for whom the bleakness of the desert may have suggested the aridity and formlessness of a godless life. There is something fundamentally martial and savage about both evocations and they reach their height in the cannibalism of the speech. Salvation and struggle in the speech connect with implications of the play's subtitle, *The Red Sea*, suggesting Moses leading the tribes of Israel across the desert and through the Red Sea to win the Promised Land. All of these aspects of the play recall the Western association of wilderness with martial struggle and triumph. That we may apply to the play's setting associations with mythical and ancient events demonstrates cultural continuity and the capacity of the past to shape our conception of the present.

The blackness of the opening is not much relieved by the following scene, set near 'a halfway house' at dusk. The setting suggests the tenuousness of humanity and civilization in this remote place, the colonial frontier peopled by desperate vagabonds and those attempting to tame the land to raise a living from it. In this case, the setting is populated by:

an innkeeper/prostitute, Nora; Obedience, an Aboriginal girl whom Nora regards as her daughter; a grazier, a missionary couple, a rootless Aboriginal woman and three interlopers, one of whom is a tongueless boy. Their intertwined stories present a pattern of murder, theft, assault, sexual abuse and lies suggesting the silenced and forgotten aspects of Australia's past that continue to unsettle its present.

This depiction of the colonial frontier is remarkable for what it is not. In common with other settler cultures, the European penetration of the Australian continent has been traditionally portrayed in a triumphalist narrative according to which the frontier of settlement was the site of a heroic and character-building struggle against nature and the natives. In Australia's case, the Aborigines have traditionally been depicted as easy targets, members of a primitive culture overtaken by modernity. While there are testimonies to Aboriginal resistance and white massacres of them in response, the continent has overwhelmingly been depicted as a 'terra nullius,' an empty land tamed by a resourceful and courageous European cohort: hence the Australian stereotype of the laconic, taciturn stockman riding through the 'sunlit plains' or taming wild horses in the mountains. *Holy Day* presents a starkly different frontier, then, from standard depictions and this would be immediately apparent to an Australian audience, as would the reason for it. While the setting seems to be the nineteenth century, the negativity of the treatment is insistently contemporary. The clashing notions of the frontier demonstrate the contestability of narratives and the way they form part of discourse.

The treatment of Aborigines in the script is also contemporary. Far from being absent from or insignificant in the white story of Australia, as is traditional, they are an unseen, sinister and resistant presence. We learn of their attempts to disrupt settlement/invasion through sabotage and guerrilla tactics. The audience may have a direct experience of the menace when, at the end of a scene, "lightning illuminates the bush. It's full of moving shadows" (11). One of the frontier vagabonds, Goundry, describes his experiences as a shepherd:

We never saw a single black man, but sure enough if we counted twenty sheep that night there would be nineteen the next morning. Every shadow seemed to us to be a man with his spear raised. And every sound in the bush a secret call [...] We might have the guns but what's the good of a gun if you can't see your enemy. (19)

At the end of the play, there is a massacre of Aborigines, an incident depicted as part of the struggle for land and partially as sheer cruelty. This, again, is contemporary.

While the play ostensibly deals with the past, it demonstrates a continuity of injustice and its aftermath in the present. The results of injustice are depicted in the characterisation of two Aboriginal women, Obedience and Linda. Both of them are displaced. Linda has been banished from her tribe because she took up with a white man, leaving her old, Aboriginal husband. Though they stayed together for some time, her partner eventually married a white woman, taking Linda to an Aboriginal camp and giving her two pounds. Not akin to the Aborigines she was left with and unable to rejoin her tribe, she has been wandering.

Linda's story echoes that of the eponymous character of Katherine Susannah Prichard's 1929 novel, *Coonardoo*. Like Linda, *Coonardoo* is dislocated and tragically broken due to an association with a white man. *Coonardoo* is married to an Aboriginal man when Hugh returns to take up the running of his station. He seduces her and they have a child. Despite his love for her, Hugh refuses to marry *Coonardoo*, who is eventually set adrift. She returns to the station, years after Hugh has sold it. Linda's distressing situation is a logical outcome of white settlement/invasion from its start and the similarity to a 1920s novel suggests the continuity of distress, perhaps into the present.

Obedience is adrift for other reasons. Though the audience hears conflicting stories about her origins, it seems most likely that Nora took Obedience from her mother when Obedience was a baby. Having removed her, Nora resists any possible contact between Obedience and other Aborigines. Obedience has a niggling memory of "an old woman's face, black as night [...]. I don't know who she was but I remember her face and I remember the sea" (23) and we feel that the memory will unsettle her until she can discover the truth and resolve it. She repeatedly asks Nora what colour the sea is and Nora always lies that it is red, demonstrating to the audience the vulnerability of the ignorant. At the end of the play, having witnessed a massacre of Aborigines, Obedience is returned to Nora with her tongue cut out.

As with Linda, Obedience's story mirrors another famous Australian narrative of Aboriginal tragedy, Charles Chauvel's 1955 film, *Jedda*, the

story of an Aboriginal girl adopted by a white family. Like Obedience, *Jedda* is refused permission from her adoptive family to associate with the station blacks. But, in defiance of the circumstance, *Jedda* falls in love with an Aboriginal man. As a result, both are alienated from white and black society and they end tragically. The character also suggests the one-in-ten to one-in-three Aboriginal children removed from their families under government policy up to 1972. The stories of these children went largely untold until a Federal inquiry resulted in the document, *Bringing Them Home* (1977). Linda and Obedience suggest the fate of many Aboriginal children from the start of white history in Australia. Obedience's similarities to *Jedda* and the more recent *Stolen Generations* powerfully depict the foundation of injustice, its continuity and present outcome.

There is another tongueless, stolen child as well, Cornelius, the white boy taken by the murderer of his parents to be his companion/sex slave. The effect of this character is to emphasise the position of the voiceless victims in Australia's past, victims being given voice by recuperative historians and playwrights such as Andrew Bovell.

The two stolen children connect with an Australian cultural trope from the earliest days of European settlement and allude to a more contemporary manifestation, the 'Stolen Generations' just mentioned. The connection with the disappearance of Aboriginal children from their families is obvious, but the play alludes to several cases of the disappearance of white children, especially the Chamberlain case in which a child was taken from a tent by a dingo near Eyre's Rock/Uluru and suspicion fell on the mother, Lindy Chamberlain. Many Australians believed her guilty due to her emotionless demeanor. Much the same occurs to Elizabeth, the missionary's wife who at one point asks angrily, "Am I to be condemned for my composure? If I wept into your arms and retired to my bed would you feel more at ease?" (39). By alluding to the Chamberlain case and other episodes involving missing children, Bovell believes himself to be evoking a continuing feature of Australian culture, treated at length by Peter Pierce in *Country of Lost Children*. In his "Playwright's Note," he asserts that

our national psyche is haunted by the figure of the lost child. From the first arrival of Europeans, stories of missing, lost and abducted children filled our night-

mares and provoked a deep sense of vulnerability. It's as though we fear that the landscape itself will take our children and therefore our future away. (iii)

In the first instance, *Holy Day* blends past and present by demonstrating how history shapes present culture. Building on that, the script presents incidents emblematic of those aspects of Australian history causing present distress, especially Aboriginal dispossession. Perhaps most powerfully, the tongueless victims in *Holy Day* suggest the impulse to justice that inspired the play and probably should finally inform our reception of it.

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The Spaces of Consciousness: New Possibilities for Contemporary Theatre

As Pamela Howard (2002) points out in her article on *design* in the *Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*, design in the theatre has seen major changes in the course of the 20th century. While it used to be (regarded as) the surface decoration of the stage, it has become an independent and important component in the making of any theatrical event, and with it the designer has gained equal status with the actor and the director. Distinct areas of design are differentiated: set, costume, light and sound. Even among those there is a kind of hierarchy: thus the *Who's Who in Contemporary World Theatre* (Meyer-Dinkgräfe) lists numerous famous designers who specialise in set and costume, much fewer who specialise in lighting, and hardly anyone specialising in sound design. It is striking, though, that quite a number of designers now no longer specialise in one or two conventional forms of design, but combine them all, at times even with directing and devising the productions in question, such as Robert Wilson. The term to capture this combination of formerly distinct areas of design is *scenography*, and the artist becomes the *scenographer*.

Set designer John Gunter (2002), in the *Continuum Companion*, suggests five stages of the creative process: the idea, the drawing, the model, building the set in the workshop, and exploring the set on the stage. Predominantly, the study of scenography deals with the last four stages: developing the ability to critically assess the scenographic work