

Staging Masculinity

Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s

By Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander and Bruce Parr

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Reviewed by Bradley Wells

Taking as their premise the assertion that in light of the continued burgeoning of studies investigating female identities in the theatre, a failure to investigate or 'define' masculinities could result in it remaining the 'unexamined gender' comprehensible merely as, what Kimmel calls, a type of 'anti-femininity' (126), the authors of this ambitious study address this through a comprehensive survey and categorisation of expressions of masculinity in Australian theatre since 1950.

After an introduction which acknowledges the pre-existing problematic definitional debate surrounding masculinity and its associated 'others' (7) of race, ethnicity, sexuality and class, this book goes on to take essentially a thematic approach in both argument and structure. Whilst acknowledging a general chronological progression of developing notions of masculinity since 1950, the chapters are grouped around separate categories of masculinity with each investigating a variety of individual texts that best exemplify those ideas.

Beginning with a study of three Australian musicals, *Reedy River* (1970), *The Sentimental Bloke* (1977) and *Lola Montez* (1958), the reader quickly discovers the tensions within traditional notions of hard-working, egalitarian, liberated, patriotic, loyal and physical masculinity in a genre which is itself notoriously torn between its 'highly suspect' flamboyant and camp qualities and its sheer popularity in the 'normal' mainstream. Apparently aware of its suspect potential, *Reedy River* took a deliberately political approach to demonstrate how the values of unionism and traditional Australian male bonding were a means by which society could neutralise the allegation that unionism or left-wing politics was communist and therefore anti-Australian. On the other hand, *The Sentimental Bloke* 'made use of the force of emerging heterosexual desire to bring the Australian male out of his inexpressive shell' (30), and in *Lola Montez*, 'it is the galvanizing influence of Lola that generates and unlocks the potential for theatrical flair in Australian manhood' (30). Thus from the beginning of

their study the authors seem to be establishing a pattern for the rest of the book. Namely, that within the ambiguities and complexities of the notion of masculinity in Australia, there has been an overall sense of developmental evolution, even liberation from stereotype, since the 1950s.

The inclusion of selective photographic images at the end of this and every chapter helps reinforce the point about how these texts foreshadow, represent and respond to the ongoing challenges of presenting masculinities on stage. In this case the contrast between the shearers drinking (but not touching) taken from *Reedy River* and the posed semi-naked male dancers taken from *Lola Montez* clearly show the breadth and development of these early masculinities.

Chapter 2 goes on to consider the particularly masculine notion of violence as it is presented in various realist plays in the 1950s and 60s. Rather than echoing the lament of critics like Hunt who argued that physical violence had replaced articulate expression of genuine conflict (see Hunt), the authors posit an alternative and enticing argument that the scenes of physical violence contained within the plays of this time were not simply occasions when language gave way to inarticulate violence, but 'where male performers also engaged new techniques of realist acting for expressing emotion' (32).

Nonetheless, there is an obvious dilemma in evoking sympathy for this type of expression in characters who oscillate between romance and violence, especially with their accompanying sense of an abdication of agency. It is a dilemma which unfortunately remains unresolved in this chapter. Surely, though, there is a more effective way of resolving the tension regarding the inarticulate but violent male beyond the one proffered by the suicide victim's ghost in *Gary's House* (1996)?

Conversely, the next chapter 'The bully and the businessman' offers an overly optimistic conclusion that bullying as a concept and expressed reality is now purely social and not gender-related. However, even the various plays studied seem to support rather than subvert the continuing phenomenon expressed in the theatre of the brutal policing of gender evident since the sixteenth century *charivari*. The problem with this chapter, as with other parts of the book, is the authors' tendency to stray too far into contemporary social criticism rather than sticking to their strength, which is the detailed study of texts and the drawing of thematic conclusions within an historical context.

Following the chapter 'Black men, white men', notable for its understatement that 'Australian theatre is still finding ways to present images and narratives of Indigenous masculinity which draw upon the authenticity of Indigenous cultures and reflect the lived experiences of "Indigenous men"' (88), the authors seem more confident in investigating the role and impact of war in theatrical presentations of masculinity.

Through an investigation of post-war gender anxieties associated with male re-integration into domestic suburban life, Chapter 5 clearly demonstrates the oppositional tropes of home-front versus battlefield, passivity versus activity, weakness versus strength, private versus public, staying versus departing, and defended versus defenders. This chapter also makes a useful distinction between memorialisation and memory, and develops convincing new scholarship in arguing that the theatre of the time successfully animated the narrative arcs of masculine memory and heterosexual desire between *here-and-now* and *there-and-then* rather than simply the traditional dichotomies between a masculine war and a feminine home.

The danger of defining masculinity in negative terms re-emerges in the analysis of theatrical presentations of race and homosexuality. Playing off well-established stereotypes and relying on an inherited intertextuality, so-called 'wog-boy' plays seem implicitly to reinforce the conjecture that Australian males are masculine because, in addition to not being women, they are simply not Greek or not Italian. So too, it is a sense of absence which helps define the non-heterosexual male in these forms of Australian theatre. For example, the character of Michael in *A Fox in the Night* (1959) does not fit in to the masculine normalcy understood by his father and, by implication, society, nor does he fulfil the stereotypes of the day. Unfortunately, a definitive alternative is not presented in this play nor any other raised in this chapter. Rather, as the authors point out, the theatre of the period has merely offered what Hanson calls 'a host of sexual possibilities that play havoc with the conventional distinction between normal and pathological, heterosexual and homosexual, masculine and feminine' (56).

The reader also discovers that these possibilities are further complicated by economic factors. In Chapter 8, the discussion of the anxieties related to the reproduction of masculinity from father to son reveals a compelling contention that the real threat to masculinity explored via characters like Owen from Louis Nowra's *The Jungle* (1998) is the 'dead end jobs and dead end lives' encapsulated in a character who represents 'the immateriality of unproductive service labour with the reproductive failure of homosexual sex' (160). The very revelation of this on stage, of course, represents some progression along the journey to better understanding and portraying the complexities of masculinity in Australia. However, the problem remains and lingers, just like the stench of 'McDonald's and semen' which follows the audience out after the final scene from *Viewing Blue Poles* (1998).

It is a pity that the analysis does not finish here. For some reason, presumably only to give justification for talking about the various plays contained therein, the final chapter does a cursory and somewhat tenuous study of various nautical tropes in Australian theatre. The conclusion that *Cloudstreet* (1999) represents

the 'dissolution, of masculinity dissolving between the sea and the sky' (p.177) seems to contradict later statements that these plays also represent an 'intergenerational consolation' (178) and 'resolutive effect on men'. (179). Even the final tease of the prospect of a possible solution to the problem of masculinity posited by an 'ungendered' past and present, as envisaged in the dance work *Inuk* (1997), can only be provided as the alternative of 'carefree irresponsibility of pre-adolescent suburbia' (183). Such an anti-climax and ambiguous ending may, however, be the very point the authors are trying to make about the notion of masculinity itself.

In the end, the authors are right to warn that it would be 'a great exaggeration to report the death of gender' (183). If anything, this study successfully foregrounds the virile tenacity of a real, if still somewhat ambiguous, notion of masculinity in the theatre, as in life. In light of this book, masculinity need no longer fear neglect in the face of continued studies of femininity. If anything, this book is a compelling historical study and it contributes much to the field by furthering the ongoing debate about the contradictions, inconsistencies, complexities, anxieties and ambiguities of masculinity in Australian theatre; a theatre which has proved itself time and again to be more than adept at wrestling with the seductive and timeless appeal of men at play.

Bradley Wells is currently completing his PhD in English Literature at the University of Sydney where he also helps teach an undergraduate course in Renaissance poetry. His is currently researching the performance theology in the collected plays of the 'forgotten Inkling', Charles Williams.

Works Cited

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