

Lord of the Flies with Grown-Ups

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Mike Dash

Batavia's Graveyard

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OVER THE YEARS, I have tried to interest various film producers in the story of the *Batavia*. In the end, I managed to interest a composer and an opera company instead. Certainly, it's the kind of story that cries out for the mythic retelling of opera, a kind of *Lord of the Flies* for grown-ups, if only the kind of grown-ups who find, once they are marooned, that they have been two-year-olds all along.

Now a film of the ill-fated expedition (a term I've always wanted to use) is to be made by Paul *Total Recall* Verhoeven, based on *Batavia's Graveyard*, a new history of the events written by Mike Dash. Dash has near-total seventeenth-century recall, and it will be fascinating to see what Verhoeven makes of his complex historical material. At the end of the story, the opera maroons a man and a woman instead of two men on the Australian mainland, but, as librettist, I claim the excuse of mythic licence. Opera is not a mimetic narrative form, but film, as the predominant realist narrative form of our time (among other things), perhaps owes more of a duty to fact. History is written by the Oscar winners in our film-ridden culture — with this privilege must come certain obligations towards the historical record. Until now, the standard source has been Henrietta Drake-Brockman's *Voyage to Disaster* (1963), a book that is 'chaotically organised', to quote Dash. Drake-Brockman did, however, as Dash concedes, perform miracles in extracting information, pre-electronically, from the Dutch archives. She also published the first English translation of the journals of Francisco Pelsaert, Commander of the expedition, the prime firsthand account of the events.

Those events, in brief: the *Batavia*, the finest ship of the Dutch Golden Age, left Amsterdam for the colony of Java in October 1628 on its maiden voyage. Approximately three hundred men, women and children were on board. It was wrecked on Houtman's Abrolhos, a string of Western Australian atolls. Pelsaert set off in a small boat with his second-in-charge, the ship's skipper, and reached the city of Batavia (now Jakarta) in an epic of small-craft navigation. In his absence, a group of men led by Undermerchant Jeronimus Cornelisz established a reign of terror on the island known as

Batavia's Graveyard. Killings commenced, at first secretly, and on semi-judicial disciplinary grounds, then more openly. Women were raped or taken as concubines by the dominant group. A small group of loyal soldiers was exiled to a neighbouring island, and — what else? — warfare broke out between the two islands. By the time Pelsaert returned with a rescue party, 125-odd people had been murdered. The chief ringleaders were tortured and hanged on the spot. Two others, as I've mentioned, were marooned on the Western Australian coast — if marooned is the word for being abandoned on an entire continent.

**Bruce Martin as Commandeur Pelsaert
in the opera *Batavia* (photo by Jeff Busby)**

Later versions of the story, including Hugh Edward's concise and readable *Islands of Angry Ghosts* (1966) and Arabella Edge's fictionalised and richly detailed *The Company* (2000), owe much to Drake-Brockman. But Dash's history represents an astonishing advance on his predecessor. As well as delving even more deeply into the Dutch East India Company archives, he has ransacked provincial archives in the Netherlands and Germany, and discovered much new material, which sheds light on the back-stories (to use a filmic term) of the main characters. His depiction of Francisco Pelsaert is far more complex than the self-portrait that emerges from Pelsaert's own journals, which are both consciously and unconsciously self-serving. Dash offers the less heroic figure, whom I always suspected but ignored for operatic purposes.

The sea voyage is brought stinkingly alive. Golden Age? This was an era when one-third of Holland's population was either on the high seas or serving in colonies where most died of various fevers within months of arrival. Most Indiamen lost twenty to thirty crew members from scurvy before the Cape of Good Hope alone, with insect-spread typhoid at times killing up to half of those on board. Sunburn, thirst, violence, filth, vermin, insects and disease were not unique to the *Batavia*. Nor was rotten salt-meat and sea-biscuit: 'Novice seamen

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learned to distinguish the flavours of the different species; weevils tasted bitter, cockroaches of sausage, maggots were unpleasantly spongy and cold to bite into.'

Most intriguing of all are the new insights Dash offers into the character of the arch-villain Jeronimus. How did he move from being a mild-mannered apothecary in Haarlem to an absurd Caligula-figure strutting about his atoll kingdom in robes and tattered hat, ordering summary executions? Dash offers a wealth of Brueghelian detail on life in the crowded towns of Holland, of Jeronimus's earlier life as an apothecary, his failed business, his marriage, and his association with the painter and sophisticate Torrentius, later broken on the wheel for heresy. Another complex man — more complex perhaps than film can allow, let alone opera. I am not so sure of his speculations about the nature of Psychopathia, however. To transplant a contemporary DSM psychiatric classification of mental illness into a different culture is not particularly useful. Jeronimus was no Hannibal Lecter. His personal journey (even as Dash so memorably records it) reminds me more of Hannah Arendt's classic *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and of how each downward step into evil can seem so small, so innocuous, that even the Eichmanns themselves fail to notice until too late the depth of their descent, like frogs, in slowly heated water, oblivious to being boiled alive.

This last quibble is nothing, though, in the context of a tremendous read, and what is now the essential text on the ill-fated voyage of the *Batavia*. Over to Paul *Starship Troopers* Verhoeven.