

# Illusions 25

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Centenary of Cinema

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*Forgotten Silver*.

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# Crossing the Boundaries

*Niko Besnier looks at the dramatization of  
Fa'afafine in A Frigate Bird Sings*

AS IN MOST OTHER Polynesian societies, the fa'afafine, or man who behaves in the fashion of a woman, is a ubiquitous and integral part of Samoan society. A threadbare characterisation of the fa'afafine (plural form fa'afāfine) would single out as his most basic attributes effeminacy, some cross-dressing, at least a token interest in sexual relations with 'straight' men, and the adoption of certain attributes and behaviours stereotypically associated with women. Moving beyond this skeletal description is difficult, because fa'afafine, like their counterparts in other regions of the Pacific (e.g., the mahu in Tahiti and Hawaii, the fakaleiti in Tonga, the wadua in Fiji), are significantly diverse in behaviour, social identity, and sense of self to defy generalisation. Neither complete men nor full women, fa'afafine waver back and forth between male privilege and the covert authority of women, between status degradation and social visibility. While some position themselves as pillars of the fa'a-Samoa and can ascend the ladder of power and prestige in one or the other sphere of the Samoan social world, others emerge as rebels, whose playful defiance of the received order, particular in matters of gender and sex, provokes the amusement, consternation, contempt, or a complex blend thereof among mainstream Samoans. The tension between tradition and modernity plays an obvious role in this diversity, as it does in many other aspects of Samoan life; however, diversity in fa'afafine identity cannot be explained simplistically as the direct result of these tensions. Indeed, fa'afafine themselves play a significant role in defining what counts as 'traditional' and what counts as 'modern' in Samoa.<sup>1</sup>

A FRIGATE BIRD SINGS by Oscar Kightley and David Fane – commissioned by the 1996 Wellington International Festival of the Arts

and premiered at Downstage Theatre in March – is centered on Vili (Iaheto Ah Hi), a young fa'afafine. Vili's family, like many

other Samoan families, lives in New Zealand; the 'Atafa family consists of a father (masterfully played by opera star Iosefa Enari), widowed early in the play, and Vili's rugby-playing younger brother Sione (Stan Wolfgramm). Both because he is the first-born and a fa'afafine, Vili is given the charge of running the household after the mother's death. A pivotal aspect of this task is the tausi 'taking care' of the father, particularly as the latter begins to drown in alcohol his despondency over his inability to 'make it' in New Zealand, a failure which is most blatantly evident in the fact that he has not managed to send a penny back to the 'aiga 'extended family' in Samoa since the family migrated to New Zealand. At first, Vili meets the responsibilities that befall him with the authoritative aplomb of a model fa'afafine. Combining the authority

that a young fa'afafine like Vili, barely clear of his adolescent years, might aspire to have, at least for a few years. Vili soon begins to feel the sting of dissatisfaction with his lot, which stands in sharp contrast with the free-wheeling existence that his younger brother leads with his rugby mates. Eventually, shedding his conservative gender-neutral long black lavalava for a body-molding fake-leather disco pants-and-vest outfit that zips open from top to bottom, Vili abandons his father and brother to go and live with two fa'afafine he has befriended. His new friends, who go by the apt names of Dêjà-Vu (Mario Gaoa) and Shaninqua (played with superb aplomb by Ole Maiava), personify a radically different embodiment of fa'afafine identity: they live in the fast lane, complete with screeching banter, high-camp performances, and head-

splitting hangovers the morning after. From them Vili learns the ropes: demand attention but don't make a fool of yourself; perform but don't become a spectacle; score boy-friends among 'straight' boys, but don't get too attached to them because they will inevitably drop you with little warning, remembering their adventure with you as a 'mistake' or, at best, an ephemeral diversion.

Such is the fate of Vili's brief affair with his brother's Palagi rugby mate Hugh (Geoff Dolan), whose initial emotional attachment to Vili soon becomes an embarrassment in front of the other guys. Ultimately, the fa'afafine must be ready to take the emotional blows like a man, as it were, while maintaining a fragile self-respect through arch-camp boasts and loud and clever repartees, which often flirt dangerously with the pathetic.

A FRIGATE BIRD SINGS is a finely nuanced

play, and the masterful performance, directed by Nathaniel Lees, brings out all the sophistication of the script, despite a few less-than-felicitous moments. Interwoven throughout the text are two important threads. One thread explores fa'afafine identity in all its complexities and contradictions, many of which are telescopic portrayals of the deeply rooted and unresolvable tensions that underlie Samoan society: tensions between the wild and the domesticated, the uncontrollable and the controlled, personal desire and communal duty, the self and the social stage.<sup>2</sup> The other probes into the difficulties and ambiguities of the Samoan immigrant experience. Like many underprivileged transnational communities throughout the world, Samoans in New Zealand often find themselves caught between the duties that tie them to the village back home and the deceitful promises of capitalism. Navigating these shoals is often frustrating, sometimes rewarding, but always extraordinarily difficult. Far from being thematically independent from one another, these two threads are intricately interwoven. For example, fa'afafine in Samoa and elsewhere in Polynesia frequently act as cultural brokers between autochthonous society and the outside world.<sup>3</sup> In migrant communities, fa'afafine often continue performing this role by becoming bicultural more readily and thoroughly than the rest of the community. This brokerage also enables them to acquire an acutely critical view of the underclass status to which many New Zealand Samoans are confined. A FRIGATE BIRD SINGS brings out this critical view in subtle yet powerful ways.

Most remarkable about A FRIGATE BIRD SINGS is the way the play steers away from explaining the tensions it depicts in terms of over-simplified and under-theorised notions like 'tradition' and 'modernity', 'acceptance' and 'rejection'. What the play narrates is considerably more complex, subtle, and powerful. While the tensions between village life in Samoa and urban existence in New Zealand do play a role in



of a male first-born with the domestic imperiousness of the Samoan matriarch, he runs a tight domestic ship, doing the cooking, laundry, and cleaning, nursing his increasingly incapacitated father, and controlling Sione with a few sharp words.

While Vili's role comes with its share of domestic power and the approval of Samoan society, it is sorely lacking in other ways. In particular, it provides little room for some basic old-fashioned fun, particularly of a sexual nature, of the sort

shaping people's life trajectories (not just those of fa'afafine), they are not determinative of these trajectories. Most remarkably, *A FRIGATE BIRD SINGS* avoids romanticising the lives of fa'afafine, and thus avoids the common pitfall that popular Western conceptualisations of Polynesian societies falls into, by insisting that these societies are more 'accepting' of gender 'diversity' than Western post-industrial societies. Such characterisations, which also become a common feature of the nostalgic second-generation migrant discourse, are fraught with problematic assumptions about the relationships among gender, the individual, and society across cultures. Far from perpetrating these myths, *A FRIGATE BIRD SINGS* captures the pathos that often characterises the lives of fa'afafine in the traditional social order. The metaphor of the frigate bird (in Samoan, 'atafa, which is also the family's last name) lurks in the background of the entire performance, and finally is unravelled at the denouement of the play: the frigate bird, a large, white, beautiful bird, is always alone, and its song is a heart-rending cry of pain, and as such the metaphor captures the lives of many fa'afafine, be they conservatively dressed models of domestic organization whose dish-washing skills are admired by all, or screeching ambulatory side-shows squeezed into skin-tight outfits, or something in between.

#### NOTES

1. The complexities of fa'afafine identity in Samoa and of comparable categories throughout Polynesia are treated in greatest detail by anthropologists Jeannette M. Mageo, "Male transvestism and cultural change in Samoa", *American Ethnologist* 19, 1992, pp. 443-59, and Niko Besnier, "Polynesian gender liminality through time and space", in Gilbert Herdt (Ed.), *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, New York: Zone Books, 1994, pp. 285-328, 554-66.
2. The centrality of these tensions is discussed in particularly lucid terms by Bradd Shore in *Sala'ilua: a Samoan Mystery*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
3. This aspect of Tongan fakaleiti identity is explored in Niko Besnier, "Sluts and super-women: the politics of gender liminality in urban Tonga", seminar presented in the Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, October 1995.