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The Very Model of a Modern...? Reflections around *The Empire Actors*

Veronica Kelly's *The Empire Actors* is a scholarly and fascinating examination of how ideas of modernity, and the concept of modernism, were imported to Australia and New Zealand from the 1890s to the 1920s, a period in which the 'foundations for twentieth century global entertainment...' were laid. ¹(1) The medium through which Kelly explores this transfer is the production of costume dramas in the commercial theatre. These evocations of past events and personalities were a contemporary popular entertainment which she cogently describes as 'one of the mass forms fulfilling the traditional need for affective connection with imagined pasts'. (3)

Kelly's study takes two strands; one is the content and staging of the shows and the other is an investigation of a more subtle, off stage dissemination through promotion and publicity surrounding the visiting performers. *The Empire Actors* first establishes the cultural environment in Australasia around the touring theatrical experience. Its insights are then moved to the visual impact of the costume dramas and the slippery concept of historical authenticity surrounding these representations of a 'glorious' but highly selective 'past'. These explorations also provide a context for the biographical focus of the second half of the book which comprises studies of six of the visiting stars of these dramas - Julius Knight, Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton, Minnie Tittell Brune, Roy Redgrave and Maud Jeffries.

The Empire Actors is a complex study of a complex set of relationships. Modernity and its symbolic companion modernism are shown in Kelly's research to be elusive concepts to encapsulate. Her book clearly establishes that neither modernism nor its theatrical exemplifications arose from 'whole cloth'. There is continuing thematic importance placed on the transfer of ideas and perceptions in the context of their time, but also acknowledgment that such transfers are neither necessarily linear nor cohesive.

This concept of cultural transfer, which underpins *The Empire Actors*, may also itself be interpreted as elusive and multi-faceted, and its use in this study brings to the fore some intriguing issues around what can be thought of as a

straightforward process. By definition the word 'transfer' has an inference of a one-way-street flow of influence and from this perspective it reflects one long held historical view of the relationship between a dominant Imperial power and an implicitly 'blotting paper' colonial culture. Kelly's study is far more perceptive and encompassing than this simplistic summary. She establishes the Imperial 'lines of inheritance', but also recognises that, by this period, the Australasian colonies had developed their own self-image. (18) The colonists were not uncritical of their Imperial imports, nor unaware of the complexities of their relationship with their touring actors. (64) These influences, however, are not the primary focus of this study.

The Empire Actors concentrates on the complex mechanisms by which ideas of modernism were transferred to Australasia from an overseas model. It is a work which, therefore, opens but does not specifically pursue issues around the colonists' understanding of their Imperial source and the influences forming their responses to the messages it sent. This colonial society was not, however, the same as the Imperial one, and it does not necessarily follow that the colonists brought the same understanding of the information they received as the initiators understood it to convey when the information was sent. It may be argued even those divergences, as much as similarities, were influential factors in the transfer of ideas and ideologies.

One such source of divergence was physical separation. Britain's Australasian colonies of settlement were 'British'. Their institutions and systems and the 'everybody knows' of daily life were adopted and adapted from that model. From very early in European settlement, however, the complexities of isolation ensured most colonists had little direct association with Britain. The civil power was represented by Imperial governors who had varied impact and who came and went. The military, the enforcer of Imperial authority, was always a small presence and it never operated as a separate caste isolated from civil society. The colonists, therefore, had virtually no exposure to any display of Imperial 'might', whether cultural or martial.

All immigrant communities develop some perception of 'home' which is frozen in time. In Australasia, however, it may be that, in addition to this folk memory, circumstance left the colonists at liberty to create their own Imperial model. It was unlikely to be challenged by exposure to the actuality. The colonists could thus choose to accept and perhaps idealise the images of 'home' which appealed to them, and reject those facts and influences which did not fit into their desired model. ²

Several shadows emerge from this postulated colonial tendency to construct an Imperial model to reflect its own desired image. One of them is the likelihood or otherwise of transferred information remaining stable throughout its passage, unaffected by a changed environment, either on the stage by artistic modification or off stage in social morés. Another is that this constructed model encouraged a cultural selectivity in the colonists' response to their imported entertainments. Both these shadows could, indeed, have permitted the colonists to draw a direct, if not necessarily acknowledged, distinction between the

contemporary material representations of the transferred culture and the evolving ideas which it promulgated.

The Australasian colonists were keen adopters of the 'latest' from overseas, and this study of modernism shows clearly the impact of the 'new' in a visual context brought by the bearers of modernism. The spectacular and brilliantly coloured stage settings and costumes brought by Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton, and the glamour incorporated into the historical verisimilitude claimed for the costumes of the dramas, had influence far beyond their stage impact. Stars, whether in Roman toga, harem glitter or the latest 'London' fashions displayed materials and styles which were directly available as models. (25) Such items could be endlessly copied, interpreted and utilised in public display, but there remained always an identifiable 'anchor point' for the colonists - the object itself. Australian audiences may not have recognised or articulated the theory behind the visuals, but they appear to have been well capable of adapting them as a resource. They were a practical model which suited the do-it-yourself requirements of the colonies in both homemade entertainments and the retail fashion industry.

The adoption of and adaptation to cultural change conveyed by entertainments from the Imperial world may have been a less straightforward process. In addition to preconceptions, there were actualities to be accommodated in the transfer of any entertainments and complexities around the range of material available to touring companies.

Logistical concerns ensured that all Australasian theatre tours until well after the First World War were 'one-offs'. Touring actors performed for a brief period then left, seldom to return. Both they and their presentations thus had the impact of the 'new', but the shock of apparently original ideas, including those of modernism, was not necessarily enduring. Inherent in this 'just passing through' association between the Imperial theatre and its colonial audiences, was that the plays and the players were presented out of their context both as part of genre and within the times and culture of their origins. The colonists were not, therefore, exposed to productions which had a continuing, so reinforced, but evolving message. They received one culturally validated production within that development process.

This lack of gradualism in the conveying of cultural change emerges in Kelly's analysis of the roles played by the visiting Empire actors. This study encompasses over thirty years of productions, and it describes considerable changes in the conventions of the 'starring role'. The modern woman came in a range of guises to her adoring fans while the implicitly desirable epitome of masculinity ranged across the romantic Julius Knight, the robust Oscar Asche and the prototype Australasian, Roy Redgrave. (125, 158-9) The performances brought by these Empire actors thus conveyed the changes apparent in the Imperial world in the understanding and interpretation of modernism over time. The ideas were doubtless recognised by their colonial audiences, but the plays and the players were presented in a society which did not have direct exposure

to the pressures operating in late nineteenth century Britain which made those ideas relevant to current concerns.

The Australasian colonists had, nonetheless, long been on the receiving end of a 'formulated culture', a system which weeded out extremes, either of innovation or challenge. Those shows which came under commercial management to Australasia were chosen through a combination of recognition of their acceptability in the Imperial culture and the entrepreneurs' assessment of their commercial viability. It is possible that this experience had been, by the late nineteenth century, accommodated into the colonial response to that fact of Australasian life.

Managerial puff promoting the touring actor as a 'star' and a repository of the Imperial theatrical tradition had emerged well before the arrival of the Empire actors. So had the discrepancy between publicity and actuality. Leading figures of the British stage never came to Australasia and earlier touring actors were either those of the provincial circuit or occasionally well known players now past their prime. Nonetheless the colonists lionised these touring 'stars', and enjoyed the theatricality which accompanied their presence in a similar manner to that displayed in their association with the Empire actors.³ Such response does not necessarily indicate the colonists were admiring them because they were an Imperial model. Part of the appeal of the Empire actors, like those who came before, may have been that, on closer acquaintance, they were not the Imperial messengers, implicitly of a different and superior culture and heritage, which their promotion indicated them to be. Instead these performers as people 'fitted in' to colonial life.

An understanding of the distinction between a personality and the various staged characters he/she undertook as an actor, may be understood from the studies in *The Empire Actors* to be part of their colonial touring experience. In the costume dramas for example, they could be the embodiment of the colonial dreams of continuity of association with a glorious 'past', evoking what Kelly graphically describes as 'hauntings', a melding of past and present resulting in a sense of association which is not quite of any particular time or place. Outside the theatre, their messages of modern developments were conveyed through daily life, both in social and practical exchange.

It seems unlikely that, in a culture which had evolved a perception of the Imperial world derived from an opportunity to select the desirable and reject the unwelcome, that at least some colonial audiences did not make similar distinctions. The colonists were not necessarily unaware of distant European power struggles and international challenges to Imperial authority, but it is possible that, within their theatres, they chose to discount them. Instead they could bring their own interpretation of times past to the costumed dramas. The staged exotic world of orientalism perhaps included the accommodation of their unspoken fears of the 'yellow peril' and 'convict stain' eugenics through its intrinsic racism. They could enjoy the heroics of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and shed tears for *L'Aiglon* without necessarily being attuned to the complexities of

Anglo/French relations and empathise with Tittell Brune's 'emotional' triumphs over adversity without an intensity of engagement with the 'woman question'.

There was, nonetheless, a shadow around the performance of these modern plays to their colonial audiences. These were at source conscious image making about a desirable Imperial model. While they came to Australasia without their context, the image now being conveyed of the Imperial power as a powerful, protective, Arcadian world of chivalry reflected much of the idealised colonial Imperial model. It was then being presented to a society which might interpret it as reinforcement of an established perception, rather than as a modern and new one.

The Empire Actors is a beautifully presented book which contains rich scholarship. The transmission of the Imperial concepts of modernism explored so broadly in it opens many intriguing aspects of relationship of these two linked societies. One aspect of these Australasian 'lines of inheritance' may be that not all transfers established themselves in the colonial world in the same guise as the Imperial power thought they were sent.

¹ Veronica Kelly, *The Empire Actors: Stars of Australasian Costume Drama 1890s-1920s* (Strawberry Hills: Currency House: 2010).

² Ailsa McPherson, unpub. mss, working title *The Anzac Rehearsals*, in process.

³ Jim Davis, 'English Theatrical Influences on the Development of Theatre in Australia to 1900' in *A Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Cambridge University Press and Currency Press: 1995), 205-6.