

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

Editorial

In our September, 2012 issue Simon Sladen issued a call to arms on behalf of pantomime, not the traditional form of the late-19th century, but rather the pantomime of today. He urged scholars to undertake research into the forms of pantomime that still exist in Hong Kong, South Africa, and Australasia, for instance. In this issue Michael Pickering urges scholars to take up the cudgels on behalf of variety, particularly the variety of the post-World War 2 era. He admits that his perspective is a British one and takes his point of departure from the recent publication of Oliver Double's book *Britain Had Talent*,¹ and his *Afterpiece* refers to the increasing corpus of knowledge now available about popular forms like music hall, minstrelsy and, more recently, circus. Perhaps, he suggests, variety still lacks the scholarly *gravitas* with which other forms have now been invested. It can certainly be argued that variety contains the essence of popular entertainments: its inclusiveness of song, dance, revue sketch, acrobatic display, prestidigitation and visual extravagance may indeed make scrutiny somewhat difficult. Yet I'm delighted that in the pages of our journal can be found numerous references to differing forms of variety. This issue is no exception.

The structure of this issue follows a chronological progression from the end of the 19th century to the present but also includes thematic intersections that permeate the period and which have helped to shape popular entertainments themselves: constructions of celebrity, the globalisation of entertainments, the impact of tourism and the touristic gaze upon the production and reception of entertainments, the imbrication of theatre, department store displays and fashion parades, which saw the preserve of the theatre threatened by alternative commercial venues and new modes of communication. In this respect television would play a vital role.

Dave Calvert examines the British Pierrot troupes and their origins in the Italian *commedia* as mediated by the French through the work of Jean Deburau at the Théâtre des Funambules for example during the first half of the 19th century. Calvert asserts that the British Pierrot tradition can be attributed to the pioneering work of Clifford Essex who initiated the first troupe in 1891 and set up its identification with seaside entertainment. The form proliferated rapidly and Pierrot entertainment soon became indistinguishable from variety, organised around a small number of performers with complementary skills who

could be either male or female. Their distinctive costume of baggy pants and voluminous tops decorated with pom-poms, which democratised the troupe, made gender differences relatively insignificant. Such costuming also allowed for a degree of licence perhaps preserving some of the anarchic qualities of the earlier *commedia*. The troupes continued to be a feature of seaside resorts catering to the urban tourists who increasingly flocked to them. Such was their ubiquity that Pierrots became a standard component of frontline entertainment during World War 1: there are documented records of Australian, New Zealand and Canadian Pierrot troupes as well in prisoner-of-war camps throughout Germany. Although the troupes survived the war their heyday was over and they do not reappear among frontline entertainers or in prisoner-of-war camps during World War 2. Yet of course their anarchic quality and their identification with the war would be nostalgically remembered in Joan Littlewood's 1963 *Oh What a Lovely War!* But perhaps their legacy was a more enduring one, embodying aspects of variety and creating a style for intimate revue based not on celebrity but rather on complementary skills that made up the collective identity of the troupe.

Although the Pierrot troupes might be instantly recognisable to people of British or Empire backgrounds it would be hard to argue for their international status. On the other hand the revue genre with which they shared many commonalities was egregiously transgressive. Indeed, Veronica Kelly avers that it became the international benchmark as a vehicle for novelty and up-to-date modernity. She uses the appearance of two revues, *Come Over Here* and *Hullo Rag-time*, imported from London to Australia in 1913-14, to demonstrate the form's eclecticism and transnational mobility. Reviewers of the time struggled to define this new genre, finding resonances in pantomime, musical comedy and even minstrelsy, but all recognised that here was something new and vital. The companies included English, American and local stars while the format of the shows easily incorporated local references and satirical thrusts. Just as important in terms of its immediate popularity were the inclusions of popular music and dance forms. Indeed, Kelly suggests that these forms "were dispersed by revue, demonstrated and rendered fashionable as the vital signature of international modernity and youth culture." This dispersal was immeasurably assisted by the new medium of the gramophone record which insured that the resonances of a revue would linger on through the iteration of its music. Hugh D. McIntosh, the Australian producer of *Hullo Rag-time*, introduced the occasion of the "tango teas", an event which integrated exhibitions of new dances with costume parades intended for the burgeoning market of female consumers. Undoubtedly he was familiar with the astonishing success of Irene and Vernon Castle who performed the new social dances of the ragtime era to international acclaim.

It is the career of Irene Castle and her engagement with the fashion industry that forms the basis of Nic Leonhardt's article. Certainly the Castles were a dancing phenomenon until Vernon's early death in 1918. They institutionalised ballroom dancing and were able to attract not only the services of 'Lucile' (Lady Duff Gordon), the foremost theatrical and fashion costumier of

the period, but also those of Elizabeth Marbury, an agent who had worked closely with the Shubert Brothers and Charles Frohman, and who was responsible for setting up the Castles' dancing school in New York in 1913. One of the most interesting aspects of Irene Castle's career was her involvement with 'Lucile', reputedly the originator of the fashion parade, itself a product of her long association with West End theatre. Between them Irene Castle and Lady Duff Gordon helped to create a tradition of costuming that would move fluidly from the stage into an affluent society which demanded that its members could "talk the talk and walk the walk." Castle's institutionalising of dance assured them that they could indeed learn to do just that. Here indeed was a celebrity whose dresses and hairstyles were emulated by women widely and whose movements between the United States and Europe were avidly reported.

The movement of the Castles between America and Europe was of course not unique. As we know, from the middle of the 19th century many performers travelled extensively between the United Kingdom, the Americas, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand as well as to Hong Kong, Calcutta and Manila. Most of them could hardly be described as stellar and indeed there were some who travelled in search of an identity which had eluded them at home, or who sought to recoup the fortunes they had lost elsewhere, or were reliant on reputations initially achieved in America or Britain to sustain their long and onerous tours. We should remind ourselves that until the post-World War 2 period, travel was inevitably bound to the sea. Even if the journey between Britain and the eastern seaboard of America could be accomplished in a week, it took a minimum of eight weeks to travel between London and Sydney and such a journey could last up to three months. The point of this reminder is to lead into Jonathan Bollen's article about variety in Australia after World War 2. In his discussion he points to two key factors which shaped the nature and scope of popular entertainments, the advent of air travel and the increasing presence of television from the 1960s onward. The former allowed celebrities and their entourages to travel for a matter of hours to their destinations as well as encouraging potential audiences to travel to exotic places they had only glimpsed through the prisms of imported variety shows and visiting stars. The latter would bring exotic stars into suburban living rooms, turning consumers into 'armchair tourists.'

Bollen discusses two complementary trajectories that affected the nature of post-war variety, at least in Australia, the move towards establishing a national theatrical culture and the recognition of the nexus between trade and the export and import of shows capable of creating a better understanding between cultures. As he says, "national governments were adopting cultural policies to foster national distinction on the one hand and encouraging the export of troupes as cultural ambassadors on the other." Thus impresarios like Tibor Rudas exported Australian dancers to Manila and in a show like *Oriental Cavalcade* brought nightclub entertainers from Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore and Manila. To promote the shows the relatively new medium of television was harnessed to give a taste of what viewers could enjoy on stage. Promoters however were well aware of television's potential threat as its keen absorption of variety formats would show. They thus struggled to emphasise and distinguish

the experience of television's "daily habit form of entertainment" from "the special night out" that live performance could offer. From television's perspective the appearance of dance companies from Israel, India, Russia and Poland, as well as performers who demonstrated the efficacy of the axiom 'East meets West' provided both ready-made entertainment and newsworthiness especially in the context of Cold War paranoia. Politically, these folkloric displays also informed the developing concept of multiculturalism, a pressing concern in post-war Australia with its influx of European immigrants. Bollen suggests that the producers of commercial entertainment had indeed anticipated and helped contribute to this development. It is however the slippage between news and entertainment and the integration of the variety format into television's programming that would prove enduring. This forms the basis of Sara Magee's investigation of the influential program *Entertainment Tonight*.

Over the last thirty years the program has eroded the distinction between investigative journalism and the provision of entertainment, while at the same time it embodies the most sophisticated attempt to glorify celebrity while insuring that celebrity itself could be made comprehensible and accessible to all. Though other television programs predated the appearance of *ET* in 1981, and of course it might be argued that *ET* was merely television's equivalent to tabloid magazine, its effect on news coverage was profound. As Magee points out "*ET...really helped start the broadcast news business thinking about where and when entertainment news could be used to their advantage.*" In other words, the 'soft news' about celebrities might well assist in sustaining the 'hard news,' held by many journalists to be the proper role of news broadcasts. For the television executives, however, it was all a question of retaining an audience whose motivation might well be defined as ongoing curiosity. From this viewpoint, the program tapped into a quality which from the end of the 19th century equally animated readers of journals, spectators at ethnographic and fashion displays and collectors of *cartes de visite* and postcards of celebrities which enabled them to 'possess' the objects of their curiosity for all time. Today *ET* is available online where we can whet our curiosity about Dionne Warwick's bankruptcy, Gwyneth Paltrow's miscarriage or Justin Bieber's European tour.

Janys Hayes's article about Le Quy Duong and the Vietnamese festivals with which he has been identified since 2005, brings together a number of intersecting narratives referred to elsewhere in the issue. They include the tensions between traditional forms of performance and new techniques, and the call to have entertainment respond to the demands of international co-operation with its attendant aims to stimulate trade and tourism. Although Duong can be regarded as a Vietnamese celebrity, his real significance lies in the celebration of Vietnam's identity. Born in 1968 during the darkest days of the Vietnam War, Le Quy Duong travelled to Australia in 1994 where he remained until 2001. He absorbed many of the new technical developments in Western theatre practices and he subsequently went on to study cinematography in Los Angeles in 2003-4 before returning permanently to Vietnam in 2005. The event which probably determined his future career was the discussion involving Vietnamese directors, politicians from the Ministry of Culture and members of Duong's Australian

Vietnamese Cultural Exchange Program in Ho Chi Minh City in 1999. The discussions focussed on the erosion of traditional Vietnamese theatrical forms and the loss of audiences especially of young people more interested in new forms of entertainment and television in particular. Duong took up the challenge and in 2006, mounted his *Myth of the Living* which mixed “traditional Vietnamese and western dance techniques, traditional drumming with large-scale A/V projection, skin-tight costumes and body paint.” It resulted in some controversy but his work was quickly noted as a useful vehicle to attract foreign visitors while at the same time to promote the idea of a new unified Vietnam both within the country and to the outside world. Hayes uses two examples of Duong’s work at the Hue and Rice Festivals to show “the intermeshing of traditional and contemporary theatrical forms as an expression of the harmony of difference.” It has attracted wide national and international notice and this has helped him move deftly between the shoals of official Vietnamese government policy and his own cultural traditions and inclinations.

The “harmony of difference” is an evocative phrase which in fact encapsulates many of the eddies of change which swirl throughout the period covered by this issue. It also might be an appropriate metaphor for the form of variety itself that consciously blends and juxtaposes discrete performative elements which, in turn, creates an energy that has made it a dominating manifestation of popular entertainment.

¹ Oliver Double, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).