

The Dead Devils of Cockle Creek: Context from the Playwright

It's one of my most deeply held beliefs that art must be challenging, honest, and, most importantly, courageous. I believe we tell stories so that we might more deeply understand ourselves and the universe we live in. When I write, I try to trick myself that I write alone, that no one will ever read it. I do this because it holds me deeply to my own truths. It gives me courage.

The truth used to be a solid foundation from which to spring. There were known truths in the world, truths that the majority of us subscribed to: the Earth is a sphere and it circles the sun; the Earth is warming and this process is rapidly accelerating due to human activities; human rights should be a birth right for all. Those truths, however, are being eroded by political agendas and corporate lobbying, by the democratic information-sharing platform that is the internet, by a mindset of anti-intellectualism and skepticism of expert knowledge, of xenophobia — swept along by fears of extremism — that is creeping across the Western World. And, so, we are forced to ask, what is true and how do we know?

The Dead Devils of Cockle Creek is a challenging work. It is challenging because the world is challenging. I have experienced the worst of human behaviour and this has, of course, shaped my world view, and, perhaps, given me what I feel is a license to discuss difficult topics. It would be a wonderful thing if violence did not exist, if sexism did not exist, if racism did not exist. The truth is, however, that most of Destinee Lee's dialogue can be found in Trump's twitter feed comments.

Humour is my saving grace. To see the world's funny bone, to see the absurdity of life at its darkest moments, to be able to laugh when all seems lost, this is one of humanity's finest pieces of armour. It has been my own armour and the armour of my work. Humour puts out fires. Laughter can start a process of healing and opening up about the world. I encourage laughter about the worst things in our world: pedophilia, violence, rape, about religion, about racism, about environmental destruction and factory farming and the list goes on and on because, to me, these are subjects we need to talk about. Yes, they are challenging, uncomfortable subjects. But, perhaps, by laughing at them, we can open up conversations. And, in my mind, there's no human experience that can't be laughed at, because, what else are we supposed to do? Cry ourselves to sleep every night? No, give me laughter every time.

What I seek to do in my play is ask, "*What is the truth?*" "*What is right and wrong, or is right and wrong not enough? Is that too binary?*" I'm using provocations to start conversations: "*If you shoot someone, and then you convince yourself that they're a pedophile, does that mean you shouldn't feel bad?*" "*Is an animal life worth the same as a human life?*" "*Is it okay to hit someone if they're being horrifically racist?*" "*Is there ever a time for violence?*" And, most importantly, "*how do we change people's minds?*"

Even form-wise, the play questions known truths. We don't expect an ethnically diverse person to be racist. We don't expect a woman to be violent (*and that's backed up, statistically*). We don't expect a mafia boss to live by a strong moral code. We don't expect an environmentalist to kill animals, even if they are ferals. But these contradictions are found everywhere in society. Just the other day, I jumped into an Uber with a young Indonesian man who was inexplicably and vilely racist. And, these contradictions are what make ethics and morality so difficult and complex in this ever-changing world.

While the warnings for the play accurately document the challenging nature of the text, I would encourage teachers to feel that they can bring their senior students to the work, and use it as an opportunity to open up discussions of morality and ethics, to unpack, if you like, what is currently happening to our world, and to truth.

If art doesn't challenge us — doesn't push ahead — then what on earth is the point?

Kathryn Marquet