A World of Popular Entertainments

A World of Popular Entertainments: An Edited Volume of Critical Essays

Edited by

Gillian Arrighi and Victor Emeljanow

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

A World of Popular Entertainments:
An Edited Volume of Critical Essays,
Edited by Gillian Arrighi and Victor Emeljanow

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-3730-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3730-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF IMAGES

INTRODUCTION

GILLIAN ARRIGHI AND VICTOR EMELJANOW

This volume is the direct result of a conference which was hosted by the School of Drama, Fine Art and Music at the University of Newcastle, Australia, in June 2009. As the title of the conference suggested, popular entertainments have a global reach and a transnational significance at odds with the fact that the meaning and definition of both "popular" and "entertainment" remain widely contested. Thus the opportunity for scholarly discussion that might embrace the polymorphous nature of popular entertainments, their performance in various media and their reception, the role of popular entertainments in the promotion of social and personal well-being, popular entertainments in the context of tourism, travel and leisure, or in nation building and national identity, was timely and we believed necessary. This volume brings together some of these deliberations in five thematic sections.

Part 1 - Marvels and Wonders

Popular entertainments have always been identified with the involvement of showmen and illusionists, often denigrated as charlatans. Yet they have played a vital role in bringing together the competing perspectives of truth and illusion, magic and scientific speculation. The Age of Enlightenment replaced superstition with rationality and in so doing ironically created an opportunity for the display of objects and people that defied categorisation and rational taxonomies. Public response to such displays demonstrated a willingness to suspend disbelief even on the part of those who had initially attended in order to scoff. The increasing use of technology from the 18th century onwards which, in principle, should have reduced the extraordinary showmanship to the operation of a mechanistic causality did little to erase the sense of wonder. Indeed, as Grete de Francesco provocatively suggests, "A disappointed society sought to recapture in technology the supernatural world it had lost."[1]

An enduring aspect of showmanship has been the demonstration of humans behaving like machines and machines exhibiting human behaviour:

the fascination with automata from the 18th century illustrates the latter point. The former can be instanced in the pleasure obtained from watching a disciplined group of individuals behaving with machine-like precision. This principle, of course, underpins the chorus lines of musicals, the demonstrations of synchronised swimming and those of military manoeuvres. This element is addressed by Jerry Wasserman in his discussion of Captain MacDonald's trained Indians who successfully toured America and England after 1874. Of course, such displays formed an integral part of "ethnological show business" during the 19th century that conflated demonstrations of the "native condition" with the civilising benefits of training. In many respects attitudes towards the civilisation of the savage had much in common with those which addressed the civilisation of children: both could be fashioned into functioning members of European society through discipline. MacDonald's Indians wore the costumes of Zouaves, the North African soldiers who formed units of the French army from 1840. Their distinctively flamboyant uniforms were appropriated as costumes for the many touring companies that continued to perform well into the 20th century. Yet as Wasserman points out, from a modern perspective, the displays of the Indians contained many ironic resonances: spectators were exposed to "exoticised aboriginal bodies performing formal European military movement in the Orientalised North African dress of another subjugated people."[2]

Another node of popular entertainments is to be found in the exhibition of the human body, deformed by nature, by self or by science. Such displays were, and continue to be, uncomfortable in that they literally embody extremes that defy rational explanation. Bill Dunstone takes the example in 1879 of the Fatima illusion to demonstrate a confluence between the evocation of the uncanny and the use of highly developed optical techniques to achieve "the deferral of a rational explanation" when spectators were shown an apparent "half-woman" reading a book within the setting of a domestic interior. The display adroitly imbricated the attractions of the freak show, the achievements of technology and the fascination (using the word's etymological reference to witchcraft) with the unnatural and the physically impossible. Dunstone, moreover, challenges us to read this demonstration in terms of the "elision of female sexuality in colonial society" and as an example of the "patriarchal violation of the female body."

Violation of the human body, whether deliberate or accidental, informs those occasions when the *tabula rasa* of the human body has been used as a canvas for story-telling and as an object lesson in human endurance. Kirsten Wright's account of the career of Captain Costentenus and his

tattooed body between the 1870s and 1890s is just such an example of self-violation in the interests of commercial display. Though Costentenus manufactured a narrative of subjugation by South Sea islanders and his forcible tattooing, the reality was a rather more prosaic one, that of calculated self-promotion. Wright places Costentenus in a discussion of other tattooed bodies and the connections between tattooing and criminality that had been investigated by Lombroso. Though she points to the "decline of the tattooed entertainer after 1900," and the fact that by 1920 tattooed entertainers were no longer regarded as unique or freakish, the use of tattooing as the basis of story-telling has continued to flourish. One might point to the framing device used by Ray Bradbury in his 1951 collection *The Illustrated Man* where each of the tattoos of the heavily illustrated body of the man tells its own story, or the reality television shows like *La Ink* and *London Ink* which demonstrate the achievements of tattooing within a loosely scripted narrative structure. At the same time we might note the global phenomenon of tattooing among young people and the self-evident connection between tattooing and performance art.[3]

In his discussion about mechanical ingenuity, Richard Altick suggests that most examples of such ingenuity were intended to amuse, although some found utilitarian applications. He quotes Sir David Brewster's 1832 comment: "The same combination of the mechanical powers which made the spider crawl, or which waved the tiny rod of the magician, contributed in future years to purposes of higher import."[4] Yuji Sone focuses on just such a duality from a particularly Japanese perspective, and in so doing turns the human-machine binary on its head in an investigation of the Bacarobo (literally "idiot robot") competition, one dedicated to the demonstration of automata that are utterly useless. He points to the close connection between the performance elements of the competition, the strategies of Japanese variety shows and the *Manzai* clown theatre in particular. Sone describes the involvement of all human and non-human participants including the spectators in a subversive engagement that deconstructs them all and indeed lampoons their involvement in the competition in the first place. In so doing it takes a tongue-in-cheek opportunity to ridicule, or at least question, the Japanese interest in such things as interactive service robots. It is a concept of which W. S. Gilbert might have been proud.

Part II - Adaptation and Preservation

The protean nature of popular entertainments allows considerable latitude for change and adaptation. At the same time, its ephemerality

makes tracking these changes elusive for scholars. Unlike more traditional performance genres, popular entertainments do not have the benefit of an established critical canon nor substantial records of achievement. Yet the connection between popular entertainments and their communities has proved to be an enduring one, so it is within those communities that the evidence for continuation and longevity is to be discovered.

It is somewhat surprising to find that a form like pantomime, often identified as a peculiarly British phenomenon, whose climacteric coincided with the end of the Victorian period, and which was followed by a long journey of decline, is in fact very much alive in Britain today. From an historical perspective, a form which integrated fairy tales, burlesque, topicality, scenic extravaganza and gender transgression, was exported everywhere that English was spoken. For English communities, usually those at a considerable distance from the imperial centre, pantomime provided a nostalgic bond and a sense of continuing cultural homogeneity. With the dissolution of that bond, particularly after World War 2, pantomime's *raison d'être* was weakened. Nonetheless, its characteristic mixture of elements had within it the capacity to adapt and thereby to survive. Even a cursory glance at contemporary online resources will reveal that pantomime continues to be represented in South Africa, Canada, the United States and Australia, even if its performance is not as frequent. Martina Lipton considers the continuing presence of pantomime in Britain. She points to the ongoing significance, especially in regional centres, of a tradition of particularity that informs pantomime's relevance in the 19th century as well.[5] At the end of the 19th century, purists were particularly offended by the inclusion of music-hall and variety performers into a form that was intended to appeal to children and their families. Yet paradoxically, this inclusion insured its perennial attractiveness. Celebrities drawn from television or sporting contexts continue to be drawcards, but more importantly, pantomimes have adapted to include the concerns of local communities.[6] Lipton draws attention to the multi-racialism of communities like Hackney in London and the ways in which this is reflected in the ongoing success of the Hackney Empire pantomimes with their subversion of traditional models of casting and gender roles. As well, she refers to the close connection between the community of Hammersmith in north-west London and the pantomimes of the Lyric theatre today. Thus the form has now the capability to become an agent for community building, itself constantly requiring change and adaptability. Far from merely preserving the past, pantomime is now actually a reflecting mirror of changes in what being British actually means.

Certainly in Australia the apparent demise of pantomime is usually identified with that of long-running theatrical enterprises and the transition from stage to television that occurred from the late-1950s. Performers who had made successful careers on the variety stage found they had to adapt to new entertainment venues like night clubs and television studios. Jonathan Bollen describes this phenomenon from the heyday of light entertainment in Australia in the mid-1950s to the absorption of variety acts into the fabric of television. Interestingly, Bollen points to the way in which early television consciously preserved aspects of past genres of variety entertainment and to the conscious revivals and recreations of music hall in theatres during the early 1960s. But his principal thrust is to measure the impact of the new night club scene upon entertainers in Australia. In many ways, the rhythm of performing variety acts at different venues replicated the habits of earlier music hall performers who scurried from venue to venue during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. One of the differences he points out is that of architecture and décor. Night clubs and television studios exposed performers and engaged with audiences in ways which the earlier theatrical configurations with their focus on illusion and the mystique of the performer tended to avoid. Thus the history of popular entertainments in Australia from the mid-1950s can be seen as a liminal period when performers adjusted to the new modernist imperatives and when the new medium of television was seeking to establish an identity that incorporated elements of the past and looked to the creation of a new audience.

Catering to new audiences and determining their tastes and interests was a key preoccupation of early 19th century British theatre. Jane Moody writes of the period 1770-1840 as one of "extraordinary social and political upheaval" in which "the theatre represented one of the few kinds of leisure patronised by all social groups…indeed, spectators, critics and pamphleteers imagined the playhouses as a miniature parliament of the nation." She goes on to state that "this heterogeneity was precisely what made theatre dangerous and potentially uncontrollable." [7] Australia, especially in the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, was equally caught up in social change as free settlers, former convicts, sailors and military personnel jostled for recognition by a colonial hierarchy that sought to preserve order and stability at any cost and was very well aware of the turmoil at "home." The disruptive and subversive potential of popular entertainments needed to be strictly patrolled. Janette Pelosi offers a snapshot of New South Wales during the period 1828 to 1856. The legislation promulgated in 1828 made clear that public exhibition and entertainment had the potential to create "evil consequences," and thus

imposed strict rules for the licensing of every manifestation, from comedies, melodramas, farces and burlesques to tumbling and displays of horsemanship. There would be no opportunity for congregations of performers and spectators to form themselves into a "miniature parliament." Pelosi offers an insight into the ways in which performers, playwrights and theatre managers negotiated and adapted to this legal intransigence and at times were able to transgress its boundaries. She also provides a glimpse into the evidence of popular entertainments and their preservation as well as into official attitudes toward their practices in the period.

Part III - Leisure and Tourism

As the middle classes emerged in western industrialized societies, so too did the tourist industry, driven by classes of people who could afford a little leisure time to travel, to briefly escape from their everyday habits, and to indulge their curiosity for sensations, sights and spectacles. Leisure time is liminal by nature, a play space between the quotidian demands of work and home, whilst the tourist site is also a liminoid space. Essays by Gillian Arrighi and Amanda Card consider popular entertainments in the social spaces of leisure and tourism and both authors delve into the historical precedents for the entertainments at the centre of their studies. Arrighi leads us to consider the persistence of performing animal shows in the 21st century and Card's focus is on the self-help dance manual.

Looking at animals is a popular pastime and as Arrighi reminds us, "animals retain a central position in contemporary tourism and leisure activities." We might consider the highly sophisticated broadcast technology that now captures every moment in the life of the globe's many animal species and beams these images into our loungerooms or the numerous films and television shows with narratives about fictive animals exhibiting extraordinary (and often comic) abilities. The proliferation of film and television shows about animals and "the many Seaworld institutions worldwide with their theatrically realised dolphin, seal and whale shows" are a continuum of the ancient phenomenon of animals in the show space. Arrighi's essay draws out the contiguous history of two cultural institutions, the public zoo and the circus, both of which emerged at roughly the same time in the late-18th century and both of which reinforced the rhetoric of the colonial project. Broadly tracing the decline in popularity of "performing animal" acts in circuses throughout the 20th century (as a result of protest and legislation on moral and humane grounds), Arrighi directs our attention to theatrically constructed performances by non-human animals in the 21st century and to the high

profile cultural sites that sanction these performances. She observes that "society can legislate to take the animal act out of the circus yet it is in no hurry to eradicate the performing animal show entirely."

Exploring the tensions between historians who regard improvisatory social dance as "a positive practice of resistance," and the authors of dance manuals who assess improvisatory social dance as exemplifying a problematic "lack of form," Card provides an overarching history of the dance manual (it has been around for more than 400 years in English), alighting on examples from the 1870s (a pocket reference book for example that the social dancer could carry on their person at all times) to contemporary internet-based sites where social dancers can learn and share dance moves interactively with a global community. Such manuals, Card argues, "reveal a struggle for jurisdiction over the rhythmic bodies of their purchasers." Drawing on the understanding that performance can happen anywhere, Card explores the do-it-yourself dance manual, whether in hard copy or digitally interactive, as the means to a preparation for performance, a private pathway towards the personal expression of "freedom on the dance floor."

Part IV - Sites of the Popular

The forms and techniques of popular entertainment have always been transgressive in the sense that they have crossed geographical boundaries, have at times resisted the ghettoization of purpose-built structures like theatre buildings, and have used their universal "languages" to engage with issues of diverse communities at differing historical periods. This transgressive fluidity has meant that such entertainments often find their natural homes in places of congregation, whether the village green, the street or the marketplace. Thus geography and site-specificity play an important role in shaping the nature of the entertainment. The chapters in this section all offer snapshots of this process: in Mike Pearson's words, they all represent "manifestations of performance, past and present, in a defined geographical area, in relation to particular sets of historical, social, cultural and environmental circumstances."[8]

Veronica Kelly looks at a particular instance of the collaboration between theatrical and civic interests in stage-managing a street event that took place in Sydney in May 1915, essentially a patriotic procession that sought to garner support both emotional and financial for the Belgian nation that had been overrun by German troops. Kelly points to the coincidence of the event with the first news in Australia of the Gallipoli landing and the appalling death statistics, and suggests that this procession

anticipated the Anzac Day processions that commenced in April 1916 and have continued to this day, commemorating the sacrifices of Australian and New Zealand troops in conflicts from World War 1 onwards. She also draws attention to the involvement of professional actors in the 1915 procession, particularly Julius Knight who had become identified in the popular imagination with his role as Napoleon in *A Royal Divorce*, an unlikely hero after a century of vilification as the oppressor but now converted by the *entente cordiale* into a symbol of allied determination and prowess.[9] The procession, however, involved the whole community in an expression of solidarity which merged patriotism and performance, an "immense symbolic outreach of the popular dramatic repertoire and its performers, their various meanings re-framed and resituated by the extraordinary cataclysms of world war."

Bett Pacey and Janys Hayes discuss the capacity of popular entertainments to transform and give expression to particular communities in particular geographical locations. Pacey looks at South African street theatre through the work of Ellis Pearson and Bheki Mkhwane, the former a trained actor in the European tradition, the latter with a background in traditional Zulu beliefs and practices. They met at the Loft Theatre Company in Durban which specialises in physical and environmental theatre, and from 1998 until 2007, they engaged in a form of street theatre which took them to African villages in shows which combined social activism and physical entertainment. Using plots set in the African oral tradition of storytelling, they addressed issues in post-Apartheid South Africa through strong narratives and direct audience participation. Pacey quotes Pearson's statement of intent behind their outdoor performances: "our mission was to inspire people about transformation in South Africa, and, by extension, the transformation of any country, community, or business."

Similarly Hayes explores the work of Circus WOW in a landscape undergoing rapid urban development and therefore in need of urgent rethinking of its cultural imperatives: in this case, the city of Wollongong situated south of Sydney whose "place" has been destabilised by the retreat of heavy industry since 2001. This is, of course, not a unique phenomenon as examples from the northern hemisphere would corroborate. In this instance, however, a community circus group providing workshops for women and largely self-funded, responds to the history and politics of a particular urban site. The company offers an opportunity for "the emancipation of the hidden voices" of women by developing their physical skills and thereby their self-esteem, while stimulating new audiences in order to shape directions for cultural infrastructures and structures in

Wollongong. That the company has been successful suggests the intimate involvement of popular entertainments in community cultural development, dissolving the boundaries of "language" while signifying the importance of "place."

Part V - The Highbrow Debate

Analysing the bifurcation of "serious" and "popular" culture in the United States during the 19th century, Lawrence Levine has observed that throughout the early decades of the century the theatre "functioned as an expressive form that embodied all classes within a shared public space."[10] A social space where literary plays and popular entertainments played side by side, Levine has characterised the theatre of that era as a "house of refuge" where "the normative restrictions of the society were relaxed and both players and audience were allowed 'to act out themselves' with much less inner and outer restraint than prevailed in society." Levine's description of the divergence that occurred incrementally between popular entertainments and "high" or "serious" culture in the United States during the latter decades of the 19th century can be broadly applied to developing cultural hierarchies in Britain and her settler colonies throughout the same period. The five essays in the final section of this book all acknowledge, in one way or another, the highbrow/ lowbrow binary that has resulted in a preference for "high" or "serious" cultural products in the research literature surrounding the performing arts.

John Bennett's essay, "What Good is a Good Night Out?" explores the meaning of the conglomerate term Contemporary British Popular Theatre. Consciously referencing in its title John McGrath's *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience, Class and Form* (1981) and John Carey's *What Good are the Arts?* (2006), Bennett contends that contemporary British "mainstream" theatre occupies a different cultural category to contemporary British "popular theatre." Defining "mainstream" theatre as "theatre for the theatre-goer" and epitomised by the output of playwright Alan Ayckbourn, "popular" British theatre, according to Bennett's class-based taxonomy, signifies plays about working class people that examine the everyday life experiences and the "minutiae of working life." Representing and reflecting upon these lived experiences for the popular theatre's primarily proletariat audience is the overarching aim of this category of British theatre. Thus Bennett uses the term "popular" in the sense of "belonging to the people."

Orchestral platforms in the world's iconic concert halls signify, in today's cultural imaginary, the natural home for classical orchestral music.

The built environment and controlled acoustics of the concert hall, together with the social rituals that must be learned by audiences of classical music—such as reverential silence as soon as the conductor raises his baton and no applause between movements—all assert the position of classical music at the "high" end of "serious" art.[11] Rosalind Halton's essay about the first Handel commemoration, held in Westminster Abbey in 1784, reveals not only the immense popularity of Handel's music but also the participatory nature of this music festival, once described as "the most important single event in the history of English music."[12] Bringing together vast numbers of musicians from around the country and reaching "a much more wide-ranging public than elsewhere in Europe," Halton observes that the five concerts of the eleven day event established the popularity of massed music events in Britain. The annual "Proms" (Promenade Concerts), established just over a century later in 1895, represent the institutionalised consequence of the first Handel commemoration.

Helen English and Stephen Wye's micro-history of musical entertainments in the regional Australian town of Newcastle during the years 1875-77 challenges any notion that a hierarchical divergence between "legitimate" and "popular" entertainments occurred in regional *and* metropolitan areas equally during the latter decades of the 19th century. Building on regional studies of Newcastle's social, economic, and demographic conditions throughout the 1870s, the authors identify the opening of the Victoria Theatre in 1875 (a building described at the time as "an ornament to the city") as the central event that led to the commercialisation of the city's public entertainments. A comparative study of entertainments on offer prior to and immediately following the opening of the Victoria Theatre demonstrates a correlation between commercial imperatives and entertainments that appealed to all social sectors of the city. Within this economic equation there simply was no room for "legitimate" or "highbrow" events aimed solely at Newcastle's "fashionable and elite" and the theatre's management negotiated the various classes of the city through the time-honoured practice of separate entrances for separate parts of the house.

As suggested by the title of the next essay in the collection, "George Selth Coppin: Colonial Clown and Gentleman," negotiation is also central to Kath Leahy's study of the English low comedian George Coppin II (1819-1906). Coppin settled in the Australian colonies in 1843 where he led a double public life as both an actor specialising in low comic characters and as a politician. Between 1858 and 1888 Coppin served two terms as a member of the Victorian Legislative Council and two terms in

the Victorian Legislative Assembly. Leahy explores Coppin's appeal to colonial audiences through comic performances that "transgressed the boundaries between theatre and the outside world," and the correlative threat he presented to early Australia's "culture-makers." Even within the colonial society of the era, where social mobility was possible, Coppin's negotiation of the public roles of gentleman statesman and vulgar clown "disrupted the 'natural' connections between classes and culture."

The research embodied in the final essay in this volume by Melissa Bellanta is a very welcome addition to the under-researched field of young people and, specifically, the contribution of youth to Australia's cultural economies during the 19th century. In the mid-1880s almost half of the population of the colony of Queensland "included children and youths under 20," and many young females and males were employed from the age of ten years.[13] Other statistics reveal that during the 1890s 45 percent of the population of New South Wales was under 20. In a rapidly expanding settler society where consumables had to be produced and services rendered, and where young people comprised a considerable proportion of the population, "youth" were well represented in the country's lowly-waged workforce. Whether employed as newspaper sellers, factory hands, or messenger boys, Bellanta's research reveals that poorly-paid juveniles were "deeply enamoured" of entertainments such as fast-paced melodramas, blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, and song-and-dance routines in pub singing-rooms. Confining her investigation to variety venues during the period 1860-1900, Bellanta's research contributes to our knowledge of popular audiences and popular entertainment tastes of the period.

Notes

[1] Grete de Francesco, *The Power of the Charlatan,* trans. Miriam Beard (New Haven: Yale University Press 1939), 241, quoted in Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1978), 76.

[2] For further discussion of Indian performances in the context of Buffalo Bill's Wild West extravaganzas that overtook the performances of MacDonald, see Scott Margelssen and Heidi L. Nees, "'Real Live Indians': Sitting Bull's performance of self in Buffalo Bill's Wild West," *Popular Entertainment Studies,* 2:1 (Mar 2011): 22-40.

[3] The *Sunday Telegraph* in Australia (31 October 2010) noted that 25% of young people in Australia under 25 have a tattoo.

[4] Sir David Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic. Addressed to Sir Walter Scott.* (London: Murray, 1832), 285 in Altick, 76.

[5] On the historical significance of regional pantomimes, see Jill A. Sullivan, *The Politics of the Pantomime: regional identity in the theatre 1860-1900* (Hatfield, Herts.: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2011).
[6] See Millie Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007) and "Continuity and Transformation in Twentieth-century Pantomime," in Jim Davis, ed., *Victorian Pantomime* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 185-200.
[7] Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 4.
[8] Mike Pearson, *'In Comes I': performance, memory and landscape* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 3.
[9] Kelly explores the career of Knight in greater detail in her book *The Empire Actors: stars of the Australasian costume drama 1890s-1920s* (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency House, 2009).
[10] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/lowbrow: the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 68.
[11] During 2011 staff at Carnegie Hall in New York handed out complimentary throat soothers to audience members in order to minimise coughing during orchestral performances. This attempt to reduce audience-generated noise was sponsored by a well-known manufacturer of throat soothers.
[12] E.D. Mackerness, *A Social History of English Music* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 127.
[13] Bradley Bowden, "A World Dominated by Youth: Child and Youth Labour in Queensland, 1885-1900," in *The Past Is before Us* (Sydney: Australian Society for the Study of Labour History and Business and Labour History Group, 2005), 37-45, quoting from William Blackeny's "Registrar-General's Report" in the *Queensland Census of 1886*.

PART 1:

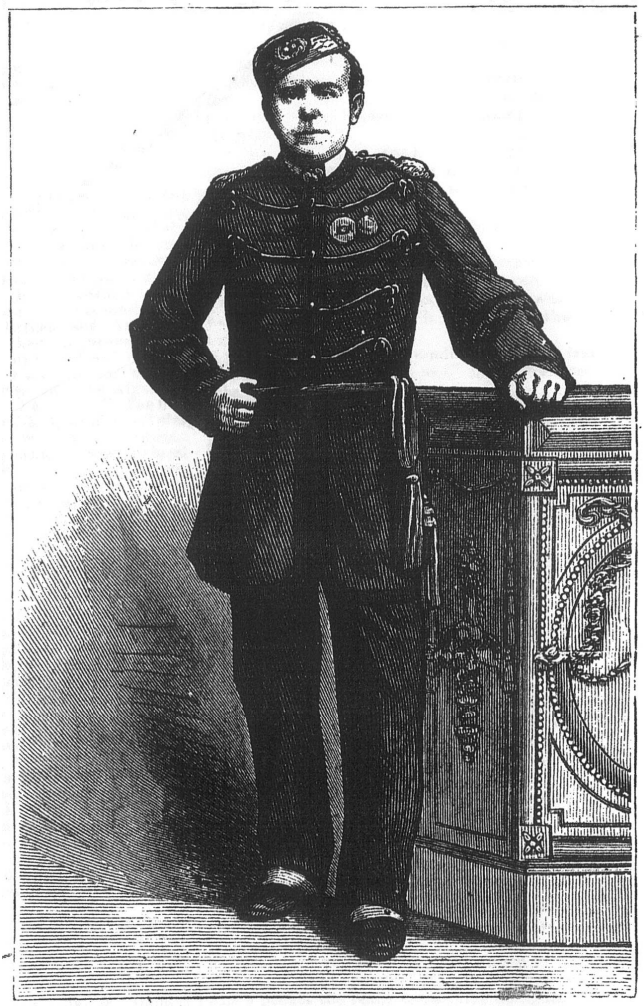
MARVELS AND WONDERS

CHAPTER ONE

ABORIGINAL DANCE, MILITARY DRILL: CAPTAIN MACDONALD'S TRAINED INDIANS AND 19TH-CENTURY VARIETY ENTERTAINMENT

JERRY WASSERMAN

In 1874, San Francisco drillmaster and theatrical entrepreneur Captain Charles E.S. MacDonald recruited a dozen aboriginal men and women from ten different tribes in the western United States and the Canadian province of British Columbia.[1] Claiming to want to refute the popular notion that Indians could not be trained, he brought them to San Francisco and in a few months turned them into a crack military drill team and spectacular performance troupe. Captain MacDonald's Trained Indians, as they were first called, played to sold-out houses up and down the west coast. Intending to highlight the contrast between "their native condition" and their newly acquired abilities as civilised, westernised, trained soldiers, MacDonald began the show as colonial spectacle.[2] A San Francisco newspaper reported that the aboriginal performers came out "howling and whooping" with "spears, war-clubs and…a wild dance," after which they threw off the dingy blankets they wore to reveal a customised version of the Zouave uniform: white cloth with leggings, "the ace of hearts on each man's back, a red sash around the waist and a red cap ornamented with feathers."[3] Captain MacDonald, sword in hand, blowing a whistle, then led them through marching and facing exercises, the bayonet drill, and a series of acrobatic skirmishes. "The manual of arms...was excellently done, the men acting like automatons," and after each burst of enthusiastic applause "the Captain remarked in accents of withering irony, 'Oh no, Indians can't be trained; oh no, I guess not.'" The account ends with what must have been considered a significant compliment: "the drill could not have been better executed even by white men."[4]



COLONEL CHARLES EDWARD STUART M'DONALD, THE CALIFORNIA INDIAN DRILL INSTRUCTOR.

Fig 1-1. This drawing of McDonald accompanied an interview with him in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York), 20 January 1877. He stopped in NYC on his way back to San Francisco from London, where he had left his troupe of Native performers under the supervision of another man.

By early 1876, with plans to tour the company to the eastern United States as he had done three years earlier with his non-aboriginal Zouave drill team, the San Francisco Cadets, MacDonald re-named his troupe The Occidentals and added additional theatrical elements: the blindfold drill and the lightning drill (executed "at the tap of a drum"), a ribbon dance, sixteen different human pyramids (the performers "forming the most picturesque positions with the agility of old professional acrobats"), and the Indian Feast of Fire ("devouring burning torches, breathing smoke and fire.")[5] The Occidentals travelled to New York City for the American Centennial, marching in the Fifth Avenue parade on the July Fourth holiday. The front page story in the *New York Sun* quoted the Mayor as saying, "The Indians are the best soldiers in the procession."[6] They played to full houses for a week at the Olympic Theatre on Broadway, praised by reviewers for their "remarkable precision and grace,"[7] as well as their expertise in the use of rifles and the manual of arms.[8] Unfortunately for MacDonald and his troupe, they were sharing newspaper space with one of the biggest American stories of the decade. The defeat and massacre of General George Armstrong Custer and his troop of 260 United States cavalry by Hunkpapa Sioux warriors, led by the great Chief Sitting Bull at Montana's Little Bighorn River, had occurred just two weeks earlier. "Custer's Last Stand" was no ordinary military defeat; Custer was a hugely romantic figure in 1870s America. Captain MacDonald's heavily armed Indians, performing military drills with rifles and bayonets, caused sufficient consternation that he soon decided they should beat a strategic retreat to England.

In August 1876 the group arrived in London, beginning their tour sightseeing at the Bank of England, the British Museum, and Madame Tussaud's.[9] By October they were reported to have played to 50,000 people at the Alexandra Palace and the Crystal Palace.[10] In a series of canny, if obvious, public relations moves, MacDonald had renamed them *Colonel* MacDonald's Troupe of *Sioux* Indians, and added scenes to their routine such as "The Defiant Wardance" and "Indians on the War Trail." He also let it be known in interviews that his performers included a son and daughter of Sitting Bull.[11] The troupe did the rounds of London's variety theatres—the Royal Music Hall, Cambridge Hall of Varieties, Royal Aquarium—until December, when MacDonald returned to San Francisco and the performers went on to tour France with J.W. Myers' Great American Circus. In Paris their audiences were said to number 7,000 people a night.[12]

The saga of Captain MacDonald's Indians ends on a bizarre and unhappy note after only three years. In September 1877 their new

manager, James Armstrong, writes from Tours to say that they have played an average of four French cities a week since May but have not proven sufficiently exotic for their European audiences:

> The Indians have not proved a success, as the people of England and France say they are East Indians, and East Indians can be seen daily in the streets of London and Paris, and far better-looking specimens of the Indian than the party I have.

Armstrong complains bitterly that the Indians fail to appreciate the opportunities they have been afforded by him and Captain MacDonald:

> [T]he Captain did for them more than any other man on earth would do. He raised them from an impecunious position to one of luxury... Ever since they left California they have never known what it is to want for anything; but they are an ungrateful set. The more a person does for them the less thanks he receives.

Ungrateful or not, the remaining five Canadian aboriginals are homesick ("They long to return to their original sphere and the sooner they do so the happier I shall be"). And ominously, in a situation all too common in 19th-century ethnographic tours of indigenous people, two of them are suffering from consumption.[13]

Although short-lived and fallen into obscurity, MacDonald's company and its brief but rich performance history instantiate a complex matrix of 19th-century colonialism, Canadian and American Indian policy, Native dance, military drill, theatrical spectacle, and a multitude of other elements that intersect at a crossroads of theatre, history, politics, and show business. In this essay I have opted to set aside some important issues of racial and cultural politics to focus on the world of entertainment highlighted by the story of Captain MacDonald's Trained Indians, whose nomenclature alone one could spend a good deal of time unpacking. Unique in form yet typical in so many of its elements, the history of this company offers multiple views of a golden age of popular entertainment.

The 1870s was perhaps the last decade, Lawrence Levine has argued, before a line would be drawn between highbrow and lowbrow in American culture; it was an era, in Joy Kasson's felicitous phrase, of "polymorphous performativity."[14] Among the numerous forms of popular entertainment extant during the era and across the 19th century, MacDonald's troupe appears remarkable for its unique performative hybridity. I have found no evidence of any other act that presented aboriginal exoticism and formal westernised military drill in anything like its combination. In her superb book, *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin*, Jane R. Goodall

lists spectacle, variety, and surprise among the primary appeals of popular theatre—all certainly elements of the Occidentals' performance—along with "the traditional tensions between the classical and the grotesque body,"[15] which in many ways lay at the heart of MacDonald's show. The *frisson*-inducing wildness and savagery of the Native dance, which must have been particularly resonant in the wake of the Custer story, found resolution—"the savage civilised"—in the highly formalised, standardised, theatricalised movements of the military drill. Note the rhetoric and rhythms in this advertisement for the show at London's Cambridge Hall:

> Special engagement, at an enormous expense, of Colonel Macdonald's Detachment of Sioux Indians, and British Columbians (male and female). Indian life on the frontiers of the far West. Indians on the war trail. The defiant war dance. Concluding with the noble savage in a European dance. The savage civilized, and his unequalled dexterity in the art of arms. Chargings and firings. Bayonet exercise. Rallies and assault of arms.[16]

In realising this juxtaposition of the grotesque and classical body in performance, MacDonald overcame what Goodall describes as "the double bind that beset all ethnological shows": "On the one hand, audiences wanted the thrill of raw primitivism; on the other, they would only be satisfied by a display of the kinds of highly crafted dramatic action that they were used to seeing in the theatre."[17] MacDonald gave them both, along with the satisfaction of seeing the primitive transformed by and into the civilised, a formula that Buffalo Bill Cody would use to great effect in his Wild West shows a decade later.

In addition to its originality MacDonald's show is notable for its typicality, the ways it reflected or incorporated many entertainment forms that came to fruition in the latter 19th century. The standard histories of 19th-century North American mass culture and popular entertainment consider circuses, freak shows, minstrel shows, vaudeville, and burlesque; frontier melodrama, ethnographic exhibitions, wild west shows, medicine shows, dime museums, and amusement parks.[18] Captain MacDonald's Trained Indians fall between the taxonomic cracks. In none of the five major histories that examine these forms is military drill even mentioned as a genre of popular entertainment, although evidence of its widespread popularity in theatres goes back at least to the 18th century.[19] At the same time the Trained Indians overlap many of these categories, marking a continuum that links the ethnological exhibition, the circus, and the wild west show, with secondary connections to vaudeville and burlesque.

Everywhere he took his performers, MacDonald earnestly argued that Native Americans had been badly mistreated and seriously underestimated,

that they could learn new skills as well as any other race of people, and that they could be trained as a military force to be employed by the very United States Army that had defeated them, in much the same way as the French had done with the native Zouave fighters of Algeria. He told the *New York Herald*:

> I am convinced that the American Indians have been imposed upon and misrepresented until they have become maniacal in their despair. I wanted to convince the Eastern people that the Indian is flesh and blood and deserving of manly treatment... In the handling of arms they are superb; in manner gentle and respectful and faithful as brothers and sisters could be to me and to each other.

He concluded that his work would prove "the American Indians the finest troops in the world."[20] Remarkably, MacDonald seems to have avoided gender discrimination in his troupe. Newspaper reports made much of the fact that his expert performers included both men and women, their abilities challenging the era's most offensive racial and gender stereotypes: "There is seemingly no difference between the movements of either sex. The useless squaw is transformed into the ideal amazon."[21] MacDonald also claimed that all his show's profits would go to the performers. In these regards he shared both the humanitarian impulses of American Indian-policy reformers, who argued that the defeated Indians could and should be civilised,[22] and the (usually phony) high seriousness of those 19th-century entrepreneurs who purported to have scientific reasons for displaying indigenous people.

Scholars are divided over the question of whether Native performers like those in MacDonald's troupe were exploited or privileged. Some argue that the performers were afforded opportunities to make money, see the world, present elements of their culture, and exercise a significant amount of control in their relationship with their spectators;[23] others contend that the theatricalisation of Native dance became a political tool for containing, policing, and ultimately "controlling Native bodies, religion, and culture."[24] In the only ostensible first-hand testimony I have been able to find from among MacDonald's performers, a Canadian aboriginal calling himself John Smith writes a very formal letter from San Francisco to the editor of the *British Colonist* newspaper in Victoria. He insists that he is a good Christian, looks forward to performing before the Queen of England later in the year, and stresses his self-improvement under MacDonald's tutelage: "Since I have joined Captain McDonald's Band, I have seen some of the world, and learned to speak my mind to all men both high and low, and...I have improved in my studies..."[25]

Notwithstanding his reformist virtues, MacDonald's shameless flair for inventing new entertainment hooks to snare his audience clearly implicates him in what Bernth Lindfors calls "ethnological show business."[26] Once MacDonald took his show on the road, whatever intention he may originally have had for it became subsumed in the structure of variety entertainment, an assemblage of independent acts without plots or thematic relationship to one another.[27] A *New York Herald* advertisement for the run of MacDonald's Occidentals at the Olympic Theatre lists the war dances and songs, feast of fire, Indian statues, acrobatics and gymnastics, manual of arms and bayonet exercises they would perform, along with the members of Billy Barry's Specialty Company with whom they shared the bill: a great Ethiopian novelty, a "laugh provoking Negro comedian," the Irish Demosthenes, a talented cantatrice, a champion lady jig dancer, a versatile actress, and a burlesque actor and comedian, "in a programme varied, original and attractive."[28] Varied, indeed. In his *Annals of the New York Stage*, George Odell refers to MacDonald's show in the context of other variety acts at the Olympic Theatre in 1876. These include Yamadiva the Boneless Wonder; a burlesque *Julius Caesar*; Ira A. Paine, champion pigeon-shot of the world; and "the fish woman" and "man-fish," Lurline and Watson, "eating, drinking, smoking, sleeping, and card-playing underwater."[29] At the Crystal Palace in London, Colonel MacDonald's Troupe of Sioux Indians was squeezed into an hour between an orchestra and a midget act.[30] It was hardly a radical step for them next to join Myers' Circus.

"Lo," Odell commented on MacDonald's performers, "the poor Indian, whose untutored mind now lodged in a tutored, commercialised body!"[31] MacDonald argued vociferously that "his" Indians' minds were in fact far from untutored; he boasted that he had taught them to read and write as well as march and drill. But the containment of the performance and its aboriginal bodies within the variety format marks this production as no less commercial than any of the many ethnological tours, museum exhibitions, or world's fair side shows that commodified exotic indigenous bodies for display in spectacle entertainments across North America, Europe, and Australasia during this era. Roslyn Poignant defines these venues collectively as "the show-space": "both a zone of displacement for the performers and a place of spectacle for the onlookers...where historically specific relations between colonisers and colonised were made visible."[32] Exploiting the show-space as others had done before him and would continue to do more successfully after, MacDonald both (re)defined one particular coloniser-colonised relationship and marketed an attractive commercial brand.

MacDonald occupies a strategic position among the important American show business entrepreneurs who went about "Indianizing" American performance in the mid-19th century.[33] In the 1840s, painter George Catlin had enlisted Ojibway and Iowa Indians to help sell his art in London and Paris by performing for his patrons as living illustrations of the frontier West he painted. MacDonald replicated some of the strategies of Catlin, who "first cast Native Americans as honourable people and victims of aggressive and misguided U.S. policies," writes wild west historian Paul Reddin, but "quickly learned that battle cries, talk of scalping and accounts of warfare brought the most paying customers."[34] In the same years as MacDonald was training, touring, and touting his Indians (1874-76), the greatest showman of the age, P.T. Barnum, was famously incorporating aboriginal performers from some of the same tribes as MacDonald's into both his circus and his touring Congress of Nations.[35] During those years as well, Indian scout William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody was performing wild west melodramas on stage in Boston and New York.[36] Not until 1883, a decade after MacDonald had incarnated theatricalised Native savagery and formalised U.S. Army militarism *in the same aboriginal bodies* in his shows, did Buffalo Bill bring real cowboys and Indians together in his Wild West, staging frontier set-pieces where savage Indian attacks were nearly always defeated by the heroic cavalry. MacDonald's show not only predated Cody's; it humanised and normalised its Native performers to a much greater degree. But Cody definitely had the last laugh. While MacDonald slid into obscurity, Buffalo Bill became the best known celebrity on the planet and his Wild West a long-running international sensation. While MacDonald had to settle for pretending to have Sitting Bull's children in his show, Cody managed to convince the real Sitting Bull to play himself for two seasons in Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

Performing military drill, Captain MacDonald's Trained Indians were engaging in an entertainment form so popular in their time that it regularly appeared on stage parodied in vaudeville routines and musical burlesques.[37] The Zouave drill they performed and the Zouave uniform they wore have their own unique performance history and genealogy. The original Zouaves were North African fighters, famous for their fierceness and their distinctive, colourful dress, whom the French integrated into colonial military units in the 1840s. The Zouaves gained international recognition during the Crimean War (1854-56), where French soldiers in Zouave-style brigades distinguished themselves in battle. In the 1860s, Zouave units formed all across the United States—American soldiers dressed in fez, pantaloon, and embroidered jackets—and fought famously on both sides of the Civil War. The first American Zouave unit was established in