

***Australian Plays for the Colonial Stage*. Ed. Richard Fotheringham. Academy Editions of Australian Literature. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2006, 732pp.**

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In keeping with the aims of the Academy Editions series, this collection of plays presents a thoroughly researched and annotated set of primary texts from colonial Australian theatre, ranging from burletta through ceremonial masque, to sensational and historical drama, with comedy both intentional and otherwise throughout. The collection is book-ended by distinctively Australian dramas, with Tasmanian newspaper man Henry Melville's discreetly anonymous and twice-performed *The Bushrangers* (1834) as the opening play, and the controversial oft-performed and multiply-versioned *Ned Kelly* (1899), claimed by the litigious Arthur Denham as his own creation but almost certainly the work of other hands, as the finale.

There is an authoritativeness in the edition which comes from the expertise and depth of its editorial scholarship, and the thoroughness of the research supporting the editing and annotations. This in spite of the frank acknowledgement of gaps in the archives that preclude any sense of completeness in the volume's reconstruction of the field of nineteenth-century Australian drama. Despite the evidently restricted choice of play texts, Richard Fotheringham's introduction to this edition gives an informative overarching account of the main phases and forces in colonial theatre, while the separate introductions to the plays include richly detailed contextualising "chunks" of theatrical history.

Fotheringham makes the point that copies of some colonial Australian plays only exist because of regulations requiring copies to be submitted to censors. Indeed, the text of one play preserved by the censors ("Life in Sydney") was, so far as is known, never performed at all until the 1970s. However, the text is fascinating in itself and the accompanying essay is valuable for its account of a phase of Sydney's theatrical history as well as the careers of those associated with the unperformed work. It also draws attention to the adaptation of a British original, *Tom and Jerry: Life in London*, to suit local audiences.

Textual issues may have determined which plays could be included, but they do not dominate most of the explanatory footnotes. These tend to focus on matters of historical and social context, or, even more importantly for the

study of popular entertainments, references that a contemporary audience might be expected to recognise (notably in the topical pantomime *The House that Jack Built*, which was adapted for Melbourne and Sydney audiences with references to current events, politicians, businessmen, prominent citizens, well-known places and shops).

Some of the plays are presented as they were published rather than as they were performed. *The Bushrangers*, for instance, was published in the newspaper edited by its author, Henry Melville, but has not survived as a performance script (11). It may not have been a major theatrical event in Port Arthur, although it is surely an interesting sidelight to the career of a prominent citizen, but as a text of its times, it is of interest to both the theatrical and cultural historian. The treatment of the Aborigines in the play is one of the moral touchstones for the times, for instance, with both “good” and “bad” white characters clearly troubled about how to regard the indigenous inhabitants. The servant Ellen patronises a native who comes asking for “baccy” and a blanket, but is clearly moved by his account of having had wife and children murdered by the bushrangers; she almost wishes his skin were not black so that she could consider him as a suitor. The bushrangers, on the other hand, are divided as to whether or not killing a “blackfella” counts as murder. The play explicitly refutes such views of the natives’ inferiority as human beings, showing that they are fully capable of feeling love and pain, and the character of Murrahwa the “black chief” is portrayed as maintaining some pride even when reduced to begging for blankets.

It may be no coincidence that this relatively thoughtful treatment of indigenous Australians appears in the earliest of the texts. The book as a whole provides material for a more considered and detailed study of colonial theatre in relation to race than is possible here. It is worth remarking, however, that the inclusion of “blackface” characters and routines in several of the plays is in the same crudely cartoonlike spirit as a 1909 photograph from *Table Talk* captioned “Representing Australian others” (Illustration 8, pp. 314-5). It shows a white man aiming a pistol at an actor in a black body suit and face paint, who is smoking a pipe and squatting in front of a gum tree/goanna/kookaburra backdrop—there is even a possum that in this reproduction could be mistaken for an arboreal platypus.

This suggests that late-colonial audiences may not have been too fussy about authenticity in the representation of Aboriginal characters, any more than they were about the inclusion of stock comic types such as Irish servants or vaporish old maids. On the other hand, of course, we can no longer hear any groans from audiences as they responded to such broad characterisations, and

an interesting aspect of Fotheringham's account of Helen Lucy Benbow's *For £60,000* (1874) is the contrast he presents between its favourable reception in Bendigo, where the author was well-known, and its failure in Melbourne, where it was advertised as a sensational drama rather than the archly self-conscious comedy it evidently aspired to be.

It is also interesting to note attempts to represent Aboriginal music in colonial theatre, from Warren Warren's song in *Arabin* (155) to a pseudo-corroboree which featured frankly as part of the spectacle and entertainment in R. H. Horne's "The South Sea Sisters: a Lyric Masque". While this triumphantly imperialistic piece, accompanied by music by C. E. Horsley which has not been located, was performed as part of the Intercolonial Exhibition of Australasia in Melbourne in 1866 (207), the corroboree section was evidently included and treated much more offhandedly in *For £60,000*, one (admittedly disreputable) character declining to stay and watch: "No thank you; I've no fancy for such a display of black art" (413).

The plays reproduced in this volume are offered as artifacts of colonial society and culture rather than as seminal texts in a literary tradition—partly because of the emphasis on popular entertainment rather than high art in most of the colonies' professional theatres, and partly no doubt because of the historical "turn" in literary criticism which admirably suits the non-canonical, popular cultural nature of most of the texts that have survived. A further consideration for a volume such as this, is whether the edition will enable colonial plays to be staged anew—do the texts provide sufficient information about staging and performance styles to allow contemporary companies to recreate a colonial theatrical experience? In the case of Horne's masque, the answer is probably "no", since the music by Horsley has neither been published nor located, but there seem to be real performance possibilities with other plays included in the anthology.

Attempting to answer this question, I consulted Dr Terence FitzSimons, historian and biographer of popular entertainers such as the balloonist Charles Brown and the "giant ladies of Gippsland", an enthusiast for traditional Irish language and music, and a regular performer of nineteenth-century music hall and vaudeville at Sovereign Hill, a historical theme park which is devoted to recreating life on the Ballarat goldfields. His response was great interest in the volume, ordering a copy for Sovereign Hill's research library and another for his own use.

According to FitzSimons, the most popular theatrical genres on the goldfields in the 1850s through to the late 1860s were farce, opera both serious and

comic, vaudeville, Christie minstrels, court minstrels, bacchus minstrels, and burlesque, with variety shows featuring well known performers such as Charles Thatcher and George Coppin. While there are no explicitly “goldfield” theatrical pieces in this volume, there are traces of these genres in some of the texts included.

Perhaps most useful for the reproduction of mixed format shows are the notes on musical and acrobatic interludes that would frequently punctuate performances. Only some of the songs included in the plays could be sourced, and they tend to be those of Irish or English origin, so any new production of *Arabin*, for example, would involve the writing of new music or the adaptation of old songs for such numbers as “The Australian Maid” (153) or “Hey for the Happy Settler’s Life” (165). Other frequently performed songs not included in this volume, such as the bawdy “Hot Coddlin’s” or sentimental favourite “My Dog Tray”, would be relatively easy to locate. While the internet now allows access to many nineteenth-century music scores (through facsimiles such as those published by Johns Hopkins University from its Simon Levy collection), accurate and authoritative texts for the music for the plays selected here make a valuable feature of this edition, with detailed commentary on the scoring provided by Angela Turner.

On the whole, then, this edition provides sufficient performance and staging information to contextualise the play texts and give a kick start to aspiring productions, while opening further vistas for research by theatre historians.

Anyone who is tempted by the title but put off by the brick-like structure of the work may like to know that it is absorbing to read. As someone interested in nineteenth-century Australian literature rather than a specialist in drama or theatre history, I was not only impressed by and grateful for the scholarship and usefulness of this volume’s overall project; I also found myself interested and engaged by almost all of the plays and supporting material. At 732 pages, this is a remarkable achievement. Further, as pleasant confirmation that high scholarly standards are compatible with new media, the volume is well supported by the AustLit database, which includes useful summaries by Clay Djubal of its contents, and some additional commentary.

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