

## Pitcairn Review

The mutiny on the *Bounty* lives in the popular imagination as a power struggle with quite obvious heroes and villains. As played on screen by the likes of Clark Gable, Marlon Brando and Mel Gibson, lead mutineer Fletcher Christian is a defender of freedom and fairness, a man of passion who not only defies the authority of Lieutenant William Bligh but with him the strictures of British society and the basis for British power in the world. We are accustomed to Fletcher Christian the revolutionary, uncannily foreshadowing the violence and rebellion which would shortly be visited upon the established order in France. We are also familiar with Christian the Romantic, who attended the same school as William Wordsworth and whose ambitions of liberty might – we fancy – have sprung from the same utopian impulse as Coleridge and Southey's scheme for a pantisocratic society. Indeed, Val McDermid's 2006 novel, *The Grave Tattoo*, ties Christian's actions even more closely to the Romantic movement, speculating that Wordsworth secretly facilitated Christian's return to Britain. It is a far-fetched story, but one which demonstrates the appeal of this figure and the framework of ideological assumptions that is so often used to interpret his place in history.

Richard Bean's new play does not reject this framework entirely. In many respects, the Fletcher Christian we meet in *Pitcairn* still wants to be an idealist and is still sporadically sympathetic – certainly more so than many of his crew mates. But by delving into the aftermath and longstanding consequences of the 1789 mutiny rather than the event itself, Bean is able to complicate our sense of the incident's symbolism and to dismiss any simplistic assumptions the audience might have about what the mutineers stood for. They are, first and foremost, kidnappers. The Tahitian men and women they bring with them to Pitcairn island are in some cases willing captives, but captives nonetheless. And though Christian clings to the appearance of monogamous propriety, laying claim to a special bond with his 'wife' Mi Mitti and becoming tormented by the possibility of her betrayal, the truth is that the island's sexual relationships are also ruled by force. It seems inevitable that the various conflicts ensuing on the island (between sailors; between races; between sexes) should culminate in an act of rape. In the penultimate scene, drunken mutineer Matthew Quintal violates Mi Mitti on stage as Christian chats to him and watches. So much for Clark Gable.

This is the moment that Christian's idealism is finally shown up as the sham it always was. He survives through cynical pragmatism, defying the collapse of his society and the wisdom

of later history books – he is generally believed to have died in the fighting only a few years after the mutiny. By contrast, in the play, Christian restores order and pacifies the rebellious Tahitian women by appealing to the very forces of divine intervention that his enlightened rationalism had previously led him to scorn. A fortuitous solar eclipse allows him to claim knowledge of God’s will, and a strategic self-amputation means that he can meet later British representatives in the guise of his deceased comrade John Adams – the man after whom Pitcairn’s capital would be named. At an early stage of the play, Christian had nobly and ambitiously stated that “We do not need God to be good”, but the course of events proves him wrong. His dependence on religious faith is built into his name, after all. Like a number of those Romantic poets with whom his reputation has been aligned, he ends up embracing conservative solutions to the problems that beset him. It might come as a surprise that the play seems to approve of his scheming and intellectual dishonesty. It is certainly presented as preferable to the carnage that has come before. In this sense, Richard Bean lives up to his reputation as a playwright who is difficult to categorise in narrow political terms. While his musical adaptation of *Made in Dagenham* (2014) and topical hit *Great Britain* (also 2014) have suggested left-wing sympathies, his sceptical treatment of multiculturalism in *English People Very Nice* (2009) provoked accusations of racial stereotyping and saw him acclaimed as an opponent of liberal orthodoxies.

Race is a major problem in *Pitcairn* as well. The play inevitably invites comparison with Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good* (1988), another work concerning eighteenth-century British sailors, far from home, attempting to build a new society with the help of often unwilling prisoners. The comparison is further encouraged by the fact that this production of *Pitcairn*, originally staged at the Chichester Festival and now at The Globe, is brought to us by the original director of Wertenbaker’s play, Max Stafford-Clark. The most impressive aspect of *Our Country’s Good* is its reluctance to speak on behalf of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples. A choric figure comments enigmatically on the British colonists and demonstrates their impact on the indigenous population, but the best productions of the play (including Stafford-Clark’s own revival, currently touring) treat this voice as fragile and futile, sounding a note of protest that can never be effectively integrated or acknowledged within the dramatic action itself. Richard Bean adopts the opposite tactic in his play, and I am not convinced that it works. Here we have two semi-choric figures, both Tahitian: Hiti, a teenage boy, and Mata, the woman he lusts after. When they are not getting involved in the action of the play, Hiti and Mata are addressing the audience directly, telling us about their

Tahitian customs in terms which at once celebrate and trivialise their cultural difference. “Our favourite thing is sex,” Mata tells us. At an earlier point in the play, she asks the female members of the audience, “Who would sleep with a sailor for a nail?” These moments certainly win some laughs, and in their defence, they could be seen as making the play’s depictions of non-consensual sex all the more abhorrent. However, it is hard to escape the sense that Tahitian culture is diminished and the historical facts of oppression ridiculed here.

A much more sensitive treatment of racial identity can be found in the play’s portrayal of Ned Young, the mutineer of West Indian birth who, in Bean’s account, suffers both from an acute jealousy of Christian and from what doctors would now recognise as sickle cell anaemia. Performed by Ash Hunter, Young is arguably the play’s most interesting character. Rather than making his position more secure, the favours extended to the Tahitians make his own racial otherness more pronounced. He is part-Othello and part-Iago, each role as alienating as the other. When Young’s affair with Mi Mitti comes to light, Christian rages at the prospect of a black child on the island. Whether one agrees with Bean or not, his message is at least clearer here: British inclusivity only stretches so far, and there is no way to be both black and British in the eighteenth century.

In spite of the play’s problems, this is a lively production. It is excellent to see new writing performed at The Globe. Bean’s text describes Pitcairn island as unwelcoming and the layout of the stage emphasises this. Forestation is implied rather than seen. The main part of the stage is dominated instead by slabs of white rock; it looks, perhaps intentionally, like someone has kicked over the white cliffs of Dover. The cast are strong, though they sometimes struggle to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Tom Morley, playing Fletcher Christian, is disconcertingly reminiscent of Matt Smith (*Doctor Who*) in his demeanour and line delivery. It is hard to buy into his utopian dreams and strivings when one suspects he could jump into his time machine and be off the island at a moment’s notice. And although we hear a lot about lust and desire in the play, it is rare that we believe in it as more than an intellectual exercise, a calculated study in survival. Perhaps this is a symptom of a more general problem with the work: that we are never encouraged to believe that this island could be a paradise, and so we wait for its descent into chaos without hope and, to our shame, without much pity.