

# Tsunami in the Royal Botanic Garden: *Pericles* and *Children of the Sea* on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe

Genevieve Love, Colorado College

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## Abstract

One of the hits of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2005 was *Children of the Sea*, often characterized as a loose adaptation of *Pericles*, whose cast included orphaned Sri Lankan survivors of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. This essay explores the show's Fringe run in Edinburgh in relationship to notions of local and the foreign — specifically, how Fringe audiences and reviewers understood the production in relation to local and foreign and what the show's relationship to Shakespeare might have to do with these understandings. Responses to *Children of the Sea* tend to intermingle the "magic" evoked by the show's outdoor location in Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Garden with the power of the show's use of Sri Lankan culture as spectacle, treating what would seem to be the show's most local and what would seem to be its most foreign aspects as if they were inextricable. This essay proposes that the indistinguishability to reviewers of the power of the Scottish/Royal locale from the power of Sri Lankan culture and context has to do with *Children of the Sea*'s unspecified relation to Shakespeare's text, *Pericles* — a text that itself seems to be both familiar — "local" — and foreign to the production's audience and reviewers.

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*Children of the Sea. Produced and directed by Toby Gough; Co-produced by Hana Al Hadad and John Simpson; RBGE Coordination, Alan P. Bennell; Costume design and traditional Sri Lankan ornaments, Anura Jayawardana and Jagath Ranasinghe; Gower costume, Jane "Beanie" Holland; Lighting design, George Tarbuck, Queen Margaret University College, School of Drama & Creative Industries; Technical*

*support*, Al Broome; *Sound*, Bloomsbury Theatre, Univ. of London Live Systems Limited; *Press and PR*, Rosalind Erskine; *International press contact*, Jon Lee; *Box Office*, Toral Shah, Leanne Anderson, and Olivia Murray; *Stage Management*, Neil Jackson, Mara Menzies; *Choreography*, Terence Lewis, Venuri Perera, and Dimuthu Chanaka; *Hair, make-up, and South Asian head massage*, Ruby Rouge Hair Salon, Clark Street; *Logistics and maker*, Ali Riddell; *Children of the Seas Project Manager*, Hana Al Hadad; *Production Manager* (Sri Lanka), Anton; *Production Assistants* (Sri Lanka), Ujith Amarawera, Sagarikia Samaraweera, and Anura Nanayakkara; *Cast in Sri Lanka*, Nilmini Bunake, Tilini Weerashinghe, Jerry Fernando, Ashan, and Pubuthu.

One of the hits of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2005 was Theatrum Botanicum's *Children of the Sea*, often characterized in the press as a loose adaptation of *Pericles*. Like many shows on the Fringe, the world's largest arts festival, *Children of the Sea* advertised itself as both "multicultural" and "international" (*Children of the Sea* Performance Program 2005), though its affiliations were more diverse than those of many shows. Theatrum Botanicum is essentially a "one-man repertory theatre" (Gilchrist 2005); British-born Toby Gough, the director, has brought international shows to the Fringe before, shows "featuring Africans, Ukranians, Croatians, Tibetans, and Barbadians . . . typically performed promenade-style around the rare species of the city's Royal Botanic Garden" (Fisher 2005). Also set promenade-style in the Botanic Garden, *Children of the Sea* was performed by orphaned Sri Lankan survivors of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, accompanied by Sri Lankan professional actors, as well as the Maori professional actor Rawiri Paratene, known internationally for his performance in the film *Whale Rider* (2002).

The production was also sponsored and endorsed by, among others, the Australian pop star Kylie Minogue.

The show was rehearsed and first performed on a hilltop in Matara, above the ocean in southern Sri Lanka, where the occasion, apparently, "was the first time the community had come together to think about their shared trauma" (Fisher 2005). In this essay, however, I will explore the show's Fringe run in Edinburgh in relationship to notions of the local and the foreign — where "local" might mean, among other things, in Edinburgh and/or in the Royal Botanic Garden. I am less interested in how the production itself understood and presented its relationship to notions of local and foreign (though I will make some speculations about this near the end of the essay) and more in how Fringe audiences and reviewers understood and positioned the production in relation to these notions — and in what, if anything, the show's relationship to Shakespeare had to do with these understandings and positionings.

*Children of the Sea* is in some ways more accurate as a description of the show's most compelling cast members than as its title. The production, as its program claims, "follows the tale of *Pericles*" (*Children of the Sea* Performance Program 2005): *Pericles* appears as a play-within-a-play in the production; it is framed by the aftermath of the tsunami, in which children gather in a shelter, where they are told the story of *Pericles*. The frame narrative is brief; the bulk of the performance is *Pericles* itself. If the production can be said to represent, at least in part, an appropriation of Shakespeare by Sri Lankan children, the promotion of and praise for the production can be read as an appropriation of those children's suffering. For *Children of the Sea* was a huge hit: It won a Fringe First award in the Fringe's first week and received unanimously glowing reviews (all four or five-star) in publications ranging from *The Scotsman* to audience-member postings on edfringe.com.<sup>1</sup> The show's touching relationship to the international crisis of the tsunami — especially its inclusion of affected children — was undoubtedly responsible for much of its notoriety; this notoriety, in turn, meant that an unusually large amount of attention (for a Fringe show) was paid to the show in print. Through these articles and reviews, some characteristic ways of talking about the show's power and importance emerge. In discussing the show's "magic" as a theatrical experience, written responses interestingly intermingle the "magic" evoked by the show's location in the Botanic Garden with the power of the show's use of Sri Lankan culture as spectacle. Perhaps it is simply a testament to the show's ingenuity that reviewers respond to what would seem to be its most local and what would seem to be its most foreign aspects as if they were inextricable. And whether we would want to celebrate or critique — or perhaps both — the indistinguishability to reviewers of the power of the Scottish/Royal locale from the power of Sri

Lankan culture and context, I think it has something to do with *Children of the Sea's* unspecified relation to Shakespeare's text, *Pericles* — a text that itself seems to be both familiar — "local" — and foreign to *Children of the Sea's* audience and reviewers.

*Children of the Sea's* program touts its venue, the Royal Botanic Garden, as "the best venue in the Festival"; on the program's cover, the name of the venue is as large as the title of the show (*Children of the Sea Performance Program* 2005). The show's own self-promotion suggests that the experience of the show ought to be as much about seeing the Botanic Garden as about seeing the performance. And reviewers responded to this injunction, praising the show as "visually ravishing" (Gardner 2005), "ravishingly beautiful to look at against the backdrop of the Botanics" (*The Scotsman* 2005), and as taking place in a "superb location" (Audience Member Review 2005). The page-long message from the Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden (Professor Stephen Blackmore) that opens the program underscores the significance of the venue: Seeing the production is "a chance to promenade in one of the world's finest Gardens after dusk" (*Children of the Sea Performance Program* 2005). *Children of the Sea* thus offers an opportunity to experience one of Edinburgh's local attractions: In addition to leading viewers to several of the Garden's features — a "natural amphitheatre" and a "Scottish country house" (Fisher 2005) — the promenade production culminates at a setting where the play's climax and denouement take place against the impressive prospect of the city of Edinburgh in the distance, lit up at night. In its initial Sri Lankan performance, as I mentioned above, the production took place on a hilltop above the sea — the sea's threat, power, and redemptive quality being central to the production and key to its use of *Pericles*. The change in locale here would seem to be striking: from a marine to an urban backdrop; from Matara, where "the stage [was] behind a cobra's nest and beneath four towering coconut trees, their fruit dangling perilously overhead" (Fisher 2005), to the tame, tidy pathways of the Botanic Garden.

There is no reason that reviewers should have known about the original circumstances of performance, but one might think that a possible dissonance, or at least interesting contrast, between the Sri Lankan landscape and marine setting in which the tsunami survivors' relationship to the story of *Pericles* was forged and the Scottish urban landscape and cultivated setting in which they now perform that relationship, might be worth commenting on. And yet no reviewers do. In fact, they often do precisely the opposite; the setting and the production are seen as seamlessly intertwined. Perhaps this seamlessness is undergirded by another suggestion in Blackmore's introduction to the program: that the "international flavour" (*Children of the Sea Performance Program* 2005) of Gough's productions "delightfully mirrors that of the Garden's fabulous plant collections, some 15,000 species from across the globe" (*Children of the Sea Performance Program* 2005).

Blackmore's term "flavour" suggests the extent to which the production's "Sri-Lankan-ness" fuses with its Scottish locale in these reviews through the rich sensual language of taste, smell, sound, and "ravishing" sight. Some of the "sensual" praise for the production is clearly linked to its Sri Lankan elements; multiple reviews comment upon the "sound of flute, sitar, and tabla" (Walker 2005), the "ornate costumes and colorful choreography . . . pounding drums, a lilting sitar" (Gould 2005), and the "Sri Lankan fairytale, masks, and puppetry" (Gilchrist 2005). But often, praise for the show's "atmospheric" qualities merges the power of its setting with the power of its Sri Lankan costumes, music, and dance: Under "torchlight," on "candle-strewn grass pathways" (Gardner 2005), it seems that the two come together. The "local" setting seems of a piece with the production's Sri Lankan elements: "There's so much to enjoy: the location, the use of fire, drumming, colorful costumes, and Bollywood-style dance and comedy" (Gardner 2005). In one reviewer's words, the two commingle as a smell in the night air: "In the damp yet fragrant Botanics, summer flora and Sri Lankan food, scented candles and incense combine with torchlight to make this surely the most atmospheric venue in the festival" (Gray 2005).

This blurring of the local and foreign in responses to *Children of the Sea* owes something, I think, to the production's relationship to *Pericles*. The program declares that the show "follows the tale of *Pericles*" (*Children of the Sea* Performance Program 2005); reviews all mention in passing that the show is "based on," "inspired by," or "an adaptation of" Shakespeare's *Pericles*. First, it is important that the reviews mention this relationship only in passing; while all the reviews nod to the show's association with Shakespeare, none develops or even describes it. Refreshingly — at least to me — Shakespeare is not invoked as the source of the production's "power" and "magic." The garden location, the children's real-life stories, and the music and dance are imbued with importance in review after review; Shakespeare is not. Second, reviewers are not exactly right when they characterize the production as an "adaptation." As the story is told, Shakespeare's text is used, though sparingly; the script is drastically cut and much of the story is told or outlined through Sri Lankan song and dance. As indicated above, however, *Children of the Sea* is not *Pericles* reset in Sri Lanka: the character names and settings from Shakespeare's play are retained, and the play-within-the-play is presented as foreign to the frame narrative — while the children in the shelter are expected to see the resonances with their own plight, the play's world must, in order to serve its therapeutic purpose, also be marked as different.

While I think reviewers were genuinely less interested in the production's Shakespearean aspect than in the other aspects I have mentioned, the confusion over the production's relationship to *Pericles* ("adaptation of" or "inspired by") suggests the reviewers' own confusion about where *Pericles* ends and *Children of the Sea* begins. One reviewer writes: "The production's power

comes from its seamless blending of contemporary tragic reality with historical storytelling, thus blurring the boundaries between the real and the imagined" (Gould 2005). The production did, at moments, explicitly blur cast members' real-life stories with *Pericles'* narrative: In the show's most poignant moment, Pericles, searching for Marina, wanders among the audience with flyers bearing her photograph; other cast members soon follow with similar flyers, saying things like "This is my brother; have you seen him?" Flyers like these were certainly familiar to the audience from news coverage of the search for the missing after the tsunami, and one can only assume that the photographs might well be of actual missing family members. This sequence was indeed powerful, and its power was created by the "seamless blending" of *Pericles'* story with the real-life experiences of the cast.

At other times, however, the production was at pains to distinguish real-life experience from the play-within-the-play; the production was as interested in exploring resonances and echoes as it was in evoking fusion. It was interested, in other words, in marking a boundary between the local and the foreign, not just in melding the two. In particular, *Children of the Sea* occasionally depicted the cast as not at home in the environment of the Royal Botanic Garden. This effort to distinguish, to identify cast members as foreign to their locale, stands in contrast to the reviews, quoted above, that tend to fuse the garden setting with the production's Sri Lankan cultural elements. The production developed the distinction between Sri Lankan production and Scottish locale chiefly, and unsurprisingly, through climate — through the weather. The program, for example, emphasizes that "for the players, it requires immense passion and perseverance to survive a continuous run of 25 or more performances — particularly if you have just arrived in cool temperate Scotland after a lifetime in the sultry tropics!" (*Children of the Sea* Performance Program 2005). The performance began with an announcement from director Gough, who, as he gathered the audience to begin the promenade, again drew our attention to the weather and encouraged us to think about how foreign the local climate must feel to his cast.

The show's use of climate to distinguish between the local and foreign is of special importance in its first episode, which includes the transition from the "real-life" post-tsunami frame into the play-within-the-play, as the traumatized children gather in the shelter and the story of *Pericles* begins. In the shelter scene, the children are costumed in long-sleeved nightshirts and huddle with blankets, as if cold and wet. Of course, the actors actually were cold and wet, and the recent physical discomfort (if not the emotional trauma) they felt after the tsunami seemed to be reflected in their present discomfort, as they shivered on wet grass on a misty Edinburgh evening. When the story of *Pericles* begins, scantily clad men bearing torches rush from a hollow behind the children. A dramatic shift takes place here: The men move quickly, accompanied by

loud drumbeats; the torches they carry burn with an intense red flame, immediately bathing the scene in a warm, otherworldly glow. The artificial color of the torches suggests the artifice of the story that is about to begin; it also challenges the atmosphere of the garden setting, as the red light drowns out all the lush greens. Into this dramatically altered scene steps actor Paratene as Gower, who speaks the first lines of Shakespeare's text: "To sing a song that old was sung / From ashes ancient Gower is come" (*Pericles*, 1.1.1-2, Shakespeare 1997). As he begins to tell the tale, the children remove their nightshirts and cast away their blankets in preparation for taking roles in the story; beneath their nightshirts are light and insubstantial Sri Lankan dress clothes. But once inside the play-within-the-play, the children never again register physical discomfort or draw attention to the evening's climate.

In this opening section of the production, the boundaries between local and foreign climate and between the Shakespearean story and tsunami experience are clearly drawn. It seems to me, however, that the production performs here what might be seen as an inversion: rather than being aligned with the local weather and location, *Pericles* bursts through the frame narrative accompanied by unnatural light, warmth, and Sri Lankan music, bringing a whole new climate with it. The British climate and damp setting, rather than being linked to "local" author Shakespeare, are aligned with the real-life experience of the tsunami. Perhaps this inversion is not really very surprising: I would wager that to most people in the audience, the story of the tsunami was much more familiar than that of *Pericles*. One effect of this lack of familiarity, as I have shown, is the eagerness of reviewers to laud the production's blurring of boundaries between *Pericles* and tsunami experience and between the Scottish and Sri Lankan locations. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of this Shakespearean text certainly spared reviewers the urge, should they have been vulnerable to it, to assess the production's "faithfulness" to the text or to measure its execution of the play's most famous moments. But I think that the reviewers' lack of familiarity with *Pericles* — or at least lack of interest in considering the production's relationship to *Pericles* — resulted in the overlooking of equally interesting claims the production may have had to make about familiarity and defamiliarization, or about the local and the foreign. *Children of the Sea* was indeed ingenious at blending the local and the foreign, and all reviewers enjoyed this aspect of the production; at the same time, the show used locale and climate to differentiate local and foreign, creating surprising juxtapositions, and at times dislocating Shakespeare — for viewers who chose to locate him there — from the British landscape and climate in which the actors performed.

## Notes

1. Fringe First awards are given in each of the festival's three weeks; five were given in the first week of the 2005 festival: "The Fringe First Awards were established in 1973 to encourage excellence in theatre, and to recognize the best new writing on the Fringe, as decided by *The Scotsman's* team of critics. They were designed to encourage people to bring new work to Edinburgh in the spirit of adventure and experiment. The awards are announced weekly during the festival. There is no fixed number given, and the only requirement is that the work must be new — having had no more than six performances in the UK, prior to the Fringe" ("Fringe First Awards" 2007). The show received five press reviews and three audience member mini-reviews; it was also covered in three feature articles.

### Online Resources

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe [cited 22 May, 2007]. Available online at <http://www.edfringe.com/story.html?id=1055>.

### Permissions

Figure 1: The Children of the Sea gather in the shelter after the tsunami. The Children of the Sea: Ruwani Sithara, Sureni Mekala, Tilani Shamila, Neena Dilhari, Rasika Manori, Shanika Indeewari, Inoshi Sharmila Medavi, Manusha Udayangani, Amali Range. Dionyza: Anoja Weerasinghe.

Figure 2: Before the show begins, the atmosphere is set with the music of flute, sitar, tabla, and drums. Musicians: Nuwan Theeksana, Jagath Chaminda, Gayanath Nalaka, Anura Jayawardana, and Jagath Ranasinghe.

Figure 3: The Children of the Sea enact the shipwreck that occurs at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Pericles*.

Figure 4: Gower (Rawiri Paratene) speaks the first lines of Shakespeare's text in a dramatic cloud of red smoke.

All photographs were taken by Genevieve Love.



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