

GENDER AND STAGING OFFSHORE

feature

Caroline Horton

It is notoriously difficult to represent the abstract and secretive world of offshore in dramatic terms. Caroline Horton's play 'Islands' stands out as one of the boldest attempts to bring the sector down to earth and into the realm of general understanding. Here the playwright explains how she used the grotesques of bouffon theatre to challenge the clean lines and plush interiors of offshore's self-presentation.

I recently made a controversial piece of theatre about the world of offshore; 'Islands' at the Bush Theatre. When I first spoke to John Christensen, director of the Tax Justice Network, about the idea back in 2012, I told him about bouffon theatre. Bouffons are characters from the margins of our society. When I first encountered it, at Philippe Gaulier's theatre school in Paris, we created costumes and formed a chorus of misshapen, cross-dressed, filthy, strange, grotesque creatures. The myth goes that sometimes the bouffons are allowed in through the gates of the city to perform before the beautiful people, the people of god. I looked to bouffons as the

storytellers for this piece because us lot, the multitudes, the massive majority, stand outside the 'city', our grubby noses pressed up against the clean glass windows and like bouffons, we've been shaking our fists. John was excited about 'Islands' because he's interested in changing the terms of the debate – he felt that bouffon offered this and animatedly described the unlikely phone call from Vanity Fair when they asked him for an article – 'change the language' he said.

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Staging 'Islands' (picture: Ed Collier)

establishment the whole thing is. Our governments, the City of London, the everyday corporations from any high street, our banks, our celebrities, are central to and complicit with it. And inevitably, the most vulnerable parts of society – and the developing world particularly – are damaged the most by its practices.

So it felt important that the marginal told the story and did the fist shaking

in this play. In 'Islands', gender is twisted, god is a woman with silvery testicles, there are men in dresses; the whole gang is foul, dirty and misshapen and so is their language. Discomfort is pushed; the polite clean office and glass beauty of the City have no place here.

The play follows a gang of bouffons who tell a story of an elite, setting themselves up as gods in 'Haven' and abusing their

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power until discontent from Shitworld and a whistleblower from their own number seem to suggest Haven’s time is up. Late on, one of the dragged up male gods mimes raping the off-stage whistleblower Eve; it is shocking, horrific. As a female theatre maker, what was this decision about? Well – the most grotesque, repellent, inhumane violence is being carried out on the world’s vulnerable and I am deliberately provoking, asking questions: I’m asking why we are not more disgusted, horrified, emotional about tax evasion? Why aren’t people going to court? We (as a society) have such trouble seeing the horror or feeling the appropriate level of disgust around tax avoidance. We intellectually understand that it’s unjust but the violence and foulness misses us because – yes – it’s oh so clean and establishment.

At the climax of the show, we see the godhead, Mary, and the whistleblower, Eve, in a head-to-head battle. Why two women? Well in part, I’m a female artist who writes and performs her own work so ok – but also, women are outsiders, or at least a rare species in the male world of offshore – they are bouffons here – so I wanted them on the inside of this angry roar of a show.

Interestingly, in an early week of research and development on the show, I found myself in a room with eight men – I had inadvertently invited an entirely male team

along. We were discussing the week’s work and tax justice. The voices got louder, the interruptions came quicker and it became harder and harder to hear anything, including the point of the discussion. The point – as far as I was concerned – was to interrogate the idea of making a piece of theatre about offshore finance using bouffons. The debate descended into a point-scoring frenzy in which there was no space for reflection or for different voices to be heard or to ask questions; it had the same soundscape as seminars at Oxbridge or Prime Minister’s questions. From this point on, I determinedly rebalanced the gender mix in the room and steered the show away from the sort of political debate in which clever words are spoken; points are scored and no one admits that they don’t know the answers.

This show was not going to join the establishment voices by engaging with a version of mainstream, intellectual, legalistic debate. Instead I wanted ‘Islands’ to provoke – emotion, outrage, horror even – and start people questioning, arguing; it would be set in a revolting wasteland, akin to a foul sewer, rather than an office. A shout from the margins and the gruesome guts, ‘Islands’ would determinedly shake its fists at our polite elites and the so-clever-it’s-eating-itself surface of offshore finance.

Caroline Horton is a writer/performer based in Birmingham. Her work has been presented at theatres, village halls schools, colleges and festivals in the UK and abroad. She is an associate artist at Birmingham Rep where she also mentors the Rep’s Foundry theatre-makers.