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# The Diva Re-Vamped: Destabilising notions of the diva in the cabaret of Paul Capsis and Meow Meow

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*Two different forms of the diva persona are presented in the work of Australian cabaret artists Paul Capsis and Meow Meow. Drawing on modes of parodic humour and the cabaret tradition of the vamp, these artists deconstruct notions of female stardom, glamour and the idealised diva. Discussion in this article focuses on Capsis' cabarets Boulevard Delirium (performed from 2001-2005) and Paul Capsis (2006), and Meow Meow's cabaret performances from 2007 to the present. Capsis disrupts fixed notions of the diva by exploring multiple viewpoints of famous divas. In contrast, Meow Meow achieves this disruption while drawing attention to the audience's involvement in the creation of the diva persona. Jo Loth is Lecturer in Drama in the Faculty of Arts and Business at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia.*

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Keywords: cabaret, diva, Meow Meow, parody, Paul Capsis, vamp

## *Preface*

**D**iva 1: the diva enters the space to thunderous applause. She totters drunkenly around the stage, wonders in which city she could be. She notes that the décor of the theatre is “very New York” then mutters about the difficulty of her life. The audience indulges her in her confusion. She begins to sing. She is singing as Judy Garland. The audience adores her. The diva is lost in her reverie.

**D**iva 2: The diva enters the space to thunderous applause. She revels in their applause, bows, then holds out her arms to welcome the adoration. She pauses. Her audience are clapping enthusiastically but something is wrong, their adoration is not enough. The diva is disgusted and exits. She returns with dozens

of long stemmed red roses, hands them out to the audience and exits again. When she next enters the stage, the audience are prepared and shower her with the roses. She graciously accepts their applause and adoration. For a brief moment the diva is satisfied and commences her first song.

### ***Introduction***

These two forms of the diva are performed by Australian cabaret artists Paul Capsis (*Paul Capsis*, 2006) and Meow Meow (*Feline Intimate*, 2010). Drawing on the tradition of the cabaret vamp and modes of parodic humour, these performers deconstruct notions of female stardom, glamour and the idealised performer. Both Capsis and Meow Meow employ performance techniques of self-referentiality, contradiction and exaggeration associated with the vamps of European cabaret from the 1880s to the 1930s. They draw attention to the way female stars construct and maintain their diva persona, and showcase the contradictions inherent in this persona. This article will explore the ways that Paul Capsis and Meow Meow have drawn from historical performance forms to deconstruct the contemporary diva persona and destabilise notions of idealised female performers. Capsis' performances have explored well-known divas such as Billie Holiday, Judy Garland and Marlene Dietrich and presented alternating viewpoints on the personas of these female artists. These alternating viewpoints create a constantly shifting performance-audience relationship, destabilising fixed notions of the diva. Meow Meow has deconstructed notions of the diva by drawing attention to the creation of a diva's image and by exaggerating and unpacking stereotypical concepts of the diva. Both of these artists have performed in a range of performance genres. For the purposes of this article, discussion will be focussed on Capsis' cabaret shows *Boulevard Delirium* (performed from 2001 to 2005) and *Paul Capsis* (2006), and Meow Meow's cabaret performances from 2007 to the present.

Actor and singer Paul Capsis has won two Helpmann Awards for his work in theatre and cabaret and gained an Australian Film Institute nomination for his role in the 1998 Australian film *Head On*.<sup>1</sup> Born in Sydney in 1964 of Maltese-Greek heritage, Capsis began his career working in community youth theatre.<sup>2</sup> He considers his five years in community theatre as his "training" and originally focussed on becoming a comic actor, "but a dearth of interesting and challenging roles turned him towards singing."<sup>3</sup> His high vocal range soon earned him work as a drag queen and he later found his niche in cabaret.<sup>4</sup> Capsis' 1997 solo show *Burning Sequins* attracted the attention of theatre director Barrie Kosky and the performer and director went on to collaborate on *The Burlesque Tour* (1998), *Boulevard Delirium* (2001-2005) and *The Lost Echo* (Sydney Theatre Company, 2006).<sup>5</sup> Most recently, Capsis has toured his one-man theatre show *Angela's Kitchen*, based on the life story of his maternal Grandmother.<sup>6</sup>

Meow Meow is the cabaret persona of Australian performer Melissa Madden Gray. She has worked as a performance artist, "deconstructionist cabaret performer," opera singer, actor, comedian and dancer.<sup>7</sup> As a teenager, Gray trained as a ballet dancer then studied Law, Fine Art, Post-structuralist and

Feminist theory at The University of Melbourne. During her studies, she performed in law revues and plays directed by Michael Kantor. She then went on to complete an Honours thesis in Berlin.<sup>8</sup> Gray tours internationally as Meow Meow and has created original works for numerous International Arts Festivals. Her extensive range of performance experience has included: performing in avant-garde opera by Liza Lim in Japan and Europe; appearing on the Seven Network's sketch show *Big Bite*; performing classical works by Schubert and Schumann; and touring with punk outfit Amanda Palmer and The Dresden Dolls.<sup>9</sup>

Capsis' performances have questioned notions of the diva as an iconic and 'perfect' being by presenting three different perspectives of the diva. In performances Capsis has 'shape-shifted' between performative modes and gender identities. In Capsis' performances the diva has been presented as an isolated and enigmatic figure. In contrast, Meow Meow deconstructs the figure of the diva as a creation that is reliant on the audience. She draws attention to the audience's role in the creation of the diva persona and presents the audience as integral to the diva's existence. Meow Meow presents a diva at the point of collapse and highlights the energy, determination and, at times, desperation required to maintain this persona.

### *The Diva*

Pope and Leonardi describe the diva as a combination of "two conflicting" representations: "the diva as an icon of powerful womanhood" and "a queer reading of the diva as an icon of performativity."<sup>10</sup> They state that by combining representations of "power" and "performativity," "the diva makes visible the seams and fissures of a culture's gender and sexual ideology."<sup>11</sup> Thus the diva persona purports to present a powerful image of femininity but embodies the inherent contradiction that this image has been performed and consciously constructed. Generally diva performers conceal this contradiction, as can be demonstrated through the example of contemporary diva Beyoncé Knowles. Beyoncé presents herself as an empowered, independent women, especially in such songs as "Who Rule the World (Girls)," "I'm a Survivor" and "Diva" (featuring the lyrics "Diva is a female version of a hustla"). Her lyrics proclaim female power. She performs with strong, confident dance moves and gazes defiantly at the camera. In live and video performances, Beyoncé's glamorous costume, hair and make-up present an image of idealised feminine beauty. Pop culture commentator, Madison Moore notes that "Beyoncé has obtained an almost royalty-like, untouchable status among her cult of fans"<sup>12</sup> and images from her current *Mrs Carter* tour "feed into the myth of Her Eminence Beyoncé Giselle Knowles Who We Should All Praise and Worship."<sup>13</sup> In these ways, Beyoncé's performances and image present an empowered and idealised glamorous persona, in which a seamless facade hides the work and construction required to maintain it.

In contrast, Paul Capsis and Meow Meow deconstruct the idealised perfection and glamour of the diva. Capsis and Meow Meow draw attention to

the 'work' and 'craft' undertaken in the creation of femininity. Dorothy Smith describes 'femininity' as a discourse through which women relate to themselves as an object, "not as sex object so much as object of work, even of a craft."<sup>14</sup> Capsis and Meow Meow show the diva as an "object of work" to varying degrees. As a male performer impersonating female performers, Capsis introduces each singer by adopting a caricatured presentation of their performance persona, employing a change of physicality and the addition (or rearrangement) of a single costume item. These introductions highlight the construction of each diva's performative image. Meow Meow's performances focus on the 'craft' and 'work' involved in creating a glamorous image. After involving the audience in the creation of the image, she then adds awkward, ungainly and 'ugly' moments to destroy this image, revealing the artifice involved in the creation of a beautiful and glamorous stage image. These self-referential and at times contradictory performative modes have strong connections to the persona of the vamp.

### ***The history of the cabaret vamp***

Cabaret has a history of exploring the darker side of life through light-hearted entertainment. Since its origination in the late-nineteenth century, cabaret has brought together 'high' and 'low' art forms, intellectualism and hedonism in a self-consciously performative art form that plays with forms of popular song.<sup>15</sup> Audience involvement is central to a cabaret performance, for, as Harrington says, "cabaret is *participational*. Audience energy affects cabaret far more than it does any other art form ... in cabaret, audience rapport is the bottom line."<sup>16</sup> The early cabarets of Paris in the 1890s were run by *conférenciers* (or performing comperes) such as Rudolphe Salis and Aristide Bruant who delighted in attacking middle-class attitudes and insulting their audience through their songs and jokes.<sup>17</sup> In Weimar Germany this tradition of provocation was continued in the cabaret performances of Walter Mehring and Kurt Tucholsky. Salis, Bruant, Mehring and Tucholsky delivered their polemic messages through witty wordplay and popular song forms.<sup>18</sup> The women of cabaret history explored darker sides of human nature and experience through the persona of the vamp. These performers utilised the witty asides, audience interaction and high theatricality popularised by the male *conférenciers*.

The vamp persona originated in France in the 1880s with Yvette Guilbert.<sup>19</sup> Guilbert employed a hoarse, mournful voice to present a diverse range of songs including sentimental love songs and songs about the harsh life of prostitutes.<sup>20</sup> Her performance was also characterised by contradictions; as Appignanesi states, she was both "the weary, ageing, cynical coquette, and the pure English governess longing for spiritual love."<sup>21</sup> Donson and Griep describe Guilbert as "at once tragic and comic, vulgar and refined," with performances that ranged from "the sweetest most delicious melody to strident hoarse cries of passion and grief or the gutter voice of the Parisian *canaille*."<sup>22</sup> Guilbert was one of the first performers to present what Ruttkowski has termed a "prostitute song" that focuses on "the gradual *decline* in a woman's life."<sup>23</sup> According to Ruttkowski, the "prostitute song" presents "an ironic exaggeration of the prostitute," for the vamp "does not take herself quite seriously."<sup>24</sup> This self-

consciousness, revealed in the “prostitute song,” is an important facet of the vamp. In order to perform these songs, the performer needs to ‘take distance’ from herself, and self-consciously focus on her own self-representation.<sup>25</sup> Guilbert demonstrated this mode of ‘taking distance’ in her performances as: “a genial cynicism ... [and] a curious intermingling of pathos and humor, so when she weeps, it is with laughter on her lips, and when she smiles, she smiles through a mist of tears.”<sup>26</sup> In these ways, Guilbert’s vamp was highly self-referential, even post-modern, in her performance style.

This performative mode was emulated by Marya Delvard who “proclaimed herself to be Guilbert’s stylistic heir.”<sup>27</sup> Performing in German cabarets at the turn of the twentieth century, Delvard ironically presented female pain in performances that featured “saturated displays of angst and world-weariness” in which she would often make abrupt leaps from “languid monotony” to wild outcries of “greedy passion.”<sup>28</sup> Credited with being the “first stage vamp of the century,” many of her songs followed the progression from a “first seduction” to a “path of promiscuity, or presumable prostitution.”<sup>29</sup> In the developing tradition of the vamp, Delvard’s work ironically celebrated female demise. Guilbert and Delvard presented tragic tales of women in a highly performative, exaggerated and playfully self-conscious style featuring “witty word plays, innuendos and asides... [and] the exaggerated use of stylistic elements.”<sup>30</sup>

The tradition of the prostitute song paved the way for Marlene Dietrich, arguably the most famous vamp of all time. Dietrich began performing in cabaret-revues in 1920s Berlin,<sup>31</sup> and the Weimar influence on her performance style is clearly shown in her portrayal of cabaret artist Lola-Lola in the 1929 film *The Blue Angel*. During the film, Lola Lola taunts her lover and “renders him progressively more jealous with her insolent sexuality veiling a cool impassivity.”<sup>32</sup> Lola-Lola is cruel and seductive, highly promiscuous and impassive. She presents herself as jaded and cynical and speaks her lines with a strong sense of irony. Dietrich’s performance as Lola-Lola expresses the darkness of the vamp persona, but in Dietrich’s version the vamp is a heartless and cruel destroyer and her male lovers the victims. Arguably this could be a result of the character being the construction of a male writer-director (while previous cabaret vamps had created their own performance personas). Nevertheless, *The Blue Angel* captures the cabaret vamp’s self-conscious and ironic presentation of conflicting character traits.

The vamp presents herself as a series of contradictions, combining elements of light and dark: she is alluring, yet harsh, sweet but sexual, the seductive yet dangerous femme fatale, fragile and steely, sentimental and cynical. The vamp pleases with her sensuality, and teases by presenting the darker side of life, or by sexually provoking her audience. These contradictions create a constantly changing relationship between audience and performer. When the vamp shares her softer side or vulnerability the audience is drawn into an empathetic connection. This connection is broken when the audience is distanced by self-conscious performativity, exaggerated parody, contradictory

character traits or other surprises. This approach creates Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (making strange), which does not allow an audience to relax into a fully empathetic relationship with the characters presented within a performance.<sup>33</sup> Instead, a constant flux between intimacy and estrangement creates a dynamic in which the audience is encouraged to critically engage with the images presented.

### ***The contemporary vamp: a parody of the diva***

Capsis and Meow Meow exploit the vamp's shifting relationship with the audience in their parodic portrayal of the diva. Hutcheon contends that "parody is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity ... [and] is a form of inter-art discourse."<sup>34</sup> For Hutcheon, modern parody has a "range of intent—from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing."<sup>35</sup> It does not necessarily denigrate the original text and "is an integrated structural modelling process of revising, replaying, inverting, and 'trans-contextualizing' previous works of art."<sup>36</sup> The two cabaret artists under investigation in this article exploit these various intents of parody, shifting between different parodic tones throughout their performances. At times Capsis makes fun of the aging divas he impersonates, at other times he invites the audience to care for them. Meow Meow uses more exaggerated forms of parody and represents recognisable diva-characteristics to evoke both laughter and surprise in her audience. It can be argued that the success of parody relies on the way the text is received by its audience as "an act of communication between encoder and decoder."<sup>37</sup> In this way parody "becomes an ultimate act of co-opting ... involving an increase in the work and participation of the decoder, forced to draw extensively on his or her artistic memory."<sup>38</sup> When an audience is 'co-opted' in this way they feel included in a performance and are conscious of their own part in making the joke work. Capsis clearly shows his familiarity with the divas he represents, communicating intimate knowledge of their stage mannerisms and vocal style. Meow Meow takes popular clichés of the egotistical diva to the extreme. Both of these performers successfully 'co-opt' the audience into sharing the joke about divas. They draw on their audience's familiarity with these tropes in order to exaggerate and disrupt them.

### ***Paul Capsis: a shape-shifting diva***

In his performances of famous divas Capsis alternated between viewpoints of caricature, empathy and admiration. Described as "a high-camp singing impersonator"<sup>39</sup> and a "wicked mimic,"<sup>40</sup> Capsis has "spent a good chunk of his career channeling divas,"<sup>41</sup> including Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, Billie Holiday and Janis Joplin. Capsis chose not to don a dress in these performances and instead morphed between performers with minimal costume changes and recreated each singer's vocal style in parodic tributes. Capsis developed a relationship with his audience as 'co-conspirators,' relying on the audiences' knowledge of these performers' work. As described at the beginning of this article, when playing Judy Garland, Capsis began by stumbling around the stage, muttering almost incoherently in a crude parody of her drunken and lost



*Figure 1. Paul Capsis in Boulevard Delirium, 2005. Photo Jeff Busby, courtesy Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne.*

behaviour. However, when he sang as Judy Garland the tone of the performance changed. He stood still, wide-eyed, looking out to the audience singing “The Man That Got Away” in an emotionally connected performance that invited audience empathy for Judy’s lovelorn state. As Marlene Dietrich, he pulled the skin back around his face, presenting a caricature of Marlene’s limited facial expression. He then sang “Happy Birthday To Me,” evoking the loneliness and pain in Dietrich’s life. He used a similar format when channelling each of the famous singers. As Janis Joplin, he strutted around the stage yelling at the audience, mocking her exaggerated performance style; as Billie Holiday he parodied her protruding lips and mournful expression. After presenting these caricatured parodies of each artist, he launched into an emotionally charged song. As Janis Joplin he devoted himself to a passionate, gut-wrenching version of “Don’t Turn Your back on Love.” When singing “Don’t Explain” as Billie Holiday he expressed her mournful, dreamlike, uncertain state and created a vulnerable moment in the middle of the song that led reviewer Helen Thomson to observe:

When the shaky Billie Holliday zones out in the middle of a song, looking at her helpless hands in puzzlement, we see the band and its music bring her back to complete the number with heartbreaking beauty.<sup>42</sup>

Capsis’ exacting impressions of each singer’s vocal style displayed a virtuosic talent. However, by completely devoting himself to the emotion of each song he went further than clever impersonations. Each time he presented a

caricatured introduction to each diva, his audience laughed in recognition, relishing the chance to make fun of these famous icons. Then when he began to sing, a hushed tone spread across the audience as they were drawn into an emotional and empathetic connection with the artist he was impersonating. Many reviewers have commented on Capsis' ability to explore these famous singers' vulnerability. Tina On observed that his "honeyed voice was tempered with a grit that spoke volumes about the vulnerability of these faded stars."<sup>43</sup> Herbert noted that Capsis is able to accurately mimic other singers' voices, but that "it is more the spirit of these damaged women that he captures."<sup>44</sup>

Capsis began his performances with caricature and then moved into empathy, drawing attention to each singer's emotional fragility. This shifting relationship with his audience explored differing perspectives on these women's lives. He presented caricatures of femininity by exaggerating the female stars' physical mannerisms and personal foibles. By then moving to an emotional connection within each song, he invited the audience to empathise with the pain and vulnerability experienced by the famous singers. In this way, Capsis moved between different modes of parody. At times he mocked, even ridiculed, the foibles of the divas. At other times he presented honorific parodies of these singers, celebrating their talent and showing empathy for their personal challenges.

An additional aspect to these performances was the character of 'Paul Capsis.' Throughout, Capsis shared his own experience of being influenced by these famous divas and described his impersonations as a process of 'channelling' these women's spirits. He spoke of his admiration for them and presented them as icons to be admired from a distance. This perspective provided an additional point of view to the other modes of 'caricature' and 'empathetic connection.'

As a male performer imitating iconic female singers without any overtly female costuming, Capsis drew attention to the artifice involved in becoming each diva. Rather than attempting to replicate their exact appearances he chose to mimic their on-stage persona and vocal style. This choice enabled Capsis to quickly 'shape-shift' between their different characters. Each time he changed identity he drew focus onto a specific part of his body, at times using hair or a costume item to enhance this effect. For Billie Holiday he pulled his hair back, added a flower to his hair, and assumed a contained physicality drawing attention to his eyes and hands. When playing Janis Joplin he hunched over and let his hair free, allowing his striding dance movements to draw attention and focus to his long, curly hair. In his caricatures of each singer's physicality and personal foibles, Capsis utilised elements of drag performance. However, in contrast to typical drag, Capsis did not use costume and make-up to give the illusion of a female; he instead used his physicality to express feminine attributes. This created an enigmatic combination of both masculine and feminine attributes that drew comment from many reviewers. Thomas noted that Capsis's face "is both feminine, with its bright eyes and large mouth, and masculine in its sometimes savage mobility," and that *Boulevard Delirium*

“reveals how brilliant illusion is created, not just with the stage paraphernalia of music, lights and voice, but out of the very body of the performer.”<sup>45</sup> Croggan stated that he “doesn't merely impersonate women; but neither does he wholly become them. He enacts a series of transformations that are all, ultimately, aspects of himself.”<sup>46</sup> Croggan also described the unsettling result of Capsis' transformations:

It's unsettling, for example, how the bewitchment of this performer can make you believe (as when he is being Judy Garland) that you are watching a beautiful woman ... But this illusion will be harshly dispelled almost at once, making you totally aware of his masculinity. And in the next moment he is neither, an androgynous trickster and parodist giving us a grotesquely exploding Marlene Dietrich.<sup>47</sup>

These “unsettling” shifts between different modes of parody, and different performances of gender created subversive effects that dispelled fixed notions of gender and identity. Judith Butler's writing discusses ways that perceptions of gender can “delimit” our perceptions of what it is to be human.<sup>48</sup> She states that performance modes such as “parody and drag” are “subversive” in that they “reveal ontological inner depths and gender cores as regulatory fictions.”<sup>49</sup> Butler argues that these modes “establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be.”<sup>50</sup> It could be argued that Capsis' enigmatic combination of masculine and feminine elements goes even further than standard drag performance to destabilise fixed gender identity and notions of fixed truths.



*Figure 2. Paul Capsis in Boulevard Delirium, 2005. Photo Jeff Busby, courtesy Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne.*

In performance, Capsis shifted between the male performer, a version of a drag queen exaggerating and making fun of female performers, and a male actor presenting an empathetic portrayal of female celebrities and inviting the audience to emotionally connect with these characters. His unsettling combination of masculine and feminine elements subverted gender norms and challenged the audience to question fixed notions of the feminine diva. Throughout the performances, Capsis re-worked and resignified notions of the diva. He portrayed in turn the diva as: a character to be made fun of; a tragic figure to be cared for; and an icon to be admired. Capsis presented the diva persona in a constant state of flux. These different perspectives on the diva persona invited his audience to consider their own point of view of these famous female singers.

### ***Meow Meow: the contradictory and hysterical diva***

Meow Meow's highly theatricalised antics can be read as a 'drag show' of the diva. She has constructed her persona as a pastiche of the contradictory aspects of the 'vamp-diva,' both elegant and ungainly, sweet and abusive, fragile and dominating. Her performances are a compilation of unexpected moments as she moves between contrasting vocal styles and moods. She constantly throws her audience off guard, never allowing them to become too attached or emotionally connected. In *Vamp* (2008) she presented a range of "alluring seductresses"<sup>51</sup> including Medea, Salome, the Biblical Judith, Marlene Dietrich, Sarah Bernhardt, Louise Brooks, Mata Hari, Lola Montez and Madonna. This show honoured the persona of the vamp and according to one reviewer it: "celebrates the cult of the man-eating femme fatale and revels in her tragedy."<sup>52</sup> The performance explored two sides of the vamp, "the dangerous seductress who is both avenging angel and tragic victim."<sup>53</sup>

Meow Meow's trademark is contradictory and unpredictable performances in which she offers up a plethora of possibilities rather than making any clear statements. She relates that her favourite songs are *Surabaya Johnny* and *Ne Me Quitte Pas*, because "both are about high romanticism and complete desperation."<sup>54</sup> Writing in *The Age*, Power described her stage persona as a "riddle wrapped in an enigma... [that is] ... equal parts beguiling, hilarious and bemusing."<sup>55</sup> In *Beyond Glamour* she sang Kurt Weil's "Surabaya Johnny" clutching a bottle of wine as she mourned her lost love. She began the song in a high pitched and whimsical recitative style evoking images of a little girl, over-using the dramatic pause and adding in touches of ironic laughter. "You cheated me blind" she coo-ed, paused, and added "Johnny," added a long pause and ironic giggle, then continued "From the minute we met ...," followed by another extended pause. This opening drew the audience towards her in empathy and expectation. As the song progressed she moved into the sweet, hoarse style of a French chanteuse and gradually built the song to become hysterically crazed and abusive. During an overly extended dramatic pause, the lighting operator staged a blackout, prompting Meow Meow to scream "It's not the end of the song." She then continued for another two verses and choruses, well past the expected length of a cabaret song. This performance initially presented the sympathetic

figure of a deserted woman, inviting empathetic connection. Later, audience members laughed at the exaggerated hysteria of the performer, becoming distanced as they observed a hysterical diva indulgently revelling in her own pain.

In *Feline Intimate* (2009) Meow Meow used similar contradictory singing styles to present Amanda Palmer's song "Missed Me." She began in a sweet and childlike mood, coo-ing "If you missed me, mister, then you've gotta kiss me." The song went on to tell the 'mister' the long list of things he needs to do, ending with the screamed lyrics: "If you f\*\*\* me mister, it must mean you love me, and if you love me mister, you would never leeeevvvve." Meow Meow then paused for dramatic effect, smirked at the audience and invited laughter before continuing in her coquettish voice "It's as simple as can be." This performance style created humour by contrasting the presentation of a sweet coquette with a dominating monster. Initially seduced by a sweet performance, the audience were later distanced by an extreme parody of the dominating diva. In both of these songs a woman is shown desperately clinging to love and adoration. In "Surabaya Johnny" the character demands that the audience continue to indulge her in experiencing her pain. In "Missed Me" the audience see the diva controlling her man through sudden personality changes. These contradictory sides of the diva create humour through the element of surprise. They also contradict the notion of the powerful 'diva.' Instead we see a woman desperately using every device she can to maintain her control. Meow Meow presents a 'warts and all' version of a woman craving love and adoration.



Figure 3. Meow Meow in *Little Matchgirl*, 2011. Photo Jeff Busby, courtesy of Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne.

Meow Meow literally strips back the façade of the diva by having the audience dress and undress her. In *Beyond Glamour* (2007) and *Feline Intimate* (2009) she performed a number of costume changes, calling on various audience members to take off her clothes and help her to assemble her next costume.<sup>56</sup> In *Beyond Glamour* she entered unexpectedly from above the lighting rig, threw her suitcase down, and asked audience members to catch her handbag. She then climbed down the handrails, unpacked her costumes and enlisted the help of the audience to dress her for the performance. In *Feline Intimate* she began the show in a floor length evening gown and then had audience members undress her to reveal a sparkly cocktail dress. During this costume change she took out the plastic breast enhancer pads that made her décolletage look impressive in the evening gown but did not suit the cocktail dress. The moments of removing these inserts were a striking instance of intimacy and awkwardness as she revealed the construction behind her impressive cleavage.

Instead of hiding the construction of her glamorous image, Meow Meow takes pains to broadcast this construction. In contrast to contemporary diva Beyoncé, Meow Meow shows the audience how her image is created and enlists the help of the audience to help. In Beyoncé's publicity and performances, the image is complete, finished and seamless. In Meow Meow's performances the audience sees the awkward moments involved in the creation of the image. They see how the breasts are lifted, and how each outfit is put together. In a performance at the Sydney Opera House, Meow Meow even had her costume repossessed, and her band stripped down to their underwear:

Lured to the Opera House with promises of lavish production budgets and sumptuous hospitality, the cabaret artist *Meow Meow* is confronted with the hard truths of the global financial crisis: her dress is repossessed after the opening number. Then her band members are stripped to their underwear to save on dry-cleaning bills.<sup>57</sup>

In *Little Matchgirl* (2011) a (staged) explosion after the opening song caused the lights to go out and musicians to flee the stage. Meow Meow initially attempted to keep the show going by lighting a number of matches. When this was not effective, she enlisted audience members to light her with their mobile phones. Later, stage crew were requested to provide torches and Meow Meow rode a bicycle to power the footlights. For the first part of the performance, Meow Meow was attired in a glamorous floor length sequined gown. To ride this bike, she hitched up her gown in an awkward and ungainly action. This clumsy act contradicted the elegant and glamorous image initially presented and instead showed the diva working with desperation to keep the performance going. In the final moments of the performance, Meow Meow was even lifted high above the stage within an elaborate chandelier. This series of events presented the show as being on the verge of collapse but maintained by its crazed and desperate diva.

Meow Meow literally throws herself into her audience during performances, relying on them to lift her up, move around the stage, hold her lights, hold her music, share their drinks with her, become microphone stands,

hold lights, or throw roses at her. Pickard states that her “brilliance is the force of her wit and the way she plunges herself into the audience.”<sup>58</sup> She orders her audience to do her bidding and “holds the audience in the palm of her hand, calling the shots like a theatrical dominatrix. She orders men on stage and when she expects more applause she tells us so.”<sup>59</sup> These antics place Meow Meow in a very high status. She is ordering the audience to do what she wants and seems to be the one in control. However these actions also heighten awareness of the diva’s need for the audience to ‘hold up’ the star and to ensure the success and continuation of the performance. Each time the audience do not act as she considers appropriate, Meow Meow screams orders at them or disparages their behaviour with sarcastic asides. Her performances are always seemingly on the verge of failure and desperately require the audience to ensure the show’s success. Meow Meow’s crowd surfing in *Beyond Glamour* (2007) brought this aspect into high relief. In this show, audience members in standard theatre seating were commanded to stand up and carry her above their heads to the lighting desk. When this task was successfully completed, the audience responded with relieved applause. It was obvious that this diva could have fallen to the ground if any audience members had not held up their end of the bargain. Meow Meow presents the diva as being desperately in need of keeping the show going at any cost and in ways just discussed, presents herself as the star in desperate need of adoration.

It is interesting to note that Capsis’ and Meow Meow’s investigations of the diva persona are predominantly attended by female audiences from an older age bracket. According to information from major Australian performance venues and festivals, Australian cabaret audiences are generally female and over 55 years of age. Recent audience statistics from The Adelaide Cabaret Festival indicate that 75% of audiences are female, and 55 % are over 55 years in age, with 39% between the ages of 31 and 54 years and only 6% under the age of 30.<sup>60</sup> These statistics are echoed in demographics from other cabaret festivals throughout Australia.<sup>61</sup> Audiences at The Melbourne Malthouse (where Paul Capsis and Meow Meow have regularly performed) are also dominantly female, with women representing 70% of the audience.<sup>62</sup> In relation to Paul Capsis’ and Meow Meow’s performances, this audience demographic could indicate that an older female audience has a strong interest in re-interpretations of famous female performers and familiar performance tropes.

### ***Conclusion***

Paul Capsis and Meow Meow have made extensive use of parody to play on audience understandings of specific divas from history or the diva persona itself. Through various performance techniques, these artists repeatedly shift the performer-audience relationship between one of intimacy to one of distance. This process does not allow audiences to maintain an empathetic point of view towards the stage persona and encourages audiences to critically reflect on the diva persona.

Capsis utilised this shifting performer-audience relationship to take his audience on a journey between highly self-conscious performativity and an empathetic connection with the performer. He invited the audience to join him as he oscillated between worshipping, ridiculing and empathising with his divas. Capsis effectively ‘channelled’ each diva by his virtuosic replication of their vocal style and emotional commitment to expressing their pain. He repeatedly broke this illusion by returning to the character of himself (the male performer influenced by these famous divas). Before creating his illusion, he mocked each singer through caricatured comedy, drawing attention to the fact that his whole performance was a fabrication. His performances combined masculine and feminine elements to subvert fixed notions of gender and identity. In explaining the effect these women have had on his life and career, Capsis drew attention to the power of these divas to inspire and affect their fans. After highlighting their iconic status, he then ridiculed their foibles, and drew attention to the pain in their lives. This shape-shifting of positions and points of view deconstructed the notion of the diva as an idealised figure. Capsis invited consideration of these iconic female stars. Are they figures to be mocked, cared for, or admired? However, in exploring each of these perspectives, Capsis maintained the diva as a separate and enigmatic figure, a mystery to be pondered. Even as Capsis ‘became’ these women, he described this as a process of ‘channeling,’ of bringing something from the outside in and then letting it return to its source. This process firmly positioned the diva persona as a figure to be contemplated in isolation.

In contrast, Meow Meow makes it explicit that the audience are her accomplices in the creation of the diva persona. She involves them in her dressing and undressing, shows intimate and ungainly moments involved in the creation of femininity, and draws attention to the construction of the diva’s image. In demanding that the audience help her with the performance (whether by lifting her, making sure she is lit, dressing her or generally adoring her) Meow Meow makes it clear that the audience are integral to the success of the show. She is a highly effective diva in that she commands her audience to do her bidding. However, her power is shown to be reliant upon the continuation of the show. Meow Meow presents herself as a powerful force and at the same time shows this power to be the result of a performance, embodying Pope and Leonardi’s notion that “the diva makes visible the seams and fissures of a culture’s gender and sexual ideology.”<sup>63</sup> While engaging in these antics, Meow Meow uses the cabaret vamp technique of presenting contradictory personal characteristics in quick succession to constantly shift her relationship with the audience. This ensures that no concept presented onstage is taken for granted or accepted as a fixed truth.

Thus, while the shows discussed here undermine notions of the idealised diva, Meow Meow’s performances can be seen to more successfully destabilise these concepts. Capsis explores shifting perspectives of idealised women, but presents these women as heightened and enigmatic figures to be explored from a distance. This has the result of presenting the diva as a unique phenomenon, as a creation separate to her audience. Capsis’ performances invite the audience to

consider their point of view of these individual women. In contrast, Meow Meow explicitly casts her audience as accomplices in the creation of the diva. By involving her audience in the construction of this discourse and allowing them to witness its contradictions, near-misses and failures, Meow Meow's audience become actively involved in the creation of this persona. By showing the importance of the audience in maintaining the phenomenon of the diva, Meow Meow points to the instability and fragility of this persona. For without an audience, the diva cannot exist.

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<sup>1</sup> "Paulcopsis.com," accessed 17 September 2013, <http://www.paulcopsis.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Lacey, "Show and tell," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November, 2006, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Shirley Sheridan, "Box office," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 November, 2005, 136.

<sup>4</sup> Debra Bela, "Cabaret clears a space for the unusual," *The Courier Mail*, 14 October, 2006, 14.

Fiona Harari, "Everybody wants to touch me," *The Australian*, 12 January, 2008, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Sheridan, "Box office," 136, and "Paulcopsis.com."

<sup>6</sup> "Paulcopsis.com."

<sup>7</sup> Fiona Scott-Norman, "What's new pussycat," *The Australian*, 19 April, 2008, accessed 17 September, 2013, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/whats-new-pussycat/story-e6frg8n6-1111116069028>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> "Official website for Meow Meow," accessed 17 September, 2013, <http://www.meowmeowrevolution.com/about.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Pope and Susan Leonardi, *The Diva's Mouth: body, voice, prima donna politics* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Madison Moore, *How to Be Beyonce* (Brooklyn: Thought & Expression Digital Books Division, 2013), 1993.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," in *Becoming Feminine: The Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Leslie Roman and Linda Christian-Smith (London, New York, Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1998), 48.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Friedman, "Cabaret as Drama (with apologies to Joseph Kerman)," in *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16:3 (2008): 320.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Harrington, *The cabaret artist's handbook* (New York: Back Stage Books, 2000), 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> Laurence Senelick, *Cabaret Performance Volume 1: Europe 1890 - 1920 Sketches, Songs, Monologues, Memoirs* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1989), 24, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Appignanesi, *The cabaret*, 2nd edition (New York: Universe Books, 2004), 133.

<sup>19</sup> Laurence Senelick, *Cabaret Performance*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Appignanesi, *The cabaret*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Theodore Donson and Marvel Griep, *Great Lithographs by Toulouse-Lautrec* (Toronto: General Publishing Company, 1982), xi.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfgang Ruttowski, "Cabaret Songs," *Popular Music and Society* 25:3/4 (Fall 2001): 57. Italics as in original.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>26</sup> A report on performances by Yvette Guilbert, quoted in Theodore Donson and Marvel Griep, *Great Lithographs*, xi.

<sup>27</sup> Jessica Payette, *Seismographic Screams: "Wrwartung"'s Reverberations Through Twentieth Century culture* (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2008), 73.

- <sup>28</sup> Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 71.
- <sup>29</sup> Christian Schonfeld, ed., *Practicing Modernity: Female Creativity in the Weimar Republic Buchbindereir* (Germany: Diehl & Co, 2005), 193.
- <sup>30</sup> Wolfgang Ruttkowski, "Cabaret Songs," 59.
- <sup>31</sup> Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 193.
- <sup>32</sup> Lisa Appignanesi, *The cabaret*, 126.
- <sup>33</sup> Frederic Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, his art, his times* (Toronto: Carol Publishing Group, 1992), 356.
- <sup>34</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The teachings of twentieth century art forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 2.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. (Note: Here Hutcheon is discussing the theories of Jonathon Culler.)
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> John Shand, "Quantum Leaps by Capsis," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February, 1997, 12.
- <sup>40</sup> Diana Simmonds, "Cool Paul sings up a storm," *The Sunday Telegraph*, 9 June, 2001, 110.
- <sup>41</sup> Fiona Harari, "Everybody wants to touch me."
- <sup>42</sup> Helen Thomson, "Boulevard Delirium," *The Melbourne Age*, 3 June, 2005.
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- <sup>44</sup> Kate Herbert, "Drink Pepsi, Bitch!" *The Herald Sun*, 26 September, 2005, 90.
- <sup>45</sup> Helen Thomson, "Boulevard Delirium."
- <sup>46</sup> Alison Croggon, "Theatre Notes – independent arts commentary by Alison Croggon," 5 June, 2005, accessed 19 July, 2013, <http://theatrenotes.blogspot.com.au/2005/06/boulevard-delirium.html>.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> Judith Butler and Sara Salih, *The Judith Butler Reader* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2008), 99.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.
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- <sup>53</sup> Jo Litson, "Meow Meow's moonlight strut," *The Sunday Telegraph*, 28 September, 2008.
- <sup>54</sup> Quoted in Alison Barclay, "Meow Meow has the looks that thrill," *The Herald Sun*, 13 November, 2009.
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- <sup>57</sup> Jason Blake, "Catwoman."
- <sup>58</sup> Nicholas Pickard, "Meow to the world: Crisis is born," *The Sun Herald*, 26 July, 2009, accessed 14 November, 2012, <http://www.tabletops.com.au/tabletops-articles/2009/7/26/meow-to-the-world-crisis-is-born>.
- <sup>59</sup> Jo Litson, "Meow Meow's moonlight strut."
- <sup>60</sup> "Adelaide Cabaret Festival Backgrounder," (Adelaide Festival Centre, 2013), 3.
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<sup>63</sup> Rebecca Pope and Susan Leonardi, *The Diva's Mouth*, 20.