

- **Victor Emeljanow**
University of Newcastle, Australia

Editorial

The nexus between politics and popular entertainment has been, and continues to be, close and intricately woven. In some cases the entertainment has served to give a voice to local communities, their concerns and issues; in others, the instruments of popular entertainment, particularly those of spectacle and display have been harnessed to the interests of national agendas as well as ideological positions. Nevertheless, because such entertainments are by definition those of the people, they have the capacity to be subversive: to say one thing but imply something entirely different, which explains some of the edginess with which hegemonic authorities have viewed the tolerated periods of carnival and misrule. Such a response has, of course, also affected the theatre at times when it was a forum for community expression, debate and potential political organisation: one might merely point to the theatre riots in British theatres during the 18th and 19th centuries, or for that matter, the 1849 Astor Place riot in New York as examples.

In our previous issues, we have featured articles which have discussed the uses of popular entertainments to foreground Native representation and agency in 19th century America and 21st century New Zealand, to investigate personal identity through karaoke performances, and to give a voice to subversive pride through pop music in Argentina. We have also seen articles which explore the theatricalist elements of sporting events and the intimate connection between performers and spectators within those contexts. What these discussions have in common are explorations of the role of the individual within a community, as well as of the capacity for a community to affirm its identity at moments of crisis through acts of resistance, overt or covert (such moments of crisis might well embrace a football game, a wrestling match, or a political revolution). The articles in this issue pick up some of the threads of these ongoing discussions.

Sean Edgecomb cites two quotations in his discussion of the Olympic Games, that of the founder of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, in which he states that “the modern athlete honours his race, his homeland, and his flag,” and that of Brecht, “our hope is based on the sports public.” They highlight two very different aspects of a sporting event: the engagement of spectators as

distinguished from the perceived passivity of theatrical audiences, and the role of the performer/athlete in such an event. Even if we may question whether Brecht was ever able to generate the response he wished in the theatre, Coubertin's evaluation of the role of the athlete continues to resonate at the Olympics to this day. The article focuses on two of the Games, in St. Louis in 1904 and in Berlin in 1936. The earlier one was chaotically organised and maintained an uneasy backward-looking identity as a P. T. Barnum ethnographic display, including "Anthropological Days" when lesser human beings were given the opportunity to demonstrate what physical training might achieve. As the article points out, the St. Louis Games was coloured by the aggressive imperialism that had surfaced after the Spanish-American war of 1898. Unquestionably there was a racist agenda, but it really took the 1936 Games to transform the Olympics into "festivals of nationalism on a global scale" (quoting John McAloon). The Games were meticulously organised to reflect Hitler's agenda of relating Aryan youth to its Hellenic antecedents. The spectacular displays employed to advance this agenda, have of course been appropriated and re-worked to this day. Edgecomb points to the fact that the identity of the St. Louis Games suffered because of their connections with the displays and exhibitions of the concurrent World Fair.

Undoubtedly Healy and Bigelow's Indian medicine shows did not figure at the 1904 World Fair. Nevertheless, they reflected the underbelly of American triumphalism in the period 1881-1914. Jason Price argues that these shows, generated by purely commercial concerns—the need to sell a patent medicine—provided an opportunity for the exploration of perceived differences in public, and should be seen in the context of the anxieties about the so-called Indian troubles of the 1880s and 1890s. The article suggests that the presentation of difference in these shows, juxtaposing portrayals of savagery with those of healing on the part of the Kickapoo Indians, created a space for the public discussion and evaluation of the "oppressed Others." Little such discussion was envisaged, let alone entertained within the purlieu of the Olympics.

Ethnographic display also found a part in the visit by the Virginia Minstrels to Britain in 1843. Jessica Legnini quotes an advertisement in the *Manchester Times* which stated that audiences would be treated to a display of the "sport and pastimes of the slave race of America." The Athenaeum, in which the group played in Manchester, was an institution built to allow for meetings, discussion and the propagation of useful knowledge, largely to professional men and youthful aspirants to such a status. The article points to the fact that Manchester possessed a strong radical political strand as well as a certain smug middle-class confidence about its position *vis-à-vis* Americans at a time of slavery in the United States. Thus the performances by the Minstrels, taking place in a lecture room at the Athenaeum as an anti-slavery convention was being held in the city, emphasised the educational as well as the political dimensions. However, the techniques of minstrelsy together with the novelty of seeing the first documented American blackface minstrel concert in Britain (as distinct from individual performances by individual performers like T. D. Rice who had

appeared in Britain in the 1830s) may have diminished their impact. The visit of the Virginia Minstrels, nonetheless, signalled the beginning of a tradition of blackface minstrelsy in Britain that lasted until 1978.

The ongoing fascination with blackface minstrelsy, appropriated by television in the 1950s, finds further corroboration in the stellar careers of Vivian and Rosetta Duncan from the 1920s to the 1950s. The duo created a theatrical sensation through their long-running show *Topsy and Eva*, itself, suggests Jocelyn Buckner, the first musical comedy adaptation of aspects of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Of the two performers, Rosetta was acknowledged as the more talented, and it was she who played the blackface role of Topsy. "The mask of blackness permitted whites to say things in another voice" (quoting Brenda Gottschild), and Rosetta used the opportunity to create a distance between her personal and performative identities. Although Buckner is at pains to describe the double-act as an "infantile routine" of fabricated prepubescent innocence which the duo preserved throughout their careers, it should also be positioned within the tradition of popular entertainment that revelled in the performances of adults as children and children as adults, let alone within the long-standing tradition of cross-dressing and the flouting of gender differences.

Certainly, in their several ways, the Virginia Minstrels and the Duncan sisters were making political statements about racial identity and capitalised on their audiences' awareness of difference and Otherness. Like the medicine shows, they may have suggested the need for their audiences to weigh up their ingrained attitudes even if the shows themselves didn't challenge those attitudes directly. In the cases of the Virginia Minstrels and the Duncan sisters, it was their outrageous comedy routines and their eccentricities of behaviour which tied them to their audiences. On the other hand, it was precisely those carnivalesque qualities in performance which concerned authorities when dealing with Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Dr. Faustus*, in the late-16th and early-17th centuries. John Frongillo compares the various versions of the two plays to suggest differences between what appear to be 'performance-based texts' and those which had been sanitised to accord with increasingly self-conscious attitudes in Elizabethan society towards the desiderata of 'high art' and the separation between an aristocratic sensibility and that designated as 'base' and identified with 'common men.' The article goes on to the intervention by the printer Robert Jones who appears to have deliberately expunged comic scenes from the plays (particularly *Tamburlaine*) to bring them into line with the expectations of a sophisticated reading clientele and to obliterate thereby any vestiges of "familiar carnival elements" that might imply social radicalism at worst or anti-authoritarian cynicism at best.

On the surface, it might be difficult to classify *Glee*, the hit television show which integrates the music of Broadway musicals into its texture of the vagaries of a high-school choir or glee club, as revolutionary or politically challenging. Yet

Barrie Gelles makes a case that the show may have the potential for re-framing the consumption of musical theatre. Within an aesthetic perspective, in the show's appropriation of well-known Broadway songs and its use of them in differing contexts to enhance its story in differing ways (she acknowledges the model offered by Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stage: the theatre as memory machine*), it shares a postmodern referentiality and perhaps the capacity to drive audiences back to the original stage versions in which the songs appeared. This may perhaps be wishful-thinking, like theatre managers in the early 20th century who supported the emergence of film on the grounds that it would encourage people back to live theatre. The managers then had the advantage that they only needed to compete with a silent film industry; today the instant accessibility of *Glee* over the internet, let alone its touring and DVD market, make the retro journey all the more difficult.

This issue does not contain our *Afterpieces* section. We would encourage scholars and practitioners to contribute to this 'notes and queries' section. It allows for significant performance reviews, observations about newly published books or just about current research interest to appear within a format of a mere and undemanding 2000 words.