Survivor - or Big Brother?

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Robinson Crusoe
Adapted by Gillian Rubinstein

Windmill Productions in association with
Kim Carpenter’s Theatre of Image
The Space

Windmill Productions have completed their first year of operation and there is much to celebrate. In the capable hands of Creative Producer Cate Fowler, Windmill is firmly in the first rank of companies which specialise in work for young audiences. Windmill, it would seem, has stepped straight into the first tier as a national and international producer of children’s theatre.

In the repertoire thus far Windmill has shown us big puppets with its visually appealing Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, showcased the Bell Shakespeare’s excellent production of I Girragundi and re-staged Twinkle Twinkle Little Fish, Simon Phillips’ production based on the work of Eric Carle, which not only successfully toured to Montreal and New York but collected one of this year’s Helpmann Awards as well. The concert feature The Sign of the Seahorse was a strong collaboration with the ASO and the Japanese co-production A World of Paper was, - along with Brundibar, the haunting children’s opera written and first performed in the Terezin concentration camp - a highlight of this year’s Come Out. All in all, it has been a varied and high calibre season.

The most recent production, Robinson Crusoe, from the Sydney based Kim Carpenter Theatre of Image is, in some respects, less satisfactory. It has high production values - particularly the evocative musical composition from Richard Vella and Carpenter’s own stage decor - but the text of Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe’s novel, is problematic for stage adaptation.

First published in 1719 and regarded by some as the first English novel, Robinson Crusoe has been described along with Faust, Don Juan and Don Quixote as one of the mythic works of Western literature. Based on the actual experiences of Alexander Selkirk, Defoe’s account of shipwreck and survival is the very paradigm of survival and self discipline. Crusoe is synonymous with the challenge of the solitary life and his courage and
resourcefulness have fuelled everyone from desert island cartoonists to those who would make a case for the innate civilisation of the Britisher.

With the use of multimedia images from Fabian Astore, Kim Carpenter and Gillian Rubinstein, who adapted this version, bring to us all of the adventure of the ripping yarn. First there is Crusoe’s shipwreck with crashing masts and high seas projected on the large screen at centre stage, then the resourcefulness of the survivor - collecting the washed up cargo, random furniture and other gear to create his cubby on the beach. We see Crusoe capture water, then fish. He raises and milks goats. He sows seeds for grains and eventually makes bread. By the end of a year he has a surplus, by two he is likely to float a company and pay a shareholders’ dividend on a twenty percent quarterly increase - but I’m getting ahead of myself here.

As Crusoe, Nicholas Berg is engaging, if sometimes a little wooden. But then the easy vernacular which Rubinstein writes is somewhat at odds with Defoe’s dogged hero. As Berg narrates his adventures he is serenaded by Island Muses one of whom, Jan Pinkerton, doubles as his pet parrot. There is some stern detail - a goat is brained by a rock and Crusoe yanks a metre or two of entrails for the delectation of the primary school audience.

Then, Crusoe realises he is Not Alone. Friday, energetically performed by Nelson Reguera, is Crusoe’s encounter with the Other. And what a nuisance he is - wanting to smoke his pipe and fidget with his carefully organised domain. No wonder Friday and the Parrot gang up like naughty children while Crusoe berates them for not keeping the dorm tidy.

It is with the Crusoe and Friday relationship that I think the production starts to drift into choppy waters. In framing the story as Crusoe’s - he speaks, he defines the reality of the play and his values predominate - it is very hard to give the Friday subtext any traction. And Friday needs a subtext because Defoe’s novel is not exactly value-free. It is the very bible of individualist economics and the work ethic. It is a triumphal aria for the imperial and the mercantile and anyone who studies the novel soon has that pointed out.

But for a schools audience that is not at all self-evident and while, we see Crusoe eventually befriending and valuing Friday, for the majority of the
play Carpenter’s Theatre of Image has systematically signified cultural supremacy. A very basic challenge in interpretation seems to have been ignored - or, at least, under-estimated. Quite simply, the novel is anchored in the values of its day, and ours, one presumes, are somewhat different - just as they now differ from those of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Biggles.