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Editorial

In our first issue we raised some of the questions surrounding popular entertainments and their definition, particularly in the light of new technological developments which impinge not only upon performers but also upon the reception of their performances. In this issue we investigate aspects of the spectrum of popular entertainments, a format which we anticipate will offer a paradigm for future issues. We are delighted to include the investigations of established researchers as well as those of 'new scholars.' We have also added a new section – "Afterpieces" – intended to offer an opportunity to bring 'notes and queries' and review articles about new research or new performance practices to the attention of readers. We hope this will provoke a plethora of 1500 word excursions for inclusion in future issues as well.

There exist a number of commonalities which link the articles in this issue. One of them is the varying uses of music and song to manipulate audience reactions, to express individual identities or to give the underprivileged a voice in subverting political and economic hegemony. Another commonality is to be found in the ubiquity of danger and risk taking: the danger implicit in avoiding physical harm in slapstick comedy as well as the circus, the danger of personal exposure in karaoke performances, the danger signified by actual harm in the theatricalised arenas of professional wrestling and football. These threads are not fortuitous: they demonstrate the slippage between the authentic and the simulated, between the agency of the performer and that of the spectator, and the supremacy of the visceral over the rational, arguably the bedrock of all popular entertainments.

The first two articles address the circus and its employment of music and song. Kim Baston investigates how music influences the optical perception of circus spectacle and shapes its reception by spectators. Though she positions the discussion historically, from the miscellanies of popular songs and dances in the early 19th century through the development of the wind band to the use of smaller ensembles and recorded music in modern circuses, her major thrust lies in relating the music used to the nature of the acts performed. In this, rhythm plays a key role. Differing rhythms evoke differing responses and circuses utilise the rhythms to generate excitement as well as reassurance and to articulate a mastery and control on the part of the performers over hazardous obstacles or

potentially recalcitrant animals. She points out the significant role that music plays technically in reinforcing regular rhythmic patterns tailored to the rhythms of dance and to those of horsemanship. Finally she offers a coda that addresses the inclusion of Chinese and Japanese performers and the invention of a musical language whereby the performer “is ‘heard’ through the complicating haze of a musical language that signifies an East appropriated and assimilated by the West.” Certainly this suggests the circus’s acceptance of a “harmonic language” that would speak to audiences and shape their responses particularly as it embraced the skills of performers from differing cultures.

The circus, however, had the capacity also to engage with the feelings of audiences towards current issues and concerns. We know, for example, that circuses (as well as pantomimes) included patriotic pageants that mirrored public attitudes to the Anglo-Boer War at the end of the 19th century. There’s little to suggest radicalism in these displays, let alone the engagement in an active debate between performers and spectators on pressing issues, yet Micah Childress in his discussion about clowning and songsters in the 19th century American circus, suggests the possibility for a much more complex series of negotiations. “Songsters (typically thirty-page books with sentimental and comic songs, with a few jokes, mock speeches, and witticisms largely written and performed by clowns) are an important window into 19th century...popular culture.” These songsters form some of the extant primary evidence of a dynamic and socially engaged aspect of circus practice. The examples Childress brings to bear are not subversive, reflecting as they do the views of individual clowns, no doubt adjusted at times to the sensibilities of the communities where the circus set up its tent. Nevertheless, they do embrace a strong anti-authoritarian stance, targeting the police, lawyers, corrupt administrators and those who sought to be the arbiters of social and individual behaviour like the temperance advocates. That said, the range of examples also comment on race and ethnicity, gender relations and economics. They show no sympathy for female suffrage but do identify with the economically depressed workers of the late-19th century. There were, moreover, plenty of opportunities for audiences to sing along in the choruses of the various songs. Such audience complicity is unusual in circus terms and it was relatively short-lived: the three ring circus and the huge audience numbers it attracted relegated the singing clown to the obscurity of an ‘aftershow.’ As Childress points out, from the early 20th century the circus had become the domain of children and their families. Yet the circus has continued to retain at least the capacity to subvert and to offer social commentary. Reference to the French contemporary circus of the 1990s, *Archaos*, is a case in point: “The brutal black humor of Archaos’ clowns is aimed at subverting society’s power to render them helpless...Archaos’ carnival of forgotten souls is a comic slap in the face of the industrialized world, a disturbing reminder of the human cost of technological progress.”¹

“Sing me a song with social significance” is the title of one of the numbers in the 1937 American musical revue *Pins and Needles*. European cabaret had already obliged by this time and music as an active ‘character’ in politically charged plays is, of course, a *donnée* of the various Brecht musical collaborations. The potential for protest would be realised in the songs of the 1960s and beyond, but Timothy Wilson and Mara Favoretto’s article about the role of popular music as a weapon, both in the face of political oppression and current financial stringencies, offers a different perspective. In *The Republic* Plato connects musical innovation with political upheaval: “the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions.” (424c-e) Thus the performance of popular music, unless carefully monitored, has the potential to lead to the destruction of the state, and this monitoring is what the Argentinian dictatorship attempted to achieve between 1976 and 1983. Yet despite this, concert halls and stadia became cultural meeting places that escaped government crackdowns and gave a voice especially to young people. The article explains as well the situation after the end of the dictatorship and documents the establishment of *cumbia villera* (literally ‘slum parties’) as a musical weapon of resistance against the crushing economic crisis that Argentina still faces. Songs about crime, sex and drugs fill small neighbourhood concert halls where singers and audiences interact and where the agents of economic repression, particularly the police, are vilified and ridiculed. Wilson and Favoretto point as well to the appropriation of the tools of working class resistance through song by the young middle classes to emphasise the universality of Argentinian suffering.

Yet the capacity of popular entertainments to subvert is not confined to the public sphere. Kevin Brown in discussing karaoke, positions it as a strategy to break down economic and cultural barriers at a personal level. This complements Lawrence Grossberg’s contention that popular music is used by individuals to mark a territorial identity in a landscape of crushing suburbia.² To be sure, karaoke might appear to be the most recent manifestation of a traditional form of self-expression. After all, the opportunities to ‘have a go’ as a singer or reciter had been intrinsic to the singing saloons and the ‘free-and-easy’ pubs of the 19th century. Indeed Peter Bailey creates a further arc that complements Grossberg’s assertion, stating that the success of the singing saloons of the 19th century “[represented] a victory over the constrictions and impersonality of the new towns.”³ Brown, however, goes further. His two-year ethnographic research project leads him to contend that karaoke performances incorporate a resistance to the upper class hold over the production of culture as well as an intervention that privileges personal agency in the face of pervasive social anonymity: “Karaoke produces a cultural space where anyone, regardless of class, gender or ethnicity can find a room.” He also draws attention to the self-reflexive and parodic modes of performance which arose during the 1990s when middle-class performers appropriated karaoke for their own end, and when it began to assume a contestatory locus for those who denigrated it as a corruption

of liveness by the technology of music replication. Brown concludes, however, by suggesting that “the anxiety that surrounds [karaoke’s] production is ultimately the strongest evidence of its efficacy.”

In 1903, George Gray, a variety performer, began a very successful career as the protagonist in an extended sketch, “The Fighting Parson.” He himself was an accomplished amateur boxer. The sketch required that the villain should be defeated by Gray, representing the epitome of ‘muscular Christianity’ in a climactic scene outside a church. While the fight at the end of the sketch was carefully rehearsed, the fact that local thugs were employed to perform the villain meant that matters could get out of hand. In his autobiography, Gray describes such an incident:

I had much trouble with one man when he first joined me; he looked an ideal Bill Sykes...but he was very slow on the uptake. A full-blooded person was he, for on two occasions while rehearsing the combat the stage cloth had to be repainted.

...“Sykes” had been bean-feasting [drinking], and in the first round of the battle he failed to guard a nasty one and went completely out...

At that moment Bill, who was made up as “Sykes” companion, without a moment’s hesitation came up, dug his finger in my chest saying: “Ere-you’ve outed my pal-‘ave a pop at me!” and forthwith swung an ox-killing blow that knocked me clean through the church cloth!...

“Come on, Guv’nor, I think I can remember it,” he whisperingly alluded to the guards and blows in the carefully arranged business. Alas for him-he remembered not one!

I was exceedingly sorry, but he was delighted; he came into my dressing-room, his mouth and nose swollen and bleeding, one eye completely closed, and with a perfectly ecstatic grin enquired: “Ow’s that”?⁴

The point of this reference is to highlight an instance of the interconnection between sport and its theatrical representation and the juxtaposition of simulation and authenticity, the latter demonstrable through the actual shedding of blood. Lucy Nevitt takes up these points in her discussion of the strategies employed by professional wrestlers and footballers to insure that blood will flow in performance to satisfy the expectations of spectators and to guarantee the authenticity of those performances. She refers to examples of wrestlers who use ‘blading’ to exaggerate the effects of physical impact, a technique recognised and accepted by spectators, and one of a footballer who manufactured such an effect in order to insure the possibility of his team gaining an advantage. In the event, the latter proved disastrous: spectators equated his poor simulation with cheating and a judicial inquiry followed. The examples allow Nevitt to investigate

the significance of pain and violence in performance: the connections, she avers, “between bleeding and pain are fundamental to the relationship between representations of and response to blood in performance.” It is no accident that such a discussion should also refer to the more extreme examples of performance body art. Both wrestlers and footballers satisfy the spectators’ expectations of pain and its transcendence through the performers’ skills and capacity for endurance. Both place their bodies at risk and flirt with the constant presence of danger.

Danger, however, is equally the province of farce and, in particular, slapstick. Louise Peacock examines the triggers which allow us to laugh at pain and the negotiations, often desperate ones, which performers use to avoid or overcome it. The process is an undignified one, hardly surprising in a form “which contradicts our cultural beliefs and expectations concerning the body as a locus of human dignity and, more generally, the nature of events and the causal connection between them.”⁵ The article draws its examples from television and film: Jim Carrey’s *Liar, Liar*, MTV’s *Jackass*, *You’ve been framed*, and the British comedy series *Some Mothers do have ‘em*, which starred Michael Crawford, later to make his name in *Phantom of the Opera*. Usefully, Nevitt supplies links to the YouTube clips of the shows to which she refers. All her examples show performers placing their bodies at risk, a commonality, of course, which they share with circus colleagues. In part, our responses, laughter in comedy and amazement in the circus, are tinged by a sense of our own relief that the dangers have been successfully negotiated. Peacock uses Alex Clayton’s question “How do I know the pain of another is genuine or that it is anything like the way in which I experience pain?”⁶ to suggest that our appreciation of slapstick involves ‘embodied understanding,’ when we measure the capabilities of our own bodies instinctively against those of the performers. While in some cases the sense of our bodies’ capacity to maintain a superior grasp on human dignity may prevail, in the case of the gladiatorial bodies of professional wrestlers, there would seem to be no contest.

The “Afterpieces,” Joseph Donohue’s excursus into staircases and their significance in the theatrical *mise-en-scène*, and Laurence Senelick’s etymological inquiry into the origins of the word ‘hep,’ need no editorial introduction. Simply, in the common parlance, “Enjoy!”

¹ Ron Jenkins, “Urban slapstick: from Chaplin’s Tramp to Archaos’s Metal Clowns,” *Theater* 23:3, (1992):66. Also Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies*, (Milton Park, Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2005).

² Lawrence Grossberg, *Dancing in spite of myself*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). Wilson and Favoretto refer to this in their article.

³ Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978),32.

⁴ ‘The Fighting Parson’ (George Gray), *Vagaries of a Vagabond*, (London: Heath Cranton, 1930), 162-3.

⁵ Stephen Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 83.

⁶ Alex Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 173.