

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

Editorial

Given the social and cultural foundations of popular entertainments it's not surprising to find instances of popular entertainments entering the lists of political conflict or to find the protagonists of political debate employing the devices and performative strategies of the entertainments to advance their causes. Popular entertainments provided the most direct access to cross-sections of potential supporters speaking a *lingua franca* that depended less on verbal persuasiveness than the visceral immediacy of display, physical dexterity and direct emotional manipulation.

Our journal has repeatedly signalled occasions when popular entertainments have given a voice to political protest, to regeneration after periods of political destabilisation, and the provision of palliative care during armed wartime conflict: after all, to borrow Carl von Clausewitz's celebrated dictum "war is the continuation of politics using other means." Thus we have documented the resurgence of circus in Buenos Aires in the post-dictatorship period, the investigation of the transformative power of Argentinian pop music, the position of South African theatre in the post-apartheid context and, most recently, the stage representations of the German West Africa genocide in Berlin at the turn of the twentieth century. This issue maintains the strong strand of political engagement, coloured this time by ethnic polarisation, by developments in the nineteenth century labour market and its relationship to the formal creation of a work/leisure-time binary.

It is perhaps appropriate and certainly timely to bring to our attention the career of the Mexican Elvis Presley impersonator Robert Lopez and his show *El Vez for Prez* which he most recently performed at the San Diego Taco Festival in 2016, at the height of the recent American presidential elections. It is appropriate that Lopez performed this role (which he had done for 28 years) just as Donald Trump lashed out, branding Mexicans as rapists and animals who threatened the American nation. Karen Martinson describes the ways in which *El Vez's* show reworked the lyrics of Elvis in order to explore social issues and brought together various musical traditions in a show that was raucous yet surprisingly playful and welcoming. Undoubtedly the show was an intervention into the discourses about

race and racism and the article here examines in particular the state of white fragility described by Robin DiAngelo: “white fragility is a state in which even a minimum of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” that include Trump’s determination to restore the privileged *status quo* of white supremacy. It is astonishing to record the geniality and good humour with which El Vez was able to negotiate a meaningful discussion about racial identity while at the same time to construct a highly inclusive social space for performers and spectators to share.

The Spanish connection surfaces again in Michael Schinasi’s discussion of the role which *zarzuela* played in the struggle to establish a national opera in Spain and to combat the competition of foreign music (particularly Italian) and foreign artists in the first half of the nineteenth century. *Zarzuela* is very much a Spanish construction that combines singing, dialogue and traditional dance forms in a style that might be compared to musical comedy or to melodrama, that protean form which in its music and drama gave a voice to the tensions and anxieties increasingly felt by those who had given up their largely rural lives for a world of relentless urbanisation from the eighteenth century on. The *zarzuela* shares with melodrama an identification with low art and this was highlighted in the struggle that pitched the high art of the Italian opera against the *zarzuela* and its expression of Spain’s national character. Nevertheless it became an established new lyric genre by 1856 as nationalist sentiment fuelled its viability and, indeed, significance. Schinasi shows how this emergence coincided with a dramatic push by musicians and lyricists to petition Queen Isabel II to support native artists who were enormously disadvantaged by the influx of foreigners. It was a case of course of industrial protectionism, but the growth of labour associations outside Spain had been noted and this spurred on the desire to organize the arts by creating an incipient labour syndicate to protect artists from exploitation and the velleities of government support or that of business speculators. It propelled the *zarzuela* and lyric theatre generally into an artistic world grappling with the tensions between art and commercialism.

In 2014 we published an article by Naomi Stubbs about pleasure gardens in the United States.¹ It joined other scholarly investigations about early pleasure gardens in Philadelphia and Niblo’s Garden in New York.² More recently Jonathan Conlin has edited a volume which documents aspects of pleasure garden development ‘from Vauxhall to Coney Island.’³ This activity reminds us that pleasure gardens and their journey towards the amusement parks of today is a story that (certainly in England) has a long history stretching back to the Restoration, and from the late eighteenth century onwards they became inextricably tied to the definition of leisure as an entitlement held by all social classes, including workers. As Peter Bailey elaborates: “the accelerated growth of big cities led to a radical restructuring of the temporal and spatial patterns of economic and social life. . . In the populous and extensive industrial city leisure was time clearly marked off from work, to be pursued elsewhere than in workplaces and its environs.”⁴ In other words, any discussion of pleasure gardens must now take into account modernity’s urbanisation and the rights of workers and their new patterns of employment. This is a far cry from the pioneering accounts of pleasure garden memorialists like Warwick Wroth or E. Beresford

Chancellor, written in the late nineteenth century or in the period after World War 1. This is by way of an introduction to Svetlana Ryabova's chronicle of Russian pleasure gardens in St. Petersburg and Moscow during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She suggests that the spread of pleasure gardens in Russia formed part of a global phenomenon. Russian entrepreneurs were very aware of other developments in Europe and visited England and France as a matter of course. This became crucial as more and more mechanical inventions were installed as drawcards for a changing and rapidly increasing spectatorship. Inevitably this hastened the transformation from pleasure garden to a mechanical fairground, as the traditional pursuits of strolling with families and companions while communing with nature were eroded by the displacement of the green environment by man-made artefacts and the structures to house them. Nevertheless, in the Russian context, theatrical presentations and musical concerts remained a prominent feature: the presence of Chaliapin, Houdini and Stanislavsky with the Moscow Art Theatre displays an unusual catholicity of taste, but they certainly were enticed to perform without any signs of status consciousness in an environment that transgressed such demarcation lines anyway. In his book, Peter Bailey discusses at length the growth and influence of 'rational recreation' in England; Ryabova points to an identical movement by Temperance societies to develop such habits particularly designed for the new urban proletariat, and to construct so-called 'people's houses'—institutions that were alcohol-free and promoted gatherings for educational pursuits. She also gives us a glimpse of the relative costs of admission to pleasure gardens and the relation of those to the costs of living, a highly significant factor if people were to make use of the new definitions and entitlements of leisure.

In 2013 Jonathan Bollen examined the globality of popular entertainments in Australia, aligning them with the opportunities to travel that emerged after World War 2 and the development of television after 1956.⁵ He surveyed the range of entertainments available in Australia between 1955 and 1964 as entrepreneurs were able to profit from the global movements of performers. Australian performers of course had toured extensively since the mid-nineteenth century while British and American stars had continually visited Australia during the same period. After World War 2, however, the speed of such exchanges, abetted by the increasing use of air travel, accelerated the demand for globally recognised entertainments. Yet there were organisations that found themselves caught up in the new entertainment demands but which preserved some of the established verities that harked back to World War 1. Sorlie's was just such a company and it forms the focus of Bollen's current contribution. George Sorlie was a singer and soft-shoe dancer who launched a career as an independent travelling tent theatre operator in 1917. He was so successful that by 1922 he had acquired the status of a theatrical institution, a position he retained until 1940. His wife took over the tent theatre after his death in 1948.⁶ Bollen's article, however, gives an account of Sorlie's musical revue during the company's sole visit to the New South Wales town of Broken Hill, a mining centre dominated by the Broken Hill Proprietary Company (BHP) in 1960. The Sorlie company was essentially a travelling tent show presenting a vestige of live variety which in the capital cities like Sydney or Melbourne was increasingly being taken over by television. Yet indefatigably it was a company that presented variety, revue and pantomime to regional

audiences and had done so in its post-war incarnation since 1949. In a marquée theatre seating about 600 it was now performing a revue entitled *Then and Now* in a town of 31,000 that was vibrant and responsive to new internationally recognised acts and to artists who had already appeared in metropolitan venues. Sorlie provided access to both. The structure of the revue is reflected in the title as it tried to juxtapose the old music-hall days with demonstrations of contemporary developments like the influence of rock 'n' roll with its appeal to a younger generation. The title may also suggest that the writing was on the wall. Bollen records that Sorlie's ceased touring after leaving Broken Hill and other tent shows touring Australia also began to shut down starting in 1961. It was after all the format of variety and revue, the staple Sorlie offerings, which were proving irresistible to the new television medium.

Wikipedia asserts that there are 217 films that feature the character of Dracula. The character as we know owes its literary origins to the 1897 novel by Bram Stoker. He wrote it hoping that his employer, the actor Henry Irving, would accept the role in a production of a version which Stoker would supply. Irving refused: by 1897 he was conscious of his position as the first actor to have ever been awarded a knighthood and in any case at this point in his career was drawn to saintly characters like Thomas à Becket rather than the demonic characters that might remind him of roles he had undertaken as a jobbing actor. Stoker had been a friend of Irving's and had served as his business manager at the Lyceum theatre in London for 27 years. Moreover he was Irish, as was his compatriot Hamilton Deane who knew the Stoker family and had served in Irving's company in 1899. It was Deane who would construct the first authorized version of the novel and present it for the first time in 1924. John Balderston, the American playwright, who would develop a successful career writing screenplays for horror films, adapted it for its New York run with Bela Lugosi in 1927: it is this version, performed by Frank Langella, that forms a substantial element of Tony Gunn's article about the involvement of the eccentric writer and artist Edward Gorey in the play's 1977 Broadway production.

Gorey was a fine book illustrator with a predilection for the Gothic. His involvement with *Dracula* was in the area of costume and scenic design for which he received two Tony Awards. The play allowed him to enter the theatrical world of high Victorian melodrama and he was able to realise the mysterious and sumptuous visual aesthetic of the Gothic to which he was drawn. New York critics iterated that Gorey's designs dominated the play's revival. Curiously in retrospect Gorey was less than impressed by the production. On the other hand, the compilation of 17 of his stories into *Gorey Stories* started its life as a production at the University of Kentucky and was remounted at an off-Broadway venue in 1977. This drew Gorey in more closely. The production was moved to Broadway on the strength of the *Dracula* collaboration and opened in 1978. Gorey again was asked to design the set and costumes. It was a critical disaster and Gunn implies that possibly the move from the relatively forgiving world of off-Broadway to the glare of Broadway simply showed up the weaknesses of the play's structure and the failure of the production to tell a convincing story. Perhaps Gorey preferred to hear his own words in the *Gorey Stories* rather than recognise his contributions to the words of others. Certainly this time a familiar plotline assisted by spectacle

was absent. The conventional wisdom might suggest that these were the *sine qua non* of a Broadway hit. Yet deep down *Dracula* taps into the dark world of the unconscious whereas *Gorey Stories* merely showed up Gorey's cleverness: this time, however, the ability to be designated as 'a master of pastiche' was simply not enough.

¹ Naomi Stubbs, "The American Path: from the Pleasure Garden to the Amusement Park," *Popular Entertainment Studies* 5, 2 (2014), 6-23.

² Stephen M. Vallillo and Maryann Chach eds. *Pleasure Gardens* (New York: Theatre Library Association, 1998).

³ Jonathan Conlin ed. *The Pleasure Garden from Vauxhall to Coney Island* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

⁴ Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Context of Control 1830-1885* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 4.

⁵ Jonathan Bollen, "Here from There" - travel, television and touring revues: internationalism as entertainment in the 1950s and 1960s," *Popular Entertainment Studies* 4:1 (2013): 64-81.

⁶ See Peter Spearritt, "George Brown Sorlie (1885-1948)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol.12 (1990).