

Who is Speaking Me?
Dramaturgy and Textual Authority

*So in the end I did not know
what was the truth,
what was a lie,
and what was mere rambling.*

— Susan Barton in *Foe* by J.M. Coetzee,
adapted for the stage by Peter Glazer¹

Last fall, I had the opportunity to work as a dramaturge and assistant director on the world premiere of *Foe*, adapted and directed by Peter Glazer for Berkeley's mainstage season. I thought it might be useful for me to talk today about the role that I played as a dramaturge for the production in order to describe the kinds of interesting negotiations that take place around research in many theatrical productions. In doing so, I hope to complicate some of our common assumptions about who performs arts research and what the object of that research should be.

But let me step back for a moment. Having been mistakenly called a drama-church on several occasions, I know that the word dramaturge isn't a term that's familiar to many people. So I'll start by giving a brief job description. The dramaturge traditionally serves as a liaison between the scholarly or conceptual aspects of a production and their practical realization on stage. Although s/he is called upon to perform a range of activities — including putting together program notes, creating press releases, developing curricular tools for student audiences — the dramaturge normally fulfills two main functions. The first is to assist in the development of new plays. This usually involves working with a playwright to edit and revise a text before and during rehearsal. The second function is to compile research for a production. These research materials can include anything from historical background to information about the social and political issues raised by the play. Traditionally thought of the guardian of the play's text and context, the dramaturge is likened to a watchdog, a curator, or a human history textbook.²

Before I get into the problems that these kinds of analogies posed for me while working on *Foe*, let me tell you a little about the play. *Foe* is adapted from the novel by the same title by J.M. Coetzee, a marvelous South African writer who, quite serendipitously, won the Nobel Prize the day before our show opened. Coetzee's novel is also an adaptation. It reworks Daniel Defoe's classic, *Robinson Crusoe*. Set in the early 18th Century, *Foe* tells the story of Susan Barton, a woman who is cast away on Crusoe's Island. (Coetzee drops the *e* in his spelling of the character; Defoe's Crusoe becomes Cruso in *Foe*). In Peter's adaptation, the character of Susan is split among three actors who are present onstage throughout the play. While on the island, Susan records her experiences of living with Cruso and his voiceless, African slave Friday. The first part of *Foe* ends with their rescue and with the death of Cruso. Susan returns to London with Friday in search of a writer who will give voice to her story and who will make Friday's silence speak. That writer turns out to be Daniel Defoe or Foe as he was called before

he changed his name for aristocratic effect. We are left with a strong premonition of the fate that will befall Susan's tale. Like other women of her time, she will be excised from the narrative.

Now, as you might guess, the intertextual and historical complexities of this novel offered particular challenges to me as a dramaturge. Not only would the cast need background on Defoe's novel, but they would also need information about the numerous literary works that serve as inter-texts for *Foe* like Defoe's *Roxana* and *Memoirs of a Cavalier*. Taking my job as a human history textbook seriously, I went off to the library to gather research materials. I showed up to rehearsals armed to the teeth with visual and textual information on a range of germane topics. My dramaturgical stockpile included: books on the history of 18th Century England; engravings by William Hogarth and poems by Jonathan Swift depicting life in London; old maps showing locations in the text; diagrams explaining the transatlantic slave trade; descriptions of Bahia (the site of Crusoe's plantation); images and descriptions of the Middle Passage; biographies of Defoe; illustrations from *Robinson Crusoe*; background on apartheid and Coetzee's native South African context; and literary criticism of Coetzee's work.

Despite the enormous amount of factual information that I had gathered for the production, I was surprised by the kinds of questions that I was asked when I showed up for one of my first brainstorming sessions with Peter. What kind of an accent should Crusoe have? he asked. My first response was to say Yorkshire. After all, the first lines of *Robinson Crusoe* are, I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York.³ But Coetzee never mentions York in his novel, Peter pointed out, Should we really be relying on the authority of Defoe's text for this information? That's true, I replied and began to think about other ways of answering the question. I started again, We also know that Coetzee's Crusoe repeatedly lies about the past. He first tells Susan: My father was a wealthy merchant who quit his counting-house in search of adventure, but then the next day says, I was a poor lad of no family. I shipped out as a cabin-boy but was captured by Moors.⁴ The asymmetry of these accounts is part of Coetzee's literary strategy in the novel, that is, to question the veracity of any singular account of history. Coetzee's view of history can be summed up in this remarkable statement:

I reiterate the elementary and rather obvious point I am making: that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse, too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other⁵

In *Foe*, Coetzee wishes to create alternate histories of Crusoe and his island. Defoe's Crusoe is a wide-eyed adventurer, taking care to record all of his thoughts in a journal. Coetzee's Crusoe is miserably solemn and refuses to set down his experiences in writing. In Defoe's account, Friday has the power of speech but is compelled to speak in the Master's tongue. In Coetzee's story, Friday literally has no tongue. Brutal slave traders have cut it out. Coetzee's concern with the authority of historical accounts must be seen in relation to the apartheid context in which he was writing. Friday's tongue is the tongue of black South Africa, its voices and histories silenced by the white colonial administration.

What does it mean, then, to do historical research for a play that overtly disavows its historical authenticity? I started to understand early on in the process that my dramaturgical strategy

would have change in order to serve the demands of this particular kind of text. Following Coetzee's suggestion, I would have to give up the traditional dramaturge's role of preserving the text or of acting as its guardian. So let's return to the accent question. It now became possible to ask: Could Cruso be Portuguese? We know that he calls out in Portuguese while in a fever. Could we stage a Cruso that speaks like an Afrikaner? Looking back at the process now, I realize that it was at this point that I began having a hard time reconciling the idea of research with the newly discovered parameters of my work. In Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, research is defined as the diligent inquiry or examination in seeking facts or principles; laborious or continued search after truth.⁶ Once we started to move away from Defoe and Coetzee's texts as authorizing narratives, it became more difficult to qualify our work under conventional definitions of research. At the very least, we were no longer seeking out some objective kind of truth about the characters and their historical circumstances. In short, we started to pay less attention to who a character was than who they could be.

Peter and I tried to carry this kind of imagining, in its playful subjunctive mode, into the rehearsal process with the actors. We showed the cast different versions of the Cruso story to illustrate a range of possibilities for the characters. These included everything from cartoons, to a brooding avant-garde film by Bu uel, to a Hollywood Blockbuster starring Pierce Brosnan. We had conversations with the actors individually, asking questions about each of their roles. This seemed especially important since Coetzee had provided unreliable histories or no histories at all for many of the characters. Ultimately, it was in these conversations with the actors that the most insightful inquiries were being made into the text. The actors, in their attempts to embody or enact the characters, were performing a kind of dramaturgical research that I could not have carried out in all of my laborious trips to the library.

Example #1. Early on in the process, we have a discussion about the character of the Girl, a child who mysteriously shows up on Susan's doorstep in the second act claiming to her long lost daughter. Susan insists that the Girl is not her daughter and that she must be a fake sent by Foe for his own amusement. I explain to the actors that Coetzee's Girl is based on a character in Defoe's novel, *Roxana*, who is also searching for her mother. But the plot in *Roxana* is too dissimilar from Coetzee's *Foe* for it to be particularly helpful for Khloe Lin, the actress playing the Girl. So instead of providing Khloe with extensive background on *Roxana*, Peter and I ask her what she thought of her character. I am Friday's tongue, she declares. This statement startles me at first. In all of the critical literature that I have read on *Foe*, few writers have made an explicit connection between the Girl and Friday. When we were doing the read-through, Khloe explains, I noticed that I don't have any stage time with Friday. I don't get a chance to interact with him any meaningful way. From this, she deduces that the Girl must be Friday's double, a constant reminder of loss that haunts the text. Like Friday, she is deprived of origin. There are countless interpretations made possible by this suggestive remark. If the Girl is Friday's tongue, what does it mean for Susan to reject her? How might this open up feminist or postcolonial readings of the play?

Example #2. We're working on the third act of *Foe*. During a break, Caroline Barad, one of the actors playing Susan, sits down next to me and asks: Do you think that *Foe* is a feminist play? What do you mean by feminist, I respond. I mean, she says, do you think that this play is really about women or is Susan just a symbol for something else. I ask her to continue her train of thought, to tell me what has prompted the question. The more I speak my lines, she

explains, the more they sound like they are written by a man. A woman would not write Susan's lines in this way. Her desire would be expressed differently. This comment raises questions that we had not asked at the beginning of the process. We had discussed the social position of women in the 18th century and what it would have meant for a woman to be a writer at this time, but we hadn't talked about the gendered implications of Coetzee's writing. This is indeed an important question to ask, Caroline points out, because the epilogue of the play is devoted to Coetzee's position as a white writer. In the epilogue to *Foe*, Coetzee grapples with the problem of writing Friday's story, the problem that white writers face when speaking for the black colonized. But does he ever really deal with his position as a male writer? We wonder if the voice that Caroline has heard in her dialogue is part of Coetzee's deliberate attempt to foreground his own authorship. I turn her attention to the set of lines that best sums up the crisis of authority in the text. Pointing to the strange Girl that has been sent to her, Susan asks Foe, who perhaps functions as Coetzee's stand-in: if this girl is a creature of yours, speaking words you have prepared for her, then who am I and who indeed are you? Who is speaking me? ⁷

In recounting these snippets of rehearsal, I have been trying to give you a sense of the fluid relationship that dramaturgical research can and should occupy in the theatre. By setting the dramaturge apart as the scholar or intellect in the artistic process, we not only misrepresent what is actually going on in rehearsals but we reinforce familiar boundaries between theory and practice, research and art. It is more productive, I think, to displace the image of the dramaturge as a font of authority or knowledge, and to conceive of dramaturgy as a collaborative practice existing in an organic feedback loop between all members of the production. As Jill O'Brien suggests, performance itself is a mode of critical discovery: It presses director and cast to attend to particular features of literary works and to make concrete performance choices that both illuminate the text and particularize one view of the whole. ⁸ In other words, instead of merely thinking of research as something that informs performance, we should also think of performance as a kind of experiential inquiry. It is in this sense that performance can open up alternate registers of the word "research," to include other words like testing, exploring, experimenting, particularizing, trying out, and yes, even rehearsing.

Notes

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*, Unpublished Play, Adapted by Peter Glazer (Draft 8/1/03), p. 13. For the original quotation see J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (New York: Penguin USA, 1986), p. 12.

² See different analogies for the role of the dramaturge in Geoffrey S. Proehl, *The Images Before Us: Metaphors for the Role of the Dramaturg in American Theatre*, *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1997), pp. 124-136; Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter, *Working the Weave*, *Dramaturgy Now: Dramaturgies II, Real Time Arts* <http://www.realttimearts.net/dramaturgy/kg_dramaturgies2.html> ; Mark Turvin, *The Dramaturg: Modern Day Court Jester*, <<http://www.goldfishpublishers.com/DramaturgEssay.html>>

³ Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Fern Canyon Press, 1996-Present, Original Publication 1719, <<http://www.deadmentellnotales.com/onlinetexts/robinson/crusoe1.shtml>>

⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*, Unpublished Play, Adapted by Peter Glazer (Draft 8/1/03), p. 12. For the original quotation see J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (New York: Penguin USA, 1986), p. 12.

⁵ J.M. Coetzee in David Atwell, *The Problem of History in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*, *Rendering Things Visible*, Martin Trump, ed. (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1990), p.103.

⁶ *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass: C & G Merriam Co, 1996, 1998).

⁷ ⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*, Unpublished Play, Adapted by Peter Glazer (Draft 8/1/03), p. 94. For the original quotation see J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (New York: Penguin USA, 1986), p. 133.

⁸ Jill O'Brien, Performance as Criticism: Discoveries and Documentation Through Enactment, Communication Studies 1987, Fall 40: 189.