

THE MONSTER (A FANTASY)

A One-Act Play by

Vilsoni Hereniko

*Center for Pacific Islands Studies,
University of Hawai'i at Manoa*

With an Interview with the Playwright

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The first performance of this play was at the University of the South Pacific in October 1987. It was directed by the playwright, and the cast was as follows:

T a	:	Salote Nawalowalo
Rua	:	Maxine Subramany
Folu	:	Felicia Reade
Spirits	:	Joseph Ravu Tarcisius Tara Vilsoni Hereniko Felicia Reade
The Monster	:	Felicia Reade

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The Monster © 1989 by Vilsoni Hereniko. First published in *The Monster and Other Plays*, Suva: Mana Publications.

Characters

TA These parts could be played by an all-female cast, although
 RUA they should all look different from each other. Or Ta could
 FOLU be male, and Rua and Folu females. Ta and Rua should be
 MONSTER dressed in complementary colours. The spirits could wear
 SPIRITS masks on their faces and dry banana leaves on their bodies.
 Each one carries a war club. Or they could be dressed as
 described in the text.

The stage is strewn with odds and ends--empty coconut shells including a burnt coconut seedling, bits of firewood, a dead branch of a tree, leaves here and there, a toppled wooden bench underneath which is a broken bicycle wheel, etc.

It is night. Sounds of shooting, screaming, running feet, wailing, etc. can be heard in the distance. As the sounds diminish, the moon rises. A beggar (Ta) is seen sitting on the bench eating. Next to her is a basket' made of green coconut leaves containing the following: one half-empty tin of fish, one toothbrush, half a dalo, half a loaf of bread, some water in a plastic bottle, some left-over curry, four lemons, etc.

Barely visible at stage left is Rua, who is massaging her leg. After a while she crawls over to where the bench is, startling Ta.

TA. Who are you? What are you doing here?

RUA. You brought me here. Remember?

TA. No, I can't remember. Anyway, I don't want you here.

RUA. But what can I do?

TA. I don't know. Why don't you go back?

RUA. I can't.

TA. Why not?

RUA. There is nothing to go back to. Besides, I was born here.

TA. There's not enough food for two people.

(Ta grabs the basket of food and moves away)

RUA. I don't eat much.

- TA. That's what you say. I don't believe you.
- RUA. I tell the truth.
- TA. So do I.
- RUA. What about the rules? You can't ignore the rules.
- TA. What rules?
- RUA. We agreed on the rules.
- TA. I can choose to ignore the rules. *(With an air of generosity)*
But because I'm a fair and just person, I shall abide by the rules.
- (Rua gets into a wrestling pose. Ta approaches and clutches Rua by the buttocks. Rua gets angry and says "foul," appealing to the audience. They hold each other by the waist and shout "ta [one], rua [two], folu [three]" and then wrestle. This wrestling match should be humorous for the audience but taken seriously by Ta and Rua. Ta wins, goes to the basket, sits down and eats. Rua walks away to the end of stage left, bruised and disgruntled. Rua stares at Ta as the latter eats)*
- RUA. I'm hungry.
- TA. You'll have to win.
- RUA. Does it have to be wrestling? What about soccer?
- TA. What about rugby? League rugby? *(Chuckles to herself)*
- RUA. No. I hate rugby. Besides, we don't have any balls.
- TA. Haven't you? *(Laughs)*
- RUA. What do you mean?
- TA. Why don't we count each other's teeth? *(Laughs)* Not funny?
- RUA. No.
- TA. *(Pause, Ta looks around)* Do you think we are the only ones left?
- RUA. I don't know. Why don't you go and find out?

- TA. And what will you do?
- RUA. I'll be on guard . . . just in case.
- TA. Why don't you go and I'll stay?
- RUA. I thought about it first.
- TA. So what? I thought about it second.
- RUA. You're not logical.
- TA. You're not popular.
- RUA. Me. Not popular? (*Chuckles at the unexpected answer*) Why did you ask me to come?
- TA. Did I ask you to come?
- RUA. What a memory you've got. So glad I haven't poured my heart out to you.
- TA. It was most thoughtful. Thank-you.
- RUA. You don't care about me, do you?
- TA. As a matter of fact, I don't.
- RUA. Why not?
- TA. Look at you? And look at me.
- RUA. I've got two eyes, one nose, two ears . . . and so have you.
- TA. I don't mean that.
- RUA. What then?
- TA. Your skin's a different colour. And your hair, and the things you like to eat, the clothes you wear, the colour of your eyes.
- RUA. You're a . . .
- TA. I'm not. Just a realist. The audience thinks I am. (*To audience*) Yes, I know you do, but I'm not.
- RUA. What the audience thinks is not important?
- TA. I don't care what they think. If I let them decide for me, I shall lose control.

RUA. What about me? I was born here.

TA. DON'T SAY THAT!

RUA. Sorry. Have I offended you?

TA. Yes. Don't you know who I am? *(Towering over Rua)*

RUA. Who are you?

TA. I am me. The one and only.

RUA. *(Not really seeing)* I see.

TA. *(Taking out some lemons from the basket)*. Here. Let's juggle. Who knows? Maybe you'll beat me at this sport.

RUA. Juggling is not a sport.

TA. It is. My father used to play it.

RUA. Not my father. I've never played it before.

TA. You can't blame me for that. On your marks, go.

(They shout "ta, rua, folu" and then juggle. Ta wins after Rua's lemons have fallen on the ground. Ta goes to the basket and takes out a toothbrush and begins to brush. Offers Rua a small piece of bread from the basket)

TA. Go on, take it.

RUA. *(Surprised)* Thank you.

TA. You don't know me well, do you?

RUA. *(Pause)* Why do you want to brush your teeth?

TA. *(Posing, smiling to the audience)* So I can keep smiling my famous smile.

RUA. What for?

(Ta laughs as she flashes a smile to the audience. If possible, Ta's teeth should remind the audience of Dracula. Rua stealthily moves over to the basket and peers over it)

TA. Get away!

(Rua timidly hobbles over to the other end of the stage)

- TA. Don't you have any relatives to look after you?
- RUA. I did. But they're all killed, or moved away.
- TA. Your face looks familiar. Are you related to . . .
(Ta looks around and whispers in Rua's ear. Rua nods)
- TA. Really?
- RUA. Why do you want to know?
- TA. Were you at the party?
- RUA. *(Looking around furtively)* Yes. I was serving the drinks. You grabbed me when the shooting started and pulled me outside. Then we ran . . . *(Looking around as though afraid)*
- TA. And then?
- RUA. There was an explosion . . . that's all I know.
- TA. But my husband. He was with me at the party. Did you see him?
- RUA. There were many men there. Which one was your husband? The ugly one? *(Laughs)*
(Ta chases Rua around the bench. She picks up the burnt coconut seedling and throws it at Rua. It misses)
- TA. I was drunk.
- RUA. Now you're sober.
- TA. I was drunk. It was me who caused the explosion. I'm not responsible for my actions. I loved my husband.
- RUA. I loved mine. But he ran away.
- TA. You were married?
- RUA. Yes. Three times.
- TA. Why three times?
- RUA. Why not?
- TA. Of course. *(Ta paces the floor, confused)* Did you say you were married?
- RUA. Yes.

TA. To a man?

RUA. No, to my dog. *(Laughs)*

TA. Really?

RUA. Who else?

TA. So you're married to a dog.

RUA. *(Realising Ta's inadequacy)* I was married to a man.

TA. You're a woman then.

RUA. Do you want to see for yourself?

TA. *(Quickly)* No, I'm a Christian.

RUA. You are? I've never met one before.

TA. Take a good look then. *(Sits and flashes a smile)*

RUA. Is that how you can tell?

TA. Yes. By the smile.

RUA. I see.

TA. So you're a woman?

RUA. Does it matter to you?

TA. Yes, a great deal. It complicates matters.

RUA. You mean, when you asked me if I would keep you warm, you thought I was a man?

TA. I told you, I was drunk.

RUA. I don't believe you.

TA. Stop treating me like a child! I know I have a bad memory, but don't treat me like this.

RUA. Not just a bad memory. You smell as well! *(Ta picks up the wheel and rolls it at Rua who trips over it while trying to dodge)* I'm frightened. Comfort me.

TA. Go away. I don't want you here.

RUA. I'm lonely.

TA. So am I.

- RUA. A hug?
- TA. No! Stay there!
- RUA. I'm starving. Help me.
- TA. The rules.
- RUA. I'm ready. *(Stands up for the challenge)*
- TA. Let's handwrestle. Yes?
- RUA. Yes. *(They shout "ta, rua, folu" and wrestle. Ta wins again)*
That was unfair. Your hands are bigger than mine.
- TA. And your hands are smaller. Small is beautiful. *(Laughs)*
(Ta nibbles at the piece of left-over bread from the basket. She drinks as well)
- RUA. It's not fair. Why should you be in control all the time. Don't you find that basket heavy?
- TA. Of course it's heavy. But this is my talent. Carrying the burden for other people. I don't mind, really,
- RUA. I wish you'd let me do it.
- TA. Tell you what. If you can prove that you're a better speaker, I'll let you carry it.
- RUA. You mean give a speech?
- TA. Yes.
- RUA. What kind of speech?
- TA. A love speech. *(Laughs)*
- RUA. Now that isn't fair. You've got the advantage. Let's toss a coin.
- TA. Do you have a coin?
- RUA. *(Checks pockets, but couldn't find any)* None. They're worth next to nothing these days anyway. Do you have any? Let me check.
- TA. *(Quickly)* Keep away! Don't touch me! I'm untouchable. *(Mock shooting)* Bang! Bang! *(Takes out a coin from one of her pockets)* Here's a coin.

RUA. Just as I thought.

TA. What did you think?

RUA. *(Pause)* Let's ask the audience. Where does this man's coin come from?

TA. Woman!

RUA. *(Confused/distracted)* Of course. Woman . . . What was the question?

TA. Heads or Tails?

RUA. Heads of course. Heads are better than tails.

TA. I said Heads first.

RUA. No you didn't.

TA. I said Heads or Tails.

RUA. Yes, and I said Heads.

TA. Yes, and I said Heads first.

RUA. If you don't give me Heads I shall appeal to the audience.

TA. Please don't. You'll wake them up. Heads for you, and Tails for me. If you win, you may carry this burden. But I'm warning you, it's too heavy for shoulders without muscles.

RUA. I intend to carry it on my head.

TA. What?

RUA. Never mind.

TA. Ready?

RUA. Are you planning to toss the coin yourself?

TA. Of course, I'm in control, aren't I?

RUA. But the rules.

TA. All right. I agree.

RUA. There's a spirit of generosity in you.

TA. Thank you. I knew it was obvious. I'll go even further. Let both of us hold the coin, a symbol of mutual respect for each other's obsessions.

RUA. How noble! I shall always be indebted to you, sir.

(They clasp their hands together with the coin in the middle. They shout "ta, rua, folu" and then toss the coin in the air. It lands on the floor and both run to see)

RUA. It's Heads.

TA. So it is.

(Ta roars like a wild animal. Rua eats greedily. Ta climbs onto the bench)

TA. I am naturally disappointed but I congratulate you on your success. Good luck with the burden!

(Rua picks up the basket and carries it the way Ta used to. Rua is surprised at how heavy it is but forces a smile. Music is heard as ghost-like figures appear and surround Rua in a war-like dance. Ta, who has retreated to the other side of the stage, watches Rua through binoculars [using her hands for this purpose]. The dance should consist of figures wearing bright contrasting costumes and rather ghost-like. The figures should dance as though they were reporters after a scoop. The music should be full of dissonance as the dancers merge and threaten each other in a kaleidoscope of colour. The dancers disappear as the music ends and Ta and Rua are left alone on stage. They stare at each other)

RUA. Why didn't you stop them. I was frightened. Didn't you see how they surrounded me? You've got to support me. Speak. *(Silence)* If you're not talking, then I'm leaving, and I'm taking this basket with me.

TA. No. No. You can't take that. You may go anywhere you like, but you can't take that with you.

RUA. Help me then. I need your support.

TA. The coin has made its decision It doesn't want me anymore. I have been rejected.

- RUA. Please, just a reassuring word from you. *(Silence)* Please, help. Help, you swine!
- TA. You've insulted me. Apologise!
- RUA. Help me!
- TA. Apologise! I feel deeply wounded. I'm offended. How could you. . . .
- RUA. Please . . . I need your protection.
- TA. Apologise!
- (In fury, Ta tackles Rua and they fall to the ground. They struggle for a while until they collapse with exhaustion. Ta is the first to stand up. Ta throws the coin away)*
- TA. I object to the use of the coin.
- RUA. But it's fair.
- TA. A coin is foreign.
- RUA. But it's just.
- TA. Rubbish.
- RUA. What?
- TA. I said rubbish. Use something local, otherwise my gods shall take revenge.
- RUA. But a coin is the fairest means. It's just!
- TA. DON'T SAY THAT WORD AGAIN!
- RUA. *(Cowering)* Sorry, chief. *(Silence)* What's that? Listen.
- (The sound of someone in pain offstage. The sound gets louder and finally a figure [Folu], bruised and sickly looking, appears. Ta doesn't see the figure until after his next speech)*
- TA. Oh come all ye spirits. Alight on me. Lead me all the way. Left, right, left, right . . .
- (Ta marches for a while. Ta sees Folu and runs to Rua. They huddle in a corner and listen)*
- FOLU. Hello. *(Reaches out for a handshake but there is no response)* I've been looking for the two of you everywhere. I was wor-

ried about you. (*Ta and Rua retreat further*) Don't you recognise me?

TA & RUA. Who are you?

FOLU. What do you mean? You ran away and left me. But I followed, then I heard arguing and . . . here I am. Aren't you glad to see me?

TA & RUA. No, go away. There isn't enough food here for everyone.

FOLU. Food? But I don't want food.

TA & RUA. Liar!

FOLU. I have a message for the two of you.

TA & RUA. (*Blocking their ears*) We don't want to hear it.

FOLU. But you need me. (*Silence*) Can we be friends at least?

TA & RUA. We don't want friendship. Not with strangers anyway.

FOLU. But we used to live together.

TA & RUA. Liar! What is your name?

FOLU. I don't have a name. I'm just a voice. (*Ta and Rua act as though struck*) So you still remember me?

TA & RUA. No. Go away!

FOLU. Please, listen!

TA & RUA. Our ears are closed. We can't hear you.

FOLU. (*Shouting*) Can you hear me now?

TA & RUA. Hardly . . . your voice is faint . . . faint.

FOLU. (*Shouting*) Please listen to me. I have come with a message. It's the same message. (*Pause*) Look after each other!

(*Screaming, Ta and Rua chase Folu, who hastily exits*)

TA. I'm hungry. Give me some food.

RUA. You'll have to win.

TA. I'm getting old and tired.. I have no energy left for the struggle.

- RUA. Too bad. You'll have to starve.
(Ta walks over and tries to snatch the basket)
- RUA. The rules. You've got to think of the rules.
- TA. I don't care about the rules! I was here first.
- RUA. But I'm in control. I won through fair and just means.
- TA. *(Getting more menacing)* Give me the basket!
- RUA. No, it's mine.
- TA. I want the basket!
- RUA. I'm in control. If you touch me, I shall appeal to the audience.
(To the audience) Didn't I win this basket through fair and just means? Didn't I? Didn't I?
- TA. *(To the audience)* I was here first!
(Pause. Silence)
- TA. Let's toss the coin again.
- RUA. Until we get it right? No.
- TA. To hell with the coin!
- RUA. But the rules, it's all we have left. No rules, no justice.
- TA. DON'T SAY THAT WORD AGAIN! I'LL KILL YOU IF YOU SAY THAT WORD AGAIN!
- RUA. It's our only hope.
- TA. There's no hope . . . for you!
- RUA. *(Pause. Suddenly the truth dawns on Rua)* Then I've been misled. I've been misled. *(Rua trembles in fear)* I . . . I . . . Will you hold the basket for a while? I have to . . . *(Rua indicates she wants to throw up)*
- TA. *(Patriotically)* If I can help, I'm ready!
- RUA. Thank you.
(Rua hands over the basket and turns her back to the audience. She clutches her stomach in agony)

TA. *(Making a speech)* If my help is needed at a time of crisis, I shall give it. How can I stand idly and watch while my sister . . .

(Ta suddenly jumps on top of Rua. They struggle, with the basket left alone at centre stage. During the struggle, a monster appears and heads towards the basket. The monster should look enormous, ugly, multi-coloured and horrible! When Ta and Rua realise that their lives are in danger, they forget their differences and attack the monster. After a lot of struggle, the monster is killed. Exhausted, Ta and Rua stare at each other as a transformation comes over them. Their bodies relax, the frowns disappear to be replaced by radiant faces.)

RUA. We've killed the monster!

TA. I feel different.

RUA. Something's changed in me. I don't understand.

TA. Neither do I. *(Pause)* We have killed the monster!

(They look at each other fondly and shake hands. Then-they pick up the basket of food, place it between them and feed each other)

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Interview with Vilsoni Hereniko

The Monster was written and directed by Vilsoni Hereniko, then a lecturer in drama and theater at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. It was first performed at the University of the South Pacific in October 1987, a few weeks after the second coup in September. Rehearsals began soon after the first coup, in preparation for the university's annual Pacific Week program, which was canceled later, partly because of disruptions on campus due to the involvement of academics in Fiji politics and the military's interference with campus facilities. The performance of this play, however, went ahead amidst a climate of fear, intimidation, and decrees designed to stifle creativity and freedom of expression.

Because of the timing and prevailing 'circumstances, *The Monster* was seen by many as a satire on the military takeover and those involved in its execution.

Below is an interview with the playwright/director about his play and his views on the relationship between theater and politics.

Pacific Studies: Why did you choose to write a play rather than a letter or a poem, or use some other genre that doesn't require a performance?

Hereniko: A play is multidimensional and doesn't have some of the constraints that beset the other forms. Let me explain. After my colleagues at the University of the South Pacific had sufficiently recovered from the shock of the first coup in Fiji in 1987, some of them started making public statements about what they felt the coup was about, whether they were for or against it, who they felt were behind the events of May fourteenth and so on. All of a sudden, academics felt they had to take sides and make clear their political affiliation. It was no longer okay to sit on the fence; if you were in favor of the coup, then you were anti-Indian, if you thought the coup was wrong, then you were denying Fijians their indigenous rights. As a Rotuman playwright living in Fiji, these two opposing positions seemed misguided. It was too simplistic to think merely in terms of one race against another; it seemed more a question of quests for control and power. Yes, race may have had something to do with it, but it was just one of the many factors at play. Who knows, perhaps it was just a mask worn to hide more private and personal ambitions. My main concern, however, was what the coup was doing to ordinary people, who, through no fault of their own, suddenly found themselves without an income or means of survival. The situation was complex, and a letter to the editor would have been inadequate to express and capture the ambiguities, contradictions, and fears that people were experiencing. But theater can convey complex emotions more efficiently than any other medium I know, except perhaps film. Theater can replicate life; it can bring to the fore what is hidden in the depths of the human heart; it can objectify reality so that we recognize ourselves and our secret fears and desires as the play unfolds. Because *The Monster* is not concerned with accurate historical representation but rather with exploring an analogous human conflict, the viewer is seduced into becoming emotionally involved with the action on stage. The fight between Ta and Rua becomes the individual's own struggle with the opposition, whatever it may be. The struggle on stage becomes the prototype for other kinds of struggles for power, between individuals, between different political parties, between governments, between good and evil.

A play in performance can do a lot of things that are impossible for

other media. Live theater is real people engaged in make-believe conflicts, and the resolution of such conflicts becomes just as engaging as conflicts in our lives. For me, writing a play is a more satisfactory way of exploring a complex issue than a letter to the editor, which, by the way, seemed to be the chosen medium for a number of political activists, who soon found themselves hounded by the military. Some were thrown in prison for a few days. By opting for a work of art, I was able to say what I wanted to say and get away with it.

There are some parts of the script that are quite explicit. Ta's comment that she has been rejected, for example, is reminiscent of Ratu Mara's response after he had lost the 1987 election; Rua's insistence on following the rules echoes the sentiments of a lot of Indians who felt that the country would go to the dogs otherwise. In some ways, The Monster seems clearly inspired by the coup. So why were you spared?

I don't really know. Suffice it to say that my colleagues were surprised that I was not arrested, for reasons best known to those in power at the time. I was told by friends that several army men in plain clothes were present during some of the performances, but they probably didn't connect what was happening on stage with the coup. That might have been the case, since the play was not performed in a naturalistic style, and the cast was all women, so perhaps they thought the play couldn't have been about power-hungry men! Theater, as a medium for raising people's consciousness, or as a potential threat to the status quo, is something that is new to the contemporary Pacific. I suppose if the government had been aware of the political nature of theater in places such as Kenya and Latin America they would have arrested me. But there has been no precedent in the South Pacific, nothing that would make politicians suspicious of theater.

Also, if I had been arrested, it would have been difficult for my detractors to know what to charge me with. Perhaps they could have charged the cast and me for working on a Sunday, for the Sunday ban was in operation at this time and we ignored it for our first performance. If they were against the contents of the play, they would have had a hard time identifying which aspects of the play offended them. The symbolic nature of the play, the all-female cast, the ambiguities and contradictions, the seemingly nonsensical dialogue at times, all these meant that the play was open to several interpretations. Some people thought the play was pro-Labour or Coalition; some thought it was pro-Alliance. Those religiously inclined saw it as having a message

of love for one another, that the monster was the personification of evil in the human heart. Only when this monster has been killed can we be free to love our enemies. A few saw the monster as Rabuka himself; others saw it as multinational corporations, dominant foreign powers or the CIA. In fact, a plus of working in a symbolic mode is that a lot more interpretations are possible and you end up with a much richer product. You can conceal as much as you reveal, and in times of danger, this was necessary for self-preservation. I have a wife and son who wanted me at home, not locked up in a cell in Suva prison or police station.

A possible reason, of course, is that the army knew what was going on but regarded the exercise as harmless and insignificant. We were performing at the University of the South Pacific rather than on the street. There were no newspapers at the time, no radio, and there were security checks at strategic places. Although we had full houses and four performances, our influence was limited; besides, we could hardly be accused of inciting anyone to violence. The ending of the play makes up for any possible offensive allusions in the beginning.

Yes, the ending seems so idealistic and preachy, so different from the never-ending struggle for power that still dominates Fiji politics.

That's right. It is futile to wallow in the mud; the artist has a responsibility to draw attention to the blue sky as well. At the end of one of our performances a colleague, who had suffered at the hands of the army and who was constantly harassed long after the play performances, took me to task for having the monster in the play killed. For him, I had presented an ideal world. He saw the monster as representing Rabuka, who was still very much alive and kicking. My play therefore had presented a false view of reality. But his view was typical of those who think the theater is nothing but a mirror. For me, the theater should do more than merely reflect reality. The theater has to be larger than life; it must aspire to improve the human condition, to act as a pointer to other paths that might lead to harmony, otherwise, why should anyone go to the theater? One can go to the street or the market to see drama, some of which is more dramatic than theater could possibly portray.

However, having said that theater should aim to present alternate realities, I must also say that at the time the play was performed the ending seemed necessary, particularly when the situation in Fiji seemed hopeless. There was a vacuum of information and the general public had no idea what was happening. Fear and anxiety were rampant. Much better to keep people informed than to keep them in the dark.

The vacuum encourages the imagination to concoct all kinds of negative possibilities; thus it was necessary for the play to offer a glimmer of hope. Now, in 1992, I'm not quite sure that I would end it in the same way, if I were writing it today. Somehow, that ending seems contrived and didactic.

Is it wrong to be didactic?

Not necessarily. A lot of Shakespeare and Ibsen is didactic. But the lesson has to evolve naturally from the action, so that it comes across as the most logical outcome, given the development of events. Rereading the play, it is plausible that once the monster has been killed, Ta and Rua would resume their struggle against one another, for there is no longer the threat of an external power. Okay, I chose to have the death of the monster result in changed hearts for Ta and Rua, but this isn't the most logical choice of action, except perhaps from a religious interpretation of what the monster represents.

What then does the monster represent?

The monster for each of us may be different. The monster is that which we all need to subdue in order to find harmony with each other. You see, though the Fiji coup inspired the final shape of the play, the play itself existed several years before the Fiji coup. I first wrote it as a play about beggars eating out of a rubbish bin. When they came to the last dregs, they realized that to survive they might have to eat each other. In another version, a garbage truck arrived and removed the rubbish bin, taking away their only source of livelihood. The earlier versions were never satisfactory to me, because they were written in a vacuum, and though I knew it was a play about the human struggle for survival, it was vague and dissipated. As soon as the coup took place, I realized straight away what this play, which I had titled "Tom, Dick, and Harry," was really about: Power. But the play was meant to travel beyond the confines of the Fiji situation. It was intended to be about the constant struggle for supremacy everywhere, what happens to individuals who are trapped in this power struggle, and what needs to happen if there is to be sharing of power, as symbolized by Ta and Rua feeding each other at the end of the play.

So the play is not a satire on Fiji politics?

Oh yes, it is. You see, in performance, Ta (meaning “First” in Rotuman) was played by a Fijian woman, Rua (meaning “Second”) by an Indian, so it is easy for a Fiji audience to see it in terms of Fiji politics. Also, some of the incidents in the play allude to specific events prior to the coup, and so a Fiji audience is bound to interpret the play from a Fiji perspective. But the script doesn’t mention anything about specific races. If the play were to be performed in Hawai‘i, with Ta played by a native Hawaiian and Rua by a *haole*, an audience of University of Hawai‘i faculty and students is bound to see the play in a different light. If one of the actors were male and the other female, others may see it as a power struggle between the sexes. In fact, when I wrote the play I wanted a man and a woman, but because I couldn’t find a male actor I ended up casting two females. I lost a layer of interpretation, but this change helped conceal some of the specific references to male-dominated Fiji politics. Also, because the two females were dressed as males, wearing complementary colors of blue and pink, the characters took on both male and female characteristics. They became generic and “sex-less.” This again is one of the strengths of theater--its ability to communicate so many different things simultaneously, through color, sound, costume, gesture, movement, lighting, and all the other elements that combine to make theater a powerful medium for communicating complex emotions.

And yet The Monster is a very simple play.

Yes. The complexity is conflated, condensed in imagery and symbolism. It looks deceptively simple as a text, but when it is performed and you have real people who look, move, talk, act differently from each other, the play takes on a three-dimensional character. Also, objects such as the coconut seedling (symbol of the Labour party) and the wheel (symbol of the Alliance party) evoked all kinds of associations in the audience. The sight of these symbolic objects mistreated on stage forces the audience to react; the play, like the dead Lazarus, is raised to life and demands our response. Thus, when Rua wins control over the basket and Ta threatens to forcibly regain possession and Rua confronts the audience and asks, “Didn’t I win through fair and just means? Didn’t I?”--someone from the audience shouted back “Yes!” while another responded “No!” These reactions from the audience are missing from the text; so is the life of the play. A play has to be performed for its full impact to be realized. Yes, you can read a play and gain something from

it, but for a fuller understanding of what the playwright intended, you really have to see, hear, and sometimes smell it. One of the wonderful things about theater is that the audience's response is immediate, and if the play works, you can tell straightaway. If it doesn't, people walk out and you have half-empty houses for the rest of the season.

How did the audience respond to your play then?

There is a videotape of one of the performances, and, every time I show it, I realize how responsive Fiji audiences are. You can hear them laughing as the actors pull each other's hair and fall on the ground with a thud. Sometimes they shout back or whistle. Because of the symbolic nature of the play, I was worried that the audience would fall asleep. Thus in the text, when Rua threatens to appeal to the audience, Ta responds, "Don't, you'll wake them up!" During performance, this line didn't make sense, since the audience was always wide awake. But I had it there when I was writing it because I thought this line might wake up the sleepy ones. With only two characters on stage, it is often difficult to hold the attention of the audience. Fortunately, the two lead characters were able to carry it off, although they had had little acting experience.

A woman whose son was under constant surveillance by the army and whose house was fire-bombed told me that she cried throughout the performance. Though she didn't live on campus, she heard about the play and drove down to see it, only to have her car stopped and checked by the army's security guards.

I had a few letters afterwards, and lots of verbal thank-yous from people who felt that the play spoke loudly and clearly about the Fiji situation. Obviously, these were people who endorsed the message that the two races should start cooperating and working together, rather than be at odds with each other all the time. The Christians, of course, found the ending very appealing. Those who were anticoup thought the play was an attack on Rabuka and Ratu Mara and that I should take it to the street, even to Australia, to gather support for their cause. I had a request from some colleagues to allow them to perform the play at Sukuna Park during an anticoup demonstration on 14 May 1988. Though I agreed initially from an artistic standpoint, my wife foresaw that the demonstrators at Sukuna Park would probably be arrested and thrown in prison, as indeed they were. Had they performed my play, I probably would also have been arrested upon my return from an over-

seas trip and my family harassed by the army meanwhile. I withdrew permission.

But why?

Because *The Monster* would have been used as a political weapon to lash out at the enemy, and would have taken on a more extreme partisan character than I could identify with. The actors would necessarily have drawn attention to themselves (they were all fairly well known for their anticoup positions) and their favorite parts of the play, at the expense of the play as a work of art. The overriding message would have been lost, for the actors were unlikely to give priority to their responsibility as actors/artists. Rather, they were political activists first and foremost, and there is a world of difference.

You are not a political activist then?

I am an artist first and foremost. At a time of political crisis, I felt moved to use my art (theater) in the hope that I could contribute to the finding of a satisfactory solution. I see art as having an important role to play in mediation and in drawing attention to other ways of being. But I am wary of power, and of people who aspire to positions of power. I can only wish such people good luck and hope they never become corrupt, like many politicians and military leaders before them. My role as an artist is to warn them of pitfalls and to remind them of the responsibilities they take on when they assume power. It is not my role to discredit anyone so that my friends or myself can get into power. This is why I am not primarily a political activist, and why art should not be used in this way--otherwise it becomes propaganda.