

Black and White

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Sheri O'Neill

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ABSTRACT

Into White is a playscript for theatre incorporating projected film/video performance, both pre-recorded and live, as an integral part of the narrative. The playscript, with an approximate performance time of 80 minutes, is written to second draft and contextualised by an exegesis: *Black and White*.

The playscript explores the conflicts generated within the crucible of the personal relationship of two fictional, 21st century New Zealand artists – a man and a woman, a painter and a poet – with the drama sparking from the dynamics between their individual expression, experience and understanding of their creative lives. Questions regarding the place of art and the artist in contemporary society are generated from the central, personal drama.

The exegesis centres on the theme of a gendered creative process as it is reflected by the synthesis of binary choices made in the creation/construction of the playscript. These include: the male and female protagonists and their parallel stories; the intermedial text (live performance and recorded performance); the use of both prose and verse; the presentation of a linear plot by means of a non-linear narrative; and the visual metaphors incorporated into the set and staging. The exegesis describes and discusses these thematic, genre and stylistic choices in relation to the writer's experiences and processes in conceiving and writing the playscript, situates the work in its relevant social, historical and theoretical context, and discusses the possibilities for its production and performance.

EXEGESIS: *BLACK AND WHITE*

Introduction

...every decision you make is shaping the personal style, vision and interpretation of your play. Those choices are your theatrical fingerprints.

Ken Duncum (2011, p. 13).

New Zealand playwright Duncum was speaking about the process of adaptation of another's text into a play, but I think his comment can be applied in a more general sense. Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned in the creation of this project is that writing is a series of choices: sometimes random and seemingly accidental, often conscious and carefully contrived, always expendable in the service of the work.

Into White is a full length (approximately 80 minutes) playscript for theatre about an artist couple that contains a synthesis of ideas around the theme of art in general and the creative process in particular. On the eve of the first public showing of painter Joe Holloway's seminal Black Octave Series – seven paintings encapsulating his career, extricated with difficulty from the possession of his ex-wives and lovers – Joe discovers that one painting has not arrived. He travels up north in deteriorating weather to see ex-wife Lilian, a poet, finding her weak and emaciated. Trapped by a flooded river, Joe and the dying Lilian revisit their past throughout the night, until dawn brings each of them a unique epiphany. This exegesis describes and discusses how binary choices that were made in the construction of the playscript reflect the theme of a gendered creative process examined in the story of the play.

Dialectics in drama are the oppositional forces or points of view through action, story, characterisation, and relationships that provide the energy that drives the play. *Into White* contains several elements that, by reflecting the theme of male and female protagonists dealing with the creative process, construct a dialectic field for the play. These elements include: the two protagonists with their parallel stories; the intermedial text (incorporating live and recorded performance); the use of both prose and verse dialogue; and the presentation of a linear plot by means of a non-linear narrative. They

are supported by the binary metaphor of black and white in the text, which is also incorporated visually into the set and staging.

The exegesis examines these reflections in relation to my writing process, situates the work within the existing canon and relevant literary, dramatic and performance theory, and postulates a future for the work.

Questions and Answers

I just got this obsessive idea, as if you have a nightmare...only it was not a nightmare. It was an obsession that took the form of a play and I felt I had to write it.

Maria Fornes (cited in Cummings, 1985, p. 51).

I do not consider myself a storyteller, in the sense of being inspired to craft a fine plot. My writing, and my urge to write, is more akin to Patricia Glensor's "slow process of untangling an obsession" (cited in Ensing, 1977, p. 144). Glensor was referring to her painting, but speaking as a poet in New Zealand's first anthology of women's poetry, a linkage which seems most apt in relation to *Into White's* painter and poet protagonists.

The obsession I have hopefully gone some way to untangling during the writing of *Into White* arose from two questions. The first one I have long asked myself: "Why is it apparently more difficult for a woman to pursue her art than it is for a man?" The second question arose from a dream: "Who is that woman disappearing into horizonless white light, where has she come from and where is she going?"

Page and Stage

In writing I played, and I played from the very beginning of their creation, any and all parts that entered my fancy.

Sophie Treadwell (cited in Dickey, 1999, p. 68).

My adult life consists of brief paragraphs as an actor and singer inserted within six chapters of child-rearing. As a consequence, when I began to write in my late 40s I automatically turned to drama to assuage my love of performance.

...the theatre is a public arena, playwrights should use that. You know, when I hear people saying, “Oh, I hate ideas in plays,” I think, “Well, just don't go to the theatre”...

Timberlake Wertenbaker (cited in Berney, 1994, pp. 144-145).

The medium of theatre also appeals to me as the last bastion of discursive public space, where speculation should always be rife, if not run riot, and ideas can still be bandied about freely. Additionally, I'm didactic by nature.

The construction that has begun as this dramatic text, *Into White*, although not yet a play, has not been written primarily to be read, and therefore requires of its reader an actively three-dimensional imagination. It cannot be considered as complete until it has all its theatrical elements – physical, visual, audible, cinematic, aural, musical and architectonic – in place, through its interpretation by dramaturg, director, designer, cinematographer, sound designer, actors, composer and musicians, and finally, it is received by a live audience. I will discuss the possibilities for production further on in the exegesis, but meanwhile, the words of Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock express how I see the future process for this text:

... the actors, directors and designers don't serve the playwright. They serve the document, which is what I call a text... The first production of a play is a journey of discovery, an exploration, because the playwright often doesn't know, hopefully, all that is there... The work is larger than the person who created it. All the playwright is, ultimately, is the means to an end

(1990, cited in DeFelice, 2005, p. 8).

Artist and Mother

I wonder how many women
denied themselves daughters,
closed themselves in rooms,
drew the curtains
so they could mainline words.

A child is not a poem,
a poem is not a child.
There is no either/or.
However.

-excerpt from "Spelling", Margaret Atwood (1981, p. 63).

I've long been interested in the role played by art and artists: in particular whether the artist still performs a social role for the community, or whether the creator of a work of art is so celebritised, the creation of a work of art so fetishised and the created work of art so commodified that the concept of art itself is devoid of any real meaning or value. The association of aesthetic values with class and economic power, interrogated by cultural theorists such as Bourdieu (1993), has culminated in the postmodern dilemma, as described by art historian Robert Hughes, of artists as social commentators "whose work is collected by... bankers and financiers" (1980, p. 386).

Lilian's mockery of "the great I AM" (*Into White*, p. 49) references the idea of artistic/creative individuality. The history of European aesthetics¹ pinpoints the rise of the Romantic movement in the 18th century, with its model of the solitary (male) creative genius, as the beginning of a journey that peaked in the mid 20th century when, as literary theorist turned conceptual art critic John Carey would have it, abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock carried on "as if they were founders of world religions" (2005, p. 138).

He may have been referring to the painters, but this "portrait of the artist" has been generally applied for the past two centuries across all of the arts. Meanwhile, many

1 For the definitive history of the Western artistic paradigm, see Barzun (2000).

women have struggled to balance mothering and artistic creation, caught in the dilemma of being either an artist or a mother, unable to find supported and satisfying ways of achieving both. There may, in reality, be no “either/or”, but the facts remain that creative inspiration tends to arise, much like the demands of mothering itself, unscheduled, and demanding of one's full attention for indeterminate periods of time. Perhaps mothering, as evolutionary imperatives recede and surrogacy technology advances, may eventually become as commodified as art and similarly theorised.

Autobiography and Biography

How long are you prepared to spend on the couch?

Dr Dale Dodd (personal communication, August 8, 2011).

An obsession may not always be, strictly speaking, autobiographical, but surely it arises in part from, and feeds back into, the concerns and experiences of the obsessor. Like my protagonist Lilian, I don't see much point in writing unless it is autobiographical to the degree that it is also somewhat personally transformative. However, I have not written solely of, or for, myself; although *Into White* incorporates my experiences as an artist, as the mother of artists, and as the partner of an artist, it is also informed by my readings of biographies of artists and studies of creative partnerships and I especially hope that it may speak to other women.

Three works in particular were major influences and inspirations for the play: the collection of biographical essays on New Zealand artist couples compiled by Deborah Shepard, *Between the lives: Partners in art* (2005); Drusella Modjesky's double biography of two Australian women painters, *Stravinsky's lunch* (1999); and Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron's compilation about international artist couples, *Significant others: Creativity and intimate partnership* (1993).

From this combination of personal and related experience it appears that although barriers may have fallen considerably since the days when any female artistic endeavour was treated with contempt or condescension,² the sociocultural expectations of

2 See, for example, Roethke's list of the reasons why women make inferior poets (1963, pp. 133-34).

mothering and the purely physiological necessity of “being there for your kids” continue to render a creative life difficult for women. I watch my daughter, a painter, struggle to find the time and the energy to paint with a houseful of young children, and her situation doesn't look very different to how it would have been 30 years ago. Perhaps it is easier now, with fathers actively co-parenting, more accessible childcare, and the option of childlessness both more socially acceptable and physically achievable than for previous generations, but it is still a constant conundrum for the female artist.

This conundrum is represented in the play by the contrasting attitudes to their art of three generations of women: Lilian, Clio and Lilian's daughter, Zoe. Where Lilian has been disappointed in her youthful vision of a mutually fulfilling life and creative partnership with Joe, Clio is adamantly no man's muse, and represents the woman who has made a conscious choice to remain childless, at least until she is well established as an artist. Zoe represents the natural creativity of childhood, and its sacrifice, particularly for females, at adolescence.

An autobiographical plot disclaimer is due here. How Lilian escapes from what she experiences as a no-win situation is purely how her story worked its way out in my imagination, and I admit no personal inspiration or responsibility for it. In planning this exegesis, I consulted Jungian analyst Dale Dodd regarding the possibility of his examination of the text in terms of Jungian concepts of archetypal story and character, but eventually decided that not only might it prove a bottomless can of worms in terms of the exegesis, requiring proof of competency over a very extensive field, but also in terms of my own personal investment. Margaret Atwood has described the mystery of authorial creation as “the jekyll hand, the hyde hand, and the slippery double” (2002, pp. 31-57), a description with which I agree: the analysis of a creator by her own creation might prove a slippery slope indeed.

Reading and Writing

The obsession that instigated *Into White* led into a long period of reading and reflection, not only regarding creative partnerships, but also aesthetics, asceticism, poetic drama

and intermedial theatre. Additionally, I reviewed existing dramatic texts on the theme of male/female creative partnerships.

Internationally, there are many contemporary plays about the art world, for example British/American Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991; 1996),³ Australian David Williamson's *Up For Grabs* (2000) and the French play *Art* by Yasmina Reza (1995; 1997); and historical/biographical plays about famous artists, who invariably feature as either the stereotypically dysfunctional, male, creative genius⁴ or his female equivalent: tortured and doomed singers and starlets (Piaf, Garland, Joplin, Monroe, Callas et al). Historical/biographical reconstructions of the relationships between notable couples are also common, and those written by women would appear closest in theme to *Into White*.⁵

In the New Zealand dramatic canon I am unaware of equivalent fictional treatments of the creative partnership.⁶ The other aspects that would appear to be unique to this play as a New Zealand work are the manner and intention with which the video is integrated into the narrative and the verse and prose combined in the dialogue, choices originally intended to differentiate between the inner and outer worlds of the artist characters.

Stage and Screen

There's not a lot of hope for theatre as it is today and there's not a lot of hope for cinema in the direction it's going right now...and there's a place in the middle...and there's a form of art and I don't know what it looks like and I don't know what's going to happen...but I'm sure it's going to happen.

Robert Lepage (cited in Gieseckam, 2007, p. 220).

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- 3 For plays with two dates given in the text or footnotes, the first date refers to the year of first production. All plays cited I have seen in production and/or read in publication. Those read are cited in full in the bibliography.
 - 4 Two examples are the earlier *Modigliani* (1988), by Dennis McIntyre, produced in Auckland circa 1994, and more recently, American playwright John Logan's *Red* (2009), about the American abstract impressionist Mark Rothko, produced by Auckland Theatre Company in 2011.
 - 5 For example, *On the Rocks* by British Amy Rosenthal (2008; 2008) about D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield and their partners, and Canadian Sharon Pollock's *Angel's Trumpet* (2001; 2003), about Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald.
 - 6 Although Fiona Samuel's *The Liar's Bible* (2004; 2009) does present a philandering male poet whose wife has lost her hair as a result of chemotherapy and gives away an expensive painting to the pizza delivery man.

We live increasingly in what Giesekeam (2007) calls “a world saturated with mediation” (p. 24), so it seems inevitable that mediation will invade our theatres, and if they are to survive this may be essential. A starting point for this discussion of the use of video in *Into White* is Giesekeam's definition of the difference between multimedia and intermedia as applied to video onstage. Although they can be seen as two ends of a spectrum, he considers multimedia the supportive, scene-enhancing use of video, and intermedia as when video is integral to the script (p. 8).

Although theatre has long been vastly mediatised, intermedial theatre differs from multimedia-supported theatre, in that it does not attempt to hide the mediation involved in the performance, rather it draws attention to it: as Giesekeam states, destroying “the normal cloak of invisibility that is cast over it in cinemas and on television” (p. 252).

The relationship between screen and stage increasingly works both ways, indicating a continuing investigation of the concept of “reality” in performance. Where theatre has been experimenting with film and video since it first became available, some filmmakers are now hearkening back to elements of theatre. Lars von Trier's 2003 film *Dogville* was shot on an unrealistic set, with streets and houses (without walls or doors) marked out in white paint on a studio floor. Theatre theorist John Hans-Theis Lehmann (2006) terms this *remediation*: “film remediated theatre, now theatre is remediating film and television...not to replicate them, but to probe their status and impact on us” (p. 13).

My stated intention in my Masters proposal was to:

...exploit the conventional and technical dichotomies between film and live performance, by showing the inner world of the play's two central characters and the external world of their relationship on both screen and stage. By weaving the narrative in and out of the media, a visual and performed/spoken text will be created that will not only reflect the “Show/Tell”, “Pictures/Words” artistic practices of the artist couple, but also establish common ground between the engaging confinement of live performance and the disengaged freedom of film.

As far as it is possible to ascertain from a written text, I think I have achieved what I set out to do. My rule of thumb has been to write nothing I did not approximately

understand the technology for, and I anticipate that the collaborative process of production will extend and enhance the intermedia written into the script.

My contemplation of the binaries of “liveness” and “non-liveness”,⁷ “reality” and “non-reality” followed through into the decision to use poetry for the onscreen dialogue, and prose onstage.

Prose and Verse

Then there was the element of poetry. Poetry connected with a play was livelier poetry than poetry unconnected with a play.

Gertrude Stein (1934, cited in Bay-Cheng & Cole, 2010, p. 13).

This is not Shakespeare, you know. And it's not Shakespearean language, although it uses, often, iambic pentameter. But that's it.

Sally Potter (2005).

My intention with writing the inner dialogue of the characters in verse was to signify and support the onscreen visual performance of their emotional and creative thought. My main inspiration for this was the 2005 feature film *Yes*, written and directed by British multimedia practitioner Sally Potter. Potter's verse dialogue in *Yes* combines iambic pentameter with contemporary (British) speech; the film's title is the final word of James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses*: “a knowing quote from the great project of the stream of consciousness” (Potter, 2005).

Yes was the first film to entirely use metered verse for modern dialogue, but contemporary verse drama without music is also uncommon nowadays on the English-speaking stage,⁸ having fallen from favour since the modernist experiments of last century's dramatists such as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein. Bay-Cheng and Cole (2010) define modernist poetic drama as “those plays that draw attention to themselves as literary creations that are never subsumed into

⁷ See Auslander (1999) for an extensive discussion of these concepts as applied to performance.

⁸ A rare example of contemporary verse drama is British playwright Caryl Churchill's use of rhyming couplets in *Serious Money* (1987). Playmarket's Jean Betts is not aware of any recent New Zealand verse drama (personal communication, 15 November 2011).

the apparent reality of the play” (pp. 17-18), contending that modernist dramatists saw theatre itself as a metaphor for modernism, poetic drama becoming a tool of the modernist attempt to subvert the realism of the “well-made play”, while poets often engaged with theatre as a means of increasing their audience while keeping their art unsullied by popular culture.

In this respect, William Carlos Williams' 1942 play *Many Loves: Trial Horse No. 1* is notable, not only for its blatant parody of realism and theatricality, but also its uncommon mixture of verse with prose. *Many Loves* has a meta-theatrical plot centered on the rehearsal of a poetic drama, using realistic dialogue to present the play within the play, but verse dialogue in contemporary voice for the framing story, which consists principally of a lengthy argument/discussion between the writer/director and his backer, much of it about the relevance of poetic drama.

With *Into White*, my use of verse is not intended to parody realism or theatricality, but rather to express the inner, creative and emotional world of the characters, to distinguish it from the external world. T. S. Eliot wrote of the duality that poetry brought to drama as a “doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once”, going on to say this was “an 'under-pattern', different than allegory or symbolism” (1934, cited in Bay-Cheng & Cole, 2010, p. 22). The combination of poetry and prose I have used in *Into White* reveals the two planes side by side, and thus doubly serves the duality inherent in my theme.

Black and White

Black blacketty black black. The beginning. The base. The root. Zero.
Nothingness. The void. The abyss. The gap-that-will-not-be-described ...

Joe (*Into White*, p. 9).

I'd focus on it really hard, and each time I almost had it – poof! – it would
iridesce and empty into white light. Elusive, ineffable, impossible to define
or describe...

Lilian (*Into White*, p. 25).

As referred to earlier, the final vision of a woman disappearing into white light and the title that arose from it, the omega and alpha of the play, were already fully formed at its conception.

However, the use of the opposing non-colour, black, and particularly The Black Octaves as a theatrical device, arose naturally out of the work. Possibly I ran with the Octaves to the detriment of the play, perhaps there is a finite number of things you can do in heptads or octaves without wearying the reader/viewer. But they have provided a useful structure on which to hang many elements of the play, acting as metaphor, symbol, scenery, technology, and timekeeper for the non-linear narrative.

At the essential symbolic level, “black” and “white”, as used in the text and staging, refer to the printed word and the white page, the paint and the canvas, the materiality of art and the sublimity of spiritual ecstasy, the void and the creation, artist and muse, yin and yang, and last, but not least, man and woman.

She and He

... “a woman writing like a woman writing like a woman” is quintessentially theatrical, feminist and deconstructive all at once.

Peggy Karnuf (cited in Freedman, 1990, p. 72).

I did not set out to make a consciously “feminist” work, inasmuch as I did not contrive to illustrate feminist themes; the work arose from my own experience and my research into the biography of male/female creative partnership. But as a woman writing a playscript about a woman writer's experience of creativity – “a woman writing as a woman writing as a woman” – there is no way the work could avoid feminist influence, and in its analysis, a feminist critique.

While acknowledging that the dialectic nature of Western dramatic theatre has long been seen by feminists as a structural convention that frames and supports difference, Barbara Freedman (1990) suggests that theatre can also be a means for reframing, pointing out that a deconstructionist “overconcern with revisioning representation” (p.

69), for example in terms of narrative style, may in actuality deny the exploration of the everyday experiences of contemporary women, and by implication, become a theatre of exclusivity.

In the early writing I did flirt with feminist/deconstructionist ideas of narrative. As the research was absorbed, the text began to arrive as a series of non-chronological short scenes around my ideas and characters. Ken Duncum has described a similar writing process for his play *Flipside* as “making compost” (2005, p. 88). I prefer “pot pourri”. Many of my ideas came disjointedly through dreams and reverie, and I connected the dots in the physical act of writing. I have learned to trust that in the depths of an obsession there is usually a story, but at this point not only was Lilian emphatically the sole protagonist, with Joe a minor character, but I was also considering the whole play as a plotless series of scenes that could be played in any order.

I had not reckoned with Joe. As soon as he received the mission to retrieve the Black Octaves, originally as a motive for him to visit Lilian, he took off with the story, and seemingly everything I wrote around Joe from that point on insisted on submission to rising action and three act structure and contributed to the construction of a linear plot. As the writing progressed I accepted the inevitable and consciously strove to write Joe and Lilian as dual protagonists with parallel stories. My concession to deconstruction was to tell their story(ies), spanning more than 20 years in the plot, by means of a non-linear narrative, specifically by “flashbacks” in time, on both stage and screen, bookended by a prologue and epilogue which are identical and actually constitute a “flashforward” (and another binary). However, the linear action of the play – from Joe's discovery of the missing painting to Lilian's final exit – spans a mere 24 hours.

I was assisted in working out this dual narrative by the structure classes with Mike Johnson and James George, and a re-reading of Christopher Vogler's *The writer's journey* (1996). My application of Vogler's “Hero's Journey” to Lilian's story was tempered and informed by Helen Jacey's recent *The woman in the story* (2010). Jacey, originally a counsellor with many years' experience in women's real life stories, has adapted the mythic structure of Vogler and Joseph Campbell (1973) to her definition of an archetypal female perspective. Where Vogler's Hero “returns with the elixir”, Jacey's

Heroine “heals her inner wound”. Although I’m hopeful that I have subverted each of my protagonists’ missions sufficiently to leave the reader/viewer only mildly conscious of the vigorous underlying nod to the laws of Hollywood screenwriting, however gendered, possibly my biggest concern for the text at present is that I’m not sure that I have achieved equal narrative status for them. Effectively conveying, via the text, changes in time in the narrative, is a lesser concern, as I am reasonably confident this can be worked out in the workshopping and staging.

Feminism is like the vacuuming – every five years or so you have to do it all over again.

Joke told by Kim Hill.⁹

Although unintentional, it could be said that the story of the play somewhat reflects my interpretation of the so-called “three waves” of Western feminism: from the first wave attempts to achieve equality by doing the things that men do; to the isolationist politics of the second wave; to the postmodern/poststructuralist project to either explain away the necessity for either or find a synthesis of both. When Lilian finds herself unable to work in a male-dominated and competitive environment, she seeks isolation and solitude, hoping for the return of her creative inspiration. When that also fails, she sets herself on the path to something entirely new, a sort of aesthetic and ascetic con-fusion. Whether this is a valid solution or just plain insane remains for the reader and the audience to decide; if I held any conscious intention in its formulation it was most likely a metaphoric one:

The artist kills experience into art, for temporal experience can only escape death by dying into the ‘immortality’ of artistic form. The fixity of ‘life’ in art, and the fluidity of ‘life’ in nature, are incompatible

Albert Gelpi (1979, cited in Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 14).

⁹ Saturday Morning with Kim Hill, Radio New Zealand National (2011, Sept 17).

Life and Death

See all the lacerated, bleeding girls:
 Sylvia, spouting words in gobs and gouts;
 and Charlotte, with her secret, seeping wound;
 the leaking gash of Mary's crimson mouth;
 and Frida, bound by sticky scarlet cords.
 Possessed and wounded, all the bloody girls
 are bleeding, bleeding, bleeding into art.

Clio (*Into White*, p. 10).

However, the presentation of a female protagonist who gives up her art and then her very life, apparently unable to master either, may get me into critical hot water, hearkening as it does not only to the concerns and themes of repressed female Victorian novelists (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000), supposedly long since written out of women writers' systems, but also to a mainstream New Zealand literary culture that, according to essayist Patrick Evans (2008), has too long been dominated by "narratives of writing and suffering that mimic(ked) the dominant culture's masochistic nationalism" (p. 7). This tendency to textualise (and live out, as a writer/artist), "agonic" narratives imbued with "the giving and receiving of pain", pioneered (metaphor intended) by the rugged masculinity of our good, keen, men-alone, transferred to a focus (by, presumably, women writers) on the female and especially the female body, and the production (by, presumably, Maori writers) of Maori narratives that foreground pain is (says Evans) no longer culturally necessary and must be superceded (p. 7).

I can't help but wonder, "Why?" I see little sign that women and Maori in our society have been totally de-marginalised. I do see considerable pretense that all is well, and a corresponding danger that our literature and our drama may become collusive. Besides, as Joseph Campbell (1991) has so gleefully pointed out, life, and consequently our stories about it, is all about "killing and eating" (pp. 53; 90-91). To deny the reality of human beings giving and receiving pain, in a word, suffering, is the first step on a path that must surely end in the denial of death, when, according to commentators such as Gelpi, and also Margaret Atwood (2002), the fear of death may be exactly what moves us to write in the first place.

When Lilian loses her will to write she considers the concept of suffering carefully and comes to her own conclusions. She decides she cannot be a true artist and a live one. The performance of her suicide is her ultimate autobiographical expression; her disappearance “into white” a signifier of her ultimate submission to the Muse.

Them and Us

A binary absence in *Into White* may generate the question: “Where are the Maori characters?” In its present form, the play appears resolutely non-bicultural. However, at one stage I envisaged Joe Holloway as Maori, and also his daughter Zoe, son Baby Eddie and the Young Man. This early choice related to three things: an automatic desire to represent New Zealand's biculturalism; a news story (White, 2009) about an ex-lover's attempts to sell a large number of Ralph Hotere's paintings, gifted to her by the artist several decades previously, the inspiration for the Black Octave motif/plot; and finally, a signification of the possibility that the Young Man may indeed be a grown-up, imaginary or ghostly Baby Eddie. As the work grew I decided to avoid ethnic specifications. For one thing, the exploration of the colour black by a Maori Joe would undoubtedly have led me, in terms of the cultural significance of black to Maori, down a path that being Pakeha I am not qualified to go. For another, a parallel news story (Lichfield, 2010) about the deceased Picasso and his electrician allowed me to make the reference and yet leave Hotere as a kind of still-living ghost in the machine of the story.

The reflection required to make this decision has led me to identify a more general tendency to automatically and unquestioningly attempt to fulfill what theatre academic and director Peter Falkenberg (2006) has described as New Zealanders' inherent “expectations of, and desire, for a(n)....idealised, hybridic image in keeping with bicultural ideology” (p. 8). There is a kind of hybridisation going on in the ideas behind the play, as I would expect and hope that any of the characters could be played by New Zealanders of any cultural background, but I have allowed this to be a production choice, not an authorial dictate.

Drama and Theatre

Discussion of the production potential for *Into White* after its academic debut needs first to ask the question: Who is its audience? Stylistically at least, *Into White* is written for a theatre that still exists but may be on its last gasp.

The dramatic text, literature's representative in the synthesis of arts that is theatre, once reigned supreme. But as cinema and television have entrenched the dramatic conventions of realism/mimesis, character, rising action, conflict and catharsis into a seemingly unbreakable set of storytelling rules, expounded as formulae by scriptwriting gurus such as Vogler and Jacey, so the evolution of the postmodernist theatre of the past 30 years or so – recently coined “postdramatic theatre” by Lehmann (2006) – has moved away from Drama and towards Performance. The authority of playwright and text, an authority never presumed by writers for film and television, is now also increasingly usurped by the auteur theatre director and collaborative theatre company. “Text,” Lehmann tells us, “...is considered only one element, one layer, or as a 'material' of the scenic creation, not its master” (p. 17).

Yet a cursory observation of recent productions on New Zealand stages establishes that most are text-based, whether they be contemporary overseas hits, classics by Shakespeare and Chekhov, plays by Maori about Maori issues, or dark, edgy, fast-paced hybrids of stand-up comedy and television sit-com from young and almost exclusively male local writers such as Thomas Sainsbury and Eli Kent, picking up the baton from longer established playwrights such as Arthur Meek, Carl Nixon, David Geary and Ken Duncum. Last, but not least, in a category of their own by virtue of their prodigious popularity, are the wordy plays of Roger Hall. Lehmann's paradigm of dramatic theatre, with its expectations of and subordination to the text, would therefore by no means appear to have totally disappeared in mainstream or even fringe theatre endeavours, in New Zealand, at least.

Bums and Seats

But if the audience that still wants “a comprehensible fable (story), coherent meaning, cultural self-affirmation, and touching theatre feelings” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 19) can get a surfeit of these from film and television, why should it invest the money and effort that theatre demands? Even the sense of communion between actors and audience, and audience and each other, once considered an integral part of theatre experience, is challenged by en masse social connections in cyberspace such as those hosted by Facebook and YouTube, experienced in the comfort of one's own home. So who is still attending this last gasp theatre?

The confused, would be my answer, and *Into White*, as my contribution to the literary field of the dramatic text, is for them: a hybrid and ragbag child, stitched together with diverse dramatic elements, my stylistic incoherence perhaps not merely reflecting my own confusion, but also that of my presumed audience: the contemporary New Zealand/Aotearoa, theatre-going demographic, which, like myself, has been generally Pakeha, female, middle-aged and middle-class, and perhaps by no means certain of the sort of theatre it desires or requires. As my survey also suggests, either despite of, or perhaps because of this confusion, New Zealand theatres are producing very little penned by women playwrights.

A poll of productions offered by Wellington's Downstage Theatre for the years 2008-2011 reveals a total of 34 text-based plays, of which only six were written by women, three of whom were New Zealand-based women.¹⁰ When Pip Hall won the Bruce Mason Playwriting Award in 2009 for her play *The 53rd Victim*, she was the first woman to do so since Jo Randerson in 1997, 12 years previously. In the 28 years since the inception of the award, a mere eight women playwrights have won, and seven of these were within the first 14 years.¹¹

¹⁰ Source: Downstage website. If an author was not noted I assumed it was a devised work.

¹¹ Source: New Zealand Book Council website. Playmarket's Adam New Zealand Play Award has a better record: in the four years since its inception women playwrights have won the supreme award twice. Women are also now offered, along with Maori, Pasifika, and Auckland playwrights, a special prize of their own, a concession perhaps more concerning than reassuring. Source: Playmarket website.

But even recognition does not guarantee a professional production – *The 53rd Victim* was premiered last year (2010) in Whangarei by a community theatre group, and later broadcast by Radio New Zealand, but two years on from the award has still not been seen on a mainstream stage. The reason for this underrepresentation is not the subject of this exegesis, but indications are that *Into White's* chances of a production are slim indeed. The expense of producing the filmed performance (amounting to a 20 minute short film), and the camera and projection technology involved, may not be as daunting as the evident reluctance of New Zealand theatre companies to take a punt on a play by a New Zealand woman playwright.

Conclusion

The dialectic emphasis throughout *Into White* is a serendipitous theatrical fingerprint. Although from the start I had intended an intermedial narrative and the use of verse for some dialogue, the binary reflections of the theme evolved naturally out of the work as it was constructed. I have been intrigued by this aspect of my writing process, and the exegesis has provided an opportunity for the exploration of it.

The next step for *Into White* is to have the text read and workshopped by actors. This will indicate the direction for a third draft, hopefully culminating in a production, at which point a collaboration of other eyes, minds, hands, bodies and voices will interpret and display the bifurcations of *Into White*.

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