

Convict Women - Lifetime Exile

A collage of contemplations from historical records, diaries and letters.

SOLO PERFORMANCE

Production – Kropka Theatre
Written & performed by Jolanta Juskiewicz
Directed by Anatoly Frusin, Jolanta Juskiewicz
Music – Henryk Gorecki
Costumes – Hana Wegner

Theatre-document of an authentic portrait of intelligent, determined women, who confronted a harsh and male-dominated land, despite stringent social constraints against any form of female achievement or personal expression in XVIII /XIX c. Contemplation on convict women sent from England to Australia that breathes life into silenced ghosts of our past and present, and presents an exciting theatre experience spiced with theatrical ingenuity.

Performed in - Edinburgh (Fringe Festival) and Glasgow, Scotland - London, England - Warsaw, Torun and Lodz, Poland, Fujairah, United Emirates, Berlin Germany

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2002

An evocative, one-woman piece performed by Jolanta Juskiewicz, of serious theatre that succeeded in educating by pulling on our heartstrings. The poignant historical lessons learned are associated with the torturous lives led by the women who were exiled to New South Wales in 1788 – 1850.

Based on Jolanta Juskiewicz on the few accounts written at the time, these tales tell of one particular women's horrendous ordeals, starting from why she was driven to crime in the first place, continuing logically to her journey, arrivals, the assignments she had, and then focusing on the enslaving way the women were treated.

An intense performance makes you feel as though you are re-living every pain with her, aware of the other thousands of now ghostly individuals.

The International Fujairah Monodrama Festival, Emirates 2014

“Convict Women”: All that beauty on Stage!



The Australian show “Convict Women: Lifetime Exile” was a lesson in monodrama for the audience who left the theatre after being treated to an extraordinary theatrical experience. The show is a valuable addition to the 6th Fujairah International Mondorama Festival and it was written and performed by Jolanta Juskiewicz and directed by Anatoly Frusin and Jolanta Juskiewicz.

“Convict Women” was a compelling monodrama show that filled the stage with Jolanta’s passionate and powerful performance without the need for the usual excessive visual effects and decorations that became typical of a lot of monodrama shows, especially the Arabic ones.

The talented Jolanta Juskiewicz played her role in a fixed and specific space, and her transition between tens of characters and mental and physical situations did not require any excessive use of colors and projections. Even the background music was used infrequently, and only when the scene demanded it.

Convict Women: Lifetime Exile tells the story of thousands of British women who have been exiled to the Australian colonies between 1788 and 1850. It tells in great detail the suffering of those women and their struggle to survive the bitter and very harsh conditions they have been subjected to.

In this show, there is a large volume of tragic tales that have been turned to a loud cry stating that human spirit must cling to hope, no matter what the difficulties and pains.

Juszkiewicz has an extraordinary ability to use her body as an obedient instrument of expression to pass on all these stories, transitions and tribulations. As usual and with the very simple tools she uses, Juszkiewicz always ends up with winner shows. It's like she's living in a constant state of challenge to search for the rare and precious jewel that resides in the performer's spirit. In more than one show of this award-winning artist, there are rarely any tools used to help her perform. Instead, she steps up to the stage to challenge, she blends with the stage and becomes part of it. Eventually, she succeeds with these simple tools, and to pass on to us all the human aches from the tales she tells and she embodies the human experience which is marred by a lot of the brutal and bitter times.

On stage, the tools comprised of the rope that had more than one meaning between her hands, the white cloth that she turned to a series of symbols, the hat, the bottle of water, and the small table. Nothing was used as a mere decoration or aesthetic piece.

The aesthetics of the show is in the performance itself and in the provision of all the tools necessary for the actress to introduce herself through her vast culture and knowledge and through her deep understanding of human pain and experience and of the spirit that glows like a flame in the face of this pain.

This show, which celebrates the determination of the human spirit to survive and triumph, is also the starting point and a milestone in standardization and stenography. It is the perfect example that great stories can be told with the most basic tools when there's a real and capable performer and a director who knows how to provoke and discover the beauty without any claim or flashy decorations.

An Art Form

"Convict Women" was a compelling monodrama show that filled the stage with Jolanta's passionate and powerful performance without the need for the usual excessive visual effects and decorations that became typical of a lot of monodrama shows, especially the Arabic ones.

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VARIA

Evan Williams

**KROPKA THEATRE'S *CONVICT WOMEN - LIFETIME EXILE*
[REVIEW]**

Bathed by a single spot on an otherwise dark stage, the convict stands before an English court, cradling two fabric bundles – her twins – as she is told that she will be deported to Australia – a sentence which will forever change her life, the lives of her family, and indeed the fabric of a nation. Kropka Theatre's *Convict Women-Lifetime Exile*, staged at the Mały Theatre, Łódź, 10 May 2010, presents a collage of the experiences of several female convicts, sentenced to penal servitude in Australia.

Jolanta Juskiewicz, an actress of Polish descent, founded the Kropka Theatre in Sydney Australia in 1997. In this production the company draws on traditions of documentary theatre and aspects of Brecht's alienation effect: the simple lighting plan both casts light onto the stage and spills light onto the spectators before it. Kropka Theatre describe their style as "poetic-metaphorical drama" and write that the production "was created as a collage of contemplations concocted from historical records, diaries and letters"¹, by the company's writer/performer Juskiewicz. Beyond these elements the production also incorporates additional extracts from *Forefathers' Eve* – a text by nineteenth century Polish writer Adam Mickiewicz. Here the company's intention is to, firstly, punctuate the performance by alluding to Mickiewicz's message to remember and appreciate our forebears and secondly, to draw parallels between the social isolation and dislocation of the convicts with Poles during the period of Poland's partition (1795-1918) – Mickiewicz was himself exiled from Poland. Here Juskiewicz's title is revealing, *Convict Women – Lifetime Exile*, as it relates that irrespective of whether a convict was sentenced to penal servitude in Australia for seven or fourteen years, as was common, in all likelihood they would be unable to return home – due to any number of reasons including the admittedly mundane expense and distance of travel.

In the context of exile, Kropka Teatre aims to present the view "that women were victims and to challenge the belief that all convict women were sex slaves and prostitutes". With this goal, the documentary style described above is adopted by Kropka Theatre believing "[t]heir [the female convicts] authentic words and responses to assignment and incarceration are far more important than any writer's illustration of behaviour of convict women, their social, cultural and economic world." (Publicity materials)

The Kropka Theatre company writes that "[f]or 150 years Australia ha[s] been erasing the ambiguities of the convict experience from its collective memory." A sweeping statement such as this is something of a double edged sword, as it is probably more accurate to say that – as with most collective memories – the ambiguities of the past

have been selectively glorified rather than erased. Certainly, from the period of the bi-centennial anniversary, in 1988, of the landing of the First Fleet to the celebration of the centenary of Federation in 2001, much emphasis has been placed on the role of convicts in establishing the colonies. Several well-known examples include the open air museum, Old Sydney Town (which focused on colonial life and operated from 1975 to 2003), Bryce Courtenay's 1995 historical-novel and later television mini-series *The Potato Factory* (where the female protagonist is a convict), and the Sydney Barracks Museum (located on Macquarie Street, which houses convict exhibitions). Moreover, given the pervasive presence of Australia's convict past in everything ranging from primary-school history curricula to dozens of collections housed in various libraries, galleries and museums including the National Museum in Canberra, Juskiewicz's claim that "The negligence surrounding the cultural heritage of Australia's convict past is a sad and stunning phenomenon," (Publicity materials) seems somewhat unfounded. But what is undeniable is that female convicts in the male dominated construction of Australian colonial history are under appreciated, and it is on this aspect that Kropka justifiably places its attention. Kropka Theatre claims:

Previously committed crimes seemed to have rendered convict women unworthy of remembering. Yet, their experience of the exile, their ways of dealing with the new reality, their ways about and around their inferior status carry historical and spiritual richness [...] In Convict Women, the spirits of the past are called upon again to bring the richness of their long-forgotten lives into the beginning of the second centenary of Australian Federation. (Publicity materials)

First performed for the centenary celebration of Australian Federation, the work was produced with the support of The Myer Cultural Foundation and was later awarded the 2002 National Trust Heritage Award in the conservation category².

Anatoly Frusin's direction places a strong emphasis on physicality. In fact, the performance operates without the use of any set elements, except for a simple chair. Similarly, there are few props; though the performer relies heavily and creatively on a long piece of white fabric. This fabric is used in various ways including physical representations but also metaphorical associations. For instance, it is wound into two joined bundles when it represents twins, and later during the transportation scene the fabric is held aloft and represents the sails of the transport ship. As an example of its metaphorical importance, in the wedding scene (described further below) the fabric adopts a dual purpose representing both the bride's dress, and being so tightly wound around the performer's body, suggest the constraints placed on female convicts.

The action of the production is linear in structure moving from conviction, transport, to life in the penal colony. In the conviction scene, an unnamed woman played with an Irish accent, describes what led to her conviction and transportation to Australia:

*Distress and want, and hunger and poverty - nothing else - druv us to this country. It was the will of God – glory be to His holy and blessed name! To fail the tatties. To be sure, I couldn't dig one out of the ground fit to ate!*³

Since no mention is made of any specific crime, the audience are left to form the conclusion that this was not a serious or malicious crime, but petty theft, or perhaps even a more lascivious crime was committed, wholly justified by hunger and poverty. In contrast to the colloquial speech of the Irish convict, her sentencing judge's language is verbose and smacks of irony:

Because you have committed this offence the judgement of the Court is that you shall no longer be burdened with the support of your husband and family. It would be beneficial for your children to have you removed from the country. You shall immediately be removed from a very bad climate and a country over-burdened with people to one of the finest regions of the earth, where the demand for human labour is every hour increasing, and where it is highly probable you may ultimately regain your character and improve your future. The Court have [sic] been induced to pass this sentence upon you in consequence of the many aggravating circumstances of your case, and they hope your fate will be a warning to others.

Juszkiewicz moves fluidly between the two characters, adopting different posture, stage position and voice. Her characterisations are subtle embodiments rather than charactures in spite of how the text may read. Satire, rather than sentimentality plays a striking role in the extract above; the audience is left to draw its own conclusions at the absurdity of the Judge's condemnation and temerarious persistence that he is doing the condemned a favour in removing her from her family and home. Immediately following the absurd judgement, the condemned female describes her twins. In a beautiful gesture the fabric is rolled into two swaddled-baby-sized bundles and as the woman herself makes the pronouncement that she will not see them again, the bundles are left to gracefully unfurl across the stage, creating a striking image of loss.

One particularly powerful scene presents a wedding service. Juszkiewicz fluidly characterises three different people: the priest, the bride and groom. The scene is frantically played, as Juszkiewicz darts between three stage positions and changes her pitch radically to indicate the change of character. The length of fabric in this scene has been bound tightly around the performer's body – her dress – severely limiting her movement and suggesting the containment of her freedom. Central to the scene is the only prop in the play in addition to from the length of fabric: a bonnet. The groom believes that the bonnet which he has given to his bride has solidified their contract to be married. The bride, however, becomes frozen during the ceremony, at first unable to answer "I will," then flatly refusing to be married. Her groom, incensed by her silence and then refusal angrily attempts to take back his wedding gift:

Priest:
He comes bringing a bonnet for his bride. Richard, wilt thou take this woman etc.?

Richard:
I will

Priest:
Eliza, wilt thou take this man etc.? [Pause.]
Eliza, wilt thou take this man etc.? [After a silence:]

Richard:
[Answers for Eliza] Yes, I will.

Eliza:
No!

Priest:
Richard amazed shouted:

Richard:
Give me back my bonnet!

Priest:
Richard, wilt thou take this woman etc.?

Richard:
I will.

Priest:
Eliza, wilt thou take this man etc.? Eliza!

Richard:
[Answers for Eliza] Yes, I will.

Eliza:
No!

Richard:
Yes.

Eliza:
No.

Richard:
Yes.

Eliza:
No.

The scene ends with Eliza in a heap on the stage after fainting. Powerless in choosing her groom, and without anyone else to assist her in her reluctance, she comes to represent the struggle of women in the male dominated penal environment – where female convicts were seen as chattel to be bought and sold for items as trivial as a fabric bonnet.

The wedding scene is a useful example of Kropka's quasi-documentary style: the scene reportedly draws on a factual account recovered by the playwright. Rather than presenting the imagined scene in full, the playwright has done away with extraneous detail. The priest's use of "et cetera" and other characters' use of pauses, and ellipses in other scenes, pares down the spoken dialogue to the bare essentials thereby focusing attention on the important issue: the emotional struggle faced by the female convict. Indeed, the theatre company's name, which translates from Polish as "Full stop Theatre," captures the company's desire for brevity and focus.

In an earlier scene, a female convict describes her arrival in Australia. Unlike the frantic tone described above, her speech is slow, her volume lowered with introspection. Like in the scene above, the narrative draws on factual accounts, but here several accounts have been condensed into a pastiche of arrival and assignment stories – told from the perspective of one person:

A female convict:

On landing at the dockyard we were mustered again including those pompous and pious speeches about our behaviour and future prospects.

We were assigned to different households, tradesman, retailers, masters and agents, and there were some of us taken up river to the Female Factory at Parramatta for further distribution.

Finally some of us were bought and sold like cattle, the going rate being about ten pounds, and when our masters were tired of us they flogged us nearly to death or sold us off to the highest bidder.

The island's beadle acted as auctioneer in the grain store where women were forced to parade around the room stark naked, with a number painted on their backs like sides of beef. By the end some of the women were so badly battered that their price had dropped to the cost of a couple of gallons of rum

From an account of personal pain told in the first person, the narrative drifts into third, describing that though the speaker suffered terrible torment, other women were even less fortunate and were not only beaten, but suffered the mortification of being auctioned in their battered state when they could attract a selling price of no more than a couple of gallons of rum. The scene places a strong emphasis on the business, and exploitation of convict women, drawing heavily on modern terms, such as "assignment" and "distribution" that would be more at home in a description of a critical logistical system than of the treatment of people. All this immoral treatment follows, with a delicious touch of irony, the women being subjected to moral sermons.

Kropka Theatre's aim to remember female convicts, illustrate their plight via their authentic words, position them as victims and challenge the idea that all convict women were sex slaves or prostitutes is a commendable goal. Even while a pastiche of verbatim text and imaginative monologue and dialogue is used, the play never

lapses into emotionally arduous raw realism – preferring metaphor to communicate the demeaning, even dehumanising treatment of convict women. That is not to say, though, that the production is detached or unemotional; the often vibrant presentation of the convict woman's plight is powerfully moving. As a small company, Kropka Theatre is bringing to audiences' attention an interesting aspect of Australia's history, with passion and commitment, all with the mobility larger companies simply do not have. Having now been performed in Australia, and fringe theatre festivals across Europe – including the Edinburgh Fringe Festival – *Convict Women – Lifetime Exile* is an evocative tribute to the gruelling lives of Australia's female convict forbears.

1 *Theatre Australia*, "Kropka Theatre," accessed 10-Feb-11, <http://www.theatre.asn.au/node/12026>

2 The performance was originally devised for three performers, Angela Bauer, Janine Burchett and Jolanta Juskiewicz, and later revised for solo performance.

3 My thanks are extended to Kropka Theatre who generously provided the quotes used in this review.



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