

# **A BRAVE VESSEL**

**Shaun McCarthy**

## **CAST**

**Caliban** – the colonised

**Prospero**

**Miranda** – the colonisers

(Caliban's language on the final page is Swahili)

'When I am attacked by gloomy thoughts, nothing helps me so much as running to my books. They quickly absorb me and banish the clouds from my mind.'

**Montaigne.**

'My alma mater was books, a good library.... I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity.'

**Malcolm X**

*(Soundtrack of gentle waves on a beach.*

**Caliban** *in a spotlight. He holds a machete. Maybe also a piece of fruit. He is wrapped in some poor cloak or a blanket. Underneath, ragged trunks.*

**Prospero and Miranda** *upstage, shadowy. He has a staff, for magic or beating.*

*Also upstage: a rough table with a number of tattered books and pieces of well-thumbed paper. Two chairs facing each other from the edges of the stage*

**Caliban** *interacts physically with Prospero and Miranda throughout the scene – mocks, challenges, cowers - always remembering where the balance of power rests at any time. Caliban may also mime actions ordered by the others.)*

CALIBAN: I am that which is exploited on this island.

*(The sound of waves fades.)*

PROSPERO: Fetch water!

MIRANDA: Bring wood!

PROSPERO: Sweep ashes!

MIRANDA: Empty slops!

CALIBAN: Fetch, bring, sweep, empty. Labour, sweat, stain and stink... I am its finest, least prized natural resource. *(To figures)* I can be called upon to provide -

PROSPERO: Fire

MIRANDA: Fruit.

PROSPERO: Shelter

MIRANDA: Drink.

CALIBAN: Kindle, gather, thatch and serve. And in return they ‘civilized’ me.

MIRANDA: Come here!

PROSPERO Clean that!

MIRANDA: Carry this!

PROSPERO: Don't dare to look at her that way!

CALIBAN: I come, I carry, clean, and cast my glance. I showed them all my island had. They took all it had.

PROSPERO: And in return?

CALIBAN: You taught me your language; 'and my profit on't is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you' - Rid me of you!

*He chases Prospero and Miranda into the shadows.*

*Beat.)*

And now they have gone. Sailed away with not a backward glance. Now, 'They are such stuff as dreams are made on.' And nightmares. My nightmares.

*(A beat. Warm lights up. Sounds of tropical forest.)*

I have not moved from the shade of this tree for hours. Days. Except to scavenge. And to piss. Away from the spring of sweet water. I was taught that, with a blow and a curse. As if I needed to learn something so bloody simple:

'Don't piss in the drinking water!' Oh really!? Yeah!

*(Beat)*

*(Pointing up)* 'Attalea osmantha': his name, his language. Once you name a thing you own it. 'Tree that gives leaves for thatch': my name. Kind of does the job better?

He was afraid of my assumed stupidity. So it suited me to play the stupid creature. The unformed, uncivilised ape. Gave me a modicum of temporary power, but the role did get a little bit wearing. It began to... Fit. Like the cloak he made me wear in their company.

*(He goes to take the cloak off, hesitates, arranges it more firmly on his shoulders.)*

It was easier to feign incomprehension, affect a dull incuriousness, than explain what he, in fact, did not understand about my island. Which was everything.

He used his power to shape my land to the form he wanted. Twisted its natural sweet airs and pleasing sounds to fit his methods and devices.

He *was* clever. Oh yeah. Clever people fear stupidity because they cannot predict how the supposedly dull witted will react to, stimuli.

*(Prospero comes forward and appears to conjure light, maybe with a staff or rod or lit ball. He shows it to Caliban, though for no obvious purpose.)*

OK. *(Mimes the following reactions as the light is demonstrated)*

Over excitement? *(Too active)*

Excessive curiosity? *(Too close)*

Fear? *(Extravagant cowering)*

Indifference. *(Turns away)*

*(The last reaction annoys Prospero who shuts off the light and retreats.)*

*(As if obvious)* Light. The sun.

*(Lights cool and dim. Tropical sounds cease.)*

The moon.

Apart from sometimes fearing my stupidity, he was always in control. Always had the whip hand, the rod, the power. The light: in that he could place me in the darkness of his making. He exercised control in ways I did not understand. I was always exploited.

But now he has taken control with him! Taken his light. But not the moon. She belongs to my island and the sea.

I am glad that they are gone. Of course I am. I have my kingdom back. A new dawn.

*(Light back as before.*

*Beat.)*

But I notice how dark it is at night. Before he came, on nights when the moon had sailed beyond my sky, I saw only stars. I was happy among shadows.

Their big unsinkable ships have dropped below the far horizon. Bound for god knows where. Their god that is. I do not want to know... And yet, I do.

They might have taken me with them. Considered it even.

I think they have taken a part of me. And left me with..?

*(He searches the stage, but rather casually.)*

Left... Left... Left me with?

All that he has left behind is... An unwelcome disaffection. Like being taught to read but having no source of texts.

*(Prospero and Miranda come forward. They have books open and they are teaching Caliban to read, but simultaneously which is of course confusing.)*

PROSPERO: Here monster, study, learn.

MIRANDA: Recite thy letters mooncalf. 'Thou poisonous slave' -

PROSPERO: 'Got by the devil himself' -

MIRANDA: 'For this be sure' -

PROSPERO: ' tonight thou shall have cramps, side stitches that shall pen they breath up' -

CALIBAN: 'Urchins shall, forth at vast of night that they may work *(Pushing them away)* all exercise on thee. This island's mine! Which thou takest from me!'

PROSPERO: Took. Took. Get with the times, wake up and smell the coffee! Oh no, we took the beans, the stove and the pot! Look around, we've gone. *(Mocking)* 'Like this insubstantial pageant faded, leaving not a rack behind.' You're on your own now boy.

MIRANDA: *(Reading)* 'Departing garrisons took the light bulbs, light fittings, plugs and even the electrical outlets from the walls of their billets. Leaving nothing for those who would take over. Amid the chaos of departure, a British entrepreneur arrived with a chartered ship which he proposed to load with all goods now being abandoned or available at rock bottom prices. This he intended to ship home and sell for a substantial profit.' Account of the last days of the British evacuation of Aden, November, 1967

***(Prospero and Miranda move back.)***

CALIBAN: I guess it could have been worse for me.

***(Prospero and Miranda pick papers from the table to read the following.)***

PROSPERO: 'For the common crimes of neglect, absence from work, eating the sugar cane: cart whipping, beating with a stick sometimes to the breaking of bones, the chain, the iron crook about the neck... Witness statement, St Kitts sugar plantation, 1784.'

MIRANDA: 'I was tied to a branch of an ant infested tree, with head down and feet upwards, and kept in that painful position for two hours, Ernest Fodaqy Mannah, enslaved boy soldier, aged eight, Sierra Leone, 1991.'

***(She passes a paper to Caliban.)***

CALIBAN: *(Fluently)* 'A young upstairs maid might have to carry twenty buckets of water from the kitchens to the bedrooms for a lady of the house to have her morning bath. In some establishments, if the maid crossed the path of any member of the household, even a child, she had to face the wall and never look at those she laboured for.' Account of life in a Georgian English country house.

***(Prospero takes the book away, with a 'see it could have been worse' stare.)***

CALIBAN: My now departed lords and lady had great ships that were, variously, unsinkable as cork, or easily cast to wreck upon the reef. Among the many strange and alien things they landed from their vessels were: lovers,

princes, magic, inebriation, rank, servitude - and preconception. Which I would call prejudice.

I was, before their footprints marred my beach, this island's natural, rightful inhabitant. Inheritor from my dam. But according to them, I was in fact a 'cambion'. (*Challenging individual audience members*) You know what that is? You? You? A cambion? No? And I thought you were all stuffed full of knowledge! A cambion is the off-spring of an incubus and human woman.

PROSPERO: Hag seed, poisonous slave!

MIRANDA: Monster. Mooncalf! Strange fish!

(**Caliban** hushes them, and they obey.)

CALIBAN: The Catholic Church, in their book of tortures against women, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, imagines the supernatural coupling that produces a cambion thus. (*Taking a paper from the table*) 'To beget a child is the act of a living body but devils cannot bestow life upon the bodies they assume, because life proceeds only from the soul.' Oh! (*To them*) This foolishness is too much for me to explain!

(*He encourages Miranda to take over.*)

MIRANDA: (*Reading, reluctant at first*) 'The method of creation of a cambion is necessarily protracted. A succubus will have sex with a human male and so acquire a sample of his sperm - '

CALIBAN: And she a maid still innocent of natural sex!

(**Prospero** looks increasing ill at ease, **Caliban** more and more amused.)

MIRANDA: 'This she will pass on to an incubus. The incubus will, in his turn, transfer the sperm to a human female and thus impregnate her.'

CALIBAN: Oh brave new world that has such people in't! (*He laughs, tries to prod Prospero in the ribs.*)

MIRANDA: Father, how is all this transfer business made?

(**Caliban** laughs more)

And how may sperm be passed around?

(**Prospero** turns away. *For the first time, Caliban has the upper hand*)

CALIBAN: Oh! (*Affecting a strong West Indies accents*) Real smart you white folks..! I am a man, (*Normal voice*) I am a man, and my mother was a woman. We are this island's true and natural crea – human forms. It's denizens, its citizens... But she too is gone for ever.

Time to put away childish things.

(**Caliban** *begins putting on a suit that appeared on a hanger. It is good suit.*)

Like all good places, good peoples, my island and I have been colonised many times over. Once, my story was made a comedy, in which my mother was given a brief life and a small voice. 'And I some worst speeches ever given to a man, from jobbing writer William Davenant's hand'. To give you my own example of his execrable rhyming couplet style.

My mother was in for a fawning bit part, one scene of feigned affection for the lowest of the invaders, another where she has a servant's role in the presence of Prospero and his clan. Who seem to think she is a fish. Then she and I are prompted to fight. Why does the coloniser's phrase 'divide and conquer' float into my mind?

(*Beat*)

But the greatest division they made is, me from myself. Something has been lost, something left that I find myself unable to value as I once did. Something gained that is illusory, taken back, or never fully given. Maybe it is what you call civilisation.

(**Miranda** *reads from a book.*)

MIRANDA: 'It is a nation ... that hath no kind of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politic superiority; no use of service, of riches, or of poverty; no contracts, no successions, no dividences, no occupation but idle; no respect of kindred, but common, no apparel but natural, no manuring of lands' –

CALIBAN: (*Pleased to guess*) Vol – Voltaire!

MIRANDA: Montaigne. (*Reading*) 'no use of wine, corn, or metal. The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason, dissimulation, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them'. Montaigne.

CALIBAN: 'Quand je suis attaqué par de sombres pensées, rien ne m'aide tant que l'exécution de mes livres. Ils absorbent rapidement et me bannir les nuages de mon espri'

MIRANDA: Er, when I am I assailed by, um, misery -

CALIBAN: Gloom, gloomy thoughts. 'When I am attacked by gloomy thoughts, nothing helps me so much as running to my books. They quickly absorb me and banish the clouds from my mind.' Montaigne.

*(He takes the book from her. She goes and on a chair sits at the edge of the stage. Caliban considers the book, chucks it down on the table.)*

Words in so many languages. Bought here on over-crowded ships. The king's English, god's Latin, creole French, fearful Espanol, Portuguese, Dutch. All the cruel and sibilant tongues that licked our soft shores, hungry for the taste and smell of spice, sugar, scent and sex.

The truth is, every time an islander stood on a cliff and saw their sails approaching they should have gathered their tribe. Stood ready.

PROSPERO: *(Picking up a book, reading)* 'And the care the Christians took was to send the men to the mines to dig for gold, which is intolerable labour, and send the women into the fields of the ranches to work the land, work suitable for strong men. Nor to either men or women did they give any food but herbs and legumes, things of little substance. The milk in the breasts of the women with infants dried up and thus in a short while the infants perished.'

CALIBAN: *(With brisk authority)* Bartoleme de Las Casas, 'Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies.' 1542. Obviously a seminal text, forward thinking, enlightened, humanitarian. Ignored in Europe.

*(Caliban takes the book from Prospero and throws it aside. A stand-off, then)*

PROSPERO: *(Quoting by heart)* And since men and women were separated, there could be no marital relations. And the men died in the mines and the women died on the ranches from the same causes, exhaustion and hunger. And thus was depopulated that island of Hispaniola which had once been densely populated.

*(Prospero sits on the opposite edge of the stage to Miranda. Caliban finishes his transformation by putting on glasses.)*

CALIBAN: Every time an islander stood on their cliff and saw the sails approaching they should have gathered their tribe. And when the sea-born set first steps upon the sand, while they wallow unsteady in the surf, sea legs buckling now planted on terra incognita after so long a voyage, those tribes, my simple, precious ancestors, they should kill them all. All. Every one, every time. Without mercy.



*(He makes a commanding sign: spotlights to come up bright on **Prospero** and **Miranda**. They appear fearful that they are about to be interrogated. **Caliban** studies them. He wheels on a medical trolley with something covered by a white cloth. He takes this off to reveal a laptop..)*

Failing that, bide your time. For generations if necessary. Learn tactics at their military academies, diplomacy at their lycees.

*(He indicates that **Prospero** come to read from the screen.)*

PROSPERO: François ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier studied public health at the University of Michigan, helped the Haitian poor to fight typhus, malaria and yaws. Kept in power by the tonton macoute, his hat-wearing ‘bogeymen’, and by voodoo.

CALIBAN: Hold out for the best bribes for mineral and oil concessions. ‘I’ll show thee the best springs; I’ll pluck thee berries; I’ll fish for thee and get thee wood enough.’ No, no more of that. Pretend you don’t know their business model is based on the cheap and desperate labour force that are your citizens.

*(He indicates that **Miranda** come to read from the screen.)*

MIRANDA: Idi Amin, butcher of Uganda and last king of Scotland, enlisted as a cook in the Royal Africa Rifles, excelled at rugby and was fond of his Scottish commanding officers. ‘A Scot would always welcome you into their home’ he said. He reportedly kept severed heads in his fridge.

CALIBAN: Oh aye hen, wee Ide loved Scotia right enough!

*(He indicates that **Prospero** and **Miranda** go back to their seats.)*

*(Own voice)* Procure a discount on weapons they mass produce that are necessary to effect the revolution, maintain the regime, restrain and persuade dissidents to recant. Make your enemy their enemy, There will always be such an enemy on another island, out in the bush, in the dynastically corrupt government. ‘As I told thee before, I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer, that by his cunning hath cheated me of the island.’ No more of that!

The peace enforcers will send you advisors, aides, spooks: men of dubious morality. Women of the same character if you are lucky and so inclined. They will circumvent international resolutions to send humanitarian aid that includes defence ‘assets’. For every strongbox of landmines, a pallet of rice or medicines must drop from the manifest. What am I to do..?

*(He shuts the computer. pushes off the trolley.)*

Do what is best for your country, your tribe, your family.  
If you do not, you will find yourself like me, a despised orphan in your own sweet isle. Utterly alone. (*Humble*) ‘And I’ll be wise hereafter. And seek for grace...’ (*With some menace*) ‘Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises.’

(*An explosion. A shower of paper falls from the roof.  
A sudden shift in mood. Prospero and Miranda, grab papers to give to Caliban.*)

MIRANDA: Mr President! The following multi-nationals require contracts to ensure security of our personnel and to undertake infrastructure rebuilding following your civil war. Specifically, they require -

PROSPERO: Prime Minister! A road from your capital to the mountains will be built, subject to agreement on the following mining concessions: iron ore, bauxite, tin -

MIRANDA: Mr President, the IMF’s conditions for aid are: preferential trade agreements, rights of oversight in all your government departments-

PROSPERO: Prime Minister, the World Bank terms for the loan are not negotiable –

(*Caliban holds up his hand, looks questioningly. A beat, he shrugs*)

CALIBAN: Katika lugha yangu. (*Sighs*) In my language. Extend me that courtesy please.

PROSPERO: (*Haltingly*) Er, Mr Rais, benki ya dunia masharti – kwa ajili – ya mokopo hii si. (*To Miranda*) Fuck’s sake, who’s supposed to be calling the shots here!?

(*Miranda makes a hushing gesture to Prospero.*)  
*Lights fade as*)

MIRANDA: Prime Min - Waziri mkuu – er – hali ya – the IMF – um – kwa ajili ya misaada, misaada – ah, miss, miss. Not, no. No negotiation. No negotiation.

***Blackout.***