JULIUS KNIGHT, AUSTRALIAN MATINEE IDOL: COSTUME DRAMA AS HISTORICAL RE-PRESENTATION

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The Scottish actor Julius Knight, whose real name was reportedly McFarlane ("Ladies' Letter") was never intended by his managers to become an idol of the Australasian theatre. But in four major tours for J. C. Williamson's successive managerial organisations from 1897 to 1916, he became the best-known and respected actor in costume plays while also contributing to the establishment of contemporary realist drama in Australia. It is significant for his contemporary standing that, without acting in a single full-length Shakespeare, Knight secured sustained acclaim for artistry and excellence. Also, it soon became apparent that he had considerable talents and experience as a director and designer, not only of lavish costume spectacles, but of contemporary English and American problem dramas by Shaw, Charles Klein and later Brieux. As he could turn his hand with equal skill to many aspects of production and design, Knight's tastes increasingly came to influence the Firm's dramatic choices, including the Shavian repertoire which he introduced to Australian professional theatre (*Arms and the Man* in 1910 and *Man and Superman* in 1913). In all these capacities he performed sterling service for the Firm, and for an unvarying weekly salary of £50.[1] Over this two-decade period, Knight incarnated both historical and fictional figures in dramas set in various past ages. Read in the light of Brecht, Nietzsche and Lukács, examples of Knight's repertoire indicate the significant yet complex cultural role of the popular actor for colonial audiences in creating living images of the uncanny presence of the past. It suggests how popular entertainment offers varied interpretations and identifications,

[1] The contracts in the J. C. Williamson papers in the Performing Arts Museum (Melbourne) show that Knight was receiving £50 per week, which sum did not vary until his last departure in 1916. The contract letters between Williamson (later George Tallis) and Knight held in the PAM collection are dated 12 April 1906, 15 April 1908, 11 October 1912. From context, these renewals and extensions are repeating his original salary. Of the principal women, Beatrice Day was receiving £25 (extendable to £30) in 1908, and Irene Browne was engaged for £30 in 1914 (Royalty Agreements Contracts File for Beatrice Day, Irene Browne, J. C. Williamson Coll, PAM). It is not known under what conditions Ada Ferrar was engaged, but Maud Jeffries with her overseas star billing may well have got an equal £50. *Table Talk* (17 December 1903 p. 17) cites Jeffries' "modest salary" but the microform copy is illegible. According to Thomas (120), she was getting £150 to Barrett's £500 during their USA tour of November 1893-June 1894, during which she created the role of Mercia in *The Sign of the Cross*.

anchoring early modern Australians in the great flow of world history, encountered in immediate contexts both fictional and historical.

Knight's repertoire is still best remembered today less for his high artistic standards or for his important later work in the modernist repertoire, but for costume melodrama. Along with those of other touring actors like Sarah Bernhardt, Wilson Barrett, Oscar Asche, H. B. Irving, Kyrle Bellew and Minnie Tittell Brune, who also starred in Australasian costume spectacle, Knight's repertoire and roles have persisted in cultural memory. The image of his Marcus Superbus is featured in the standard Australian theatre-historical textbooks more frequently than that of the role's writer and creator Wilson Barrett.[2] Historical periods covered in his repertoire concentrate on the ancient world (*Sign of the Cross*, *Claudian*) and the mediaeval period (*If I Were King* and the first Australasian productions of *Everyman*).[3] But the bulk of his repertoire can be grouped into three broad modern historical areas: contemporary times (*The Third Degree*, *The Lion and the Mouse*, *Harbour Lights*); the French Renaissance and English Civil War periods (*Under the Red Robe*, *The Duke's Motto*, *His Majesty's Servant*, *The Breed of the Treshams*); and the English and French eighteenth-century and Revolutionary periods. His huge successes were in Baroness Orczy's counter-revolutionary drama *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Booth Tarkington's comedy of class in eighteenth-century Bath *Monsieur Beaucaire*, and in Napoleonic-era dress he played in *A Royal Divorce* and in Conan Doyle's *Brigadier Gerard*. In the tour of the Beerbohm Tree repertoire in 1903-1906 with co-star Maud Jeffries, Knight made an impression in adaptations of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, Hall Caine's utopian socialist speculation *The Eternal City* and David Belasco's Japanese art pageant *The Darling of the Gods*. While for Australian theatre development, the Tree repertoire may have stronger claims to socially radical artistic excellence, three early Knight productions brought here in the 1897-99 tour will usefully serve to cover a spread of historical periods within the romantic costume melodrama genre. The principle vehicles introduced in the first Williamson and Musgrove tour were *The Prisoner of Zenda* and the endlessly revived *The Sign of the Cross* and *A Royal Divorce*. These representative productions will be discussed more closely as indicative of the cultural significance of the actor's art in

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[2] For modern scholarly accounts of Knight see Murphy. Beresford Fowler provides a brief personal reminiscence "The Fascinating Matinée Idol and Fine Actor, Julius Knight." The J.C. Williamson Royalty Agreements Contracts File for *The Sign of the Cross* holds the Memo of Agreement (11 April 1896) whereby Wilson Barrett assigns the Australasian rights to Williamson and Musgrove for five years after date of first performance at the rate of £5 per performance in Sydney and Melbourne and £3 in other towns, plus £500 advance. If Barrett however plays this drama in Australasia during this period – as he did – he must pay the firm £5 per performance in Melbourne and Sydney and £3 elsewhere.

[3] *Everyman* premiered at the Melbourne Town Hall on 25 October 1905, played by the Knight-Jeffries Company, but appears to have been performed previously in New Zealand in 1904-1905 (*Bulletin*, 1 December 1904: 34).

creating and embodying historical imagination, and the varied pleasures and complexities of historical identifications which the genre of costume drama made available to early modern Australians.

While achieving the status of Australian popular idol and critical success, Knight's own industrial situation ironically contradicted the heroic individualism of his main roles, while both mimicking and running counter to the industrial autonomy of the entrepreneurial Edwardian actor-managers. For all the audience adulation lavished upon him, and the generally good reviews, Knight remained the Firm's loyal and discreet servant, shunning equally romantic entanglements and off-stage publicity.[4] Unlike his touring contemporaries Kyrle Bellew and Cora Brown-Potter, or Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton, Knight was no colonial social lion, and largely resisted becoming the petted darling of the social set. Williamson was fortunate to have more or less accidentally secured the long-lasting services of a multi-talented man of the theatre who was content with his industrial status as salaried employee. Knight admitted that personal limitations did not suit him for the energetic entrepreneurial role of independent actor-manager. In 1912 Knight assessed the difficulty of getting a foothold in London theatre "unless one is prepared to take a theatre and try a play. I never had any business ability. My life is behind the curtain" ("Mr Julius Knight"). He seemed also to understand that the metropolitan and international reign of the monopolistic actor-manager imposed artistic no less than employment restrictions on the numerous non-manager performers; restrictions which might be evaded in the colonies by accepting a more industrially supplementary role. In Australasia, professional opera, music theatre and drama were largely dominated by the series of inter-colonial and international organisations centred on the American actor-manager-impresario James Cassius Williamson (Tallis, West, Dicker, "J. C. Williamson," "Williamson, Garner," "Williamson and Musgrove") and polarised manager-actor relationships were becoming the new norm. There were however considerable artistic compensations for loyalty. In Australia and New Zealand Knight performed roles created by Irving (*Waterloo*); Beerbohm Tree (Nekhludov in *Resurrection* and Zakkuri in *The Darling of the Gods*); Wilson Barrett (Marcus Superbus in *The Sign of the Cross*, Claudian, Denver in *The Silver King*); George Alexander (Rassendyll in *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Villon in *If I Were King*); Lewis Waller (Monsieur Beaucaire, Gerard in *Brigadier Gerard*, Robin Hood); Du Maurier (Raffles); Martin Harvey (Reresby in *The Breed of the Treshams*); Forbes Robertson and Fred Terry (Henri of Navarre). Despite his and his Australian audience's enthusiasm for George Bernard Shaw, Knight did not re-create for them his own original London Shavian part, that of Praed in the 1902 premiere of the scandalous and banned *Mrs Warren's Profession*.

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[4] *Table Talk* reports that "he is married, and that a wife watches his success with pride from afar" ("Ladies' Letter"), but this is the only and rather unreliable source contesting Knight's single status.

In December 1912, in the run-up to his fourth tour for the Firm, Knight assessed his fortunes as an "actor for parts" in the age of actor-managers. He located the turning point of his later career in the mid-90s when William Terriss dropped out of the Lyceum *Faust*. Since April 1894, Knight had been playing Valentine[5] and could now reasonably expect the larger role, but as he said "it was my youth that prevented me getting Terriss's position." Ellen Terry was beginning to show her years and required an older man as Faust to her Marguerite. "Terriss's position would have brought me everything London could give a young actor" ("Mr Julius Knight"). He was working in the provinces in romantic leads when George Musgrove, at that point the overseas half of an increasingly volatile Williamson-Musgrove entrepreneurial partnership, saw Knight as Claude Melnotte in the venerable drama *The Lady of Lyons*. "He is a really good actor for parts and has a good presence," Musgrove reported, giving his height as 5 ft 7 inches.[6] The first publicity images shown in Australia indicate a handsome but rather conventional young nineties actor ("Mr Julius Knight" [NLA]). It was however a good face which made up well, with arresting eyes ("Mr Julius Knight" [SLV]). Later studio studies by the Talma and Rembrandt studios, and by May and Irena Moore, show the qualities of strength plus sensitivity which gave Knight considerable cross-gender appeal ("[Julius Knight]" [Photograph]). He seems to know what men know, and what women do as well: a decided advantage for a popular performing star.

The strong presence of Knight in Australasian public culture was preceded by a lengthy apprenticeship in touring in various kinds of contemporary vehicles. He was born in Dumfries in 1863 and began his acting career in 1884 in Wales in the melodrama *Called Back* (Parker).[7] His first appearance in these colonies was actually in 1890 aged 27, as a young support actor in an unremarkable tour with Laura Villiers. However, he received encouraging notices and left favourable memories (Murphy). During the 1890s he worked hard trying to break into West End stardom, while undertaking long provincial tours in England and America and playing with leading actor-managers. With Lily Langtry he toured in what was to become his great Australasian role of Napoleon, both in the comedy *Mademoiselle Mars* and also in *A Royal Divorce*. In routine melodrama he was the hero of a long-running Drury Lane tour of *A Life of Pleasure* in North America. On the strength of this role, Henry Irving invited him to the Lyceum where in 1894 he played in *Faust* and *Beckett*, and in 1895 created Sir Lavaine in *King Arthur* and toured as Didier in the Lyceum *Lyons Mail* (Wearing). Upon his return to London from three years'

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[5] Programme for *Faust* 14 April 1984 "431st performance of *Faust* at this theatre," Lyceum Papers 1894, Box 1444, Theatre Museum, London. His other Lyceum roles 1894-95 were King Louis in *Beckett* and Sir Lavaine in *King Arthur*.

[6] Letter from George Musgrove to J. C. Williamson, London, 20 November 1896. In Letters of Musgrove to Williamson 1893-96, Box 614, folder 9, J. C. Williamson Coll, (MS 5783). National Library of Australia, Canberra.

[7] Knight remained in this annual compendium until its 8th edition (1936).

touring Australasia in the Beerbohm Tree company, Knight played Polixenes in Tree's production of *The Winter's Tale* at His Majesty's in September 1906. However, the West End door again didn't open, and Knight was welcomed in Australia for further tours in 1907-1911 and 1912-1916, by which time he endeavoured to hang up the golden boots of Marcus Superbus and the swords and wigs of romantic costume drama, and to concentrate for preference on modern plays of social and psychological interest.

It seemed not to be the intention of either partner of the increasingly fractious firm of Williamson and Musgrove to create a star actor out of the initial venture which brought Knight to Australia in 1897, but audience response was to alter their plans. At the end of 1896 Musgrove in London engaged Knight and seven other actors, including Ada Ferrar as leading lady, for what was then planned as a limited experiment of a dramatic stock company. This was actually Musgrove's own pet idea, and ran contrary to Williamson's preference for importing stars in ready-made productions, generally of comic opera and the new craze of musical comedy. Musgrove had much persuading to do, since Williamson's desire was to import yet more of the music theatre upon which he had founded his fortune, but by mid-1896 and for want of a viable alternative he eventually caved in to Musgrove's enthusiasms. A twenty-week engagement commencing February 1897 was contracted for, although so successful did this season eventually prove it was extended to June 1899 and involved numerous tours around Australia and New Zealand. Musgrove, still uneasy about two of the six leads whom he dispatched to Melbourne in December 1896, wrote anxiously to Williamson that the success of this dramatic stock company rested on highlighting the plays, not the company members, and above all to avoid giving the impression of introducing, let alone creating, stars.[8] It was the prestige of the hot dramatic vehicles for which Musgrove had bought the Australasian rights which he believed would pull the crowds, particularly the expensively dressed *Prisoner of Zenda* and the Barrett world phenomenon *The Sign of the Cross*. Musgrove also advised that *Sign* be plugged heavily for its Christian sentiment and for the approval it had won from various English and American divines who recommended it to their flocks from the pulpit. As the Australian *Souvenir Programme* for this play indicates, Williamson rigorously followed this piece of audience-building advice.

Zenda, though it was performed in Australia until 1908 at least, was not initially a resounding success, being at first cautiously and respectfully received at its Melbourne premiere of 13 February 1897 at the Princess's Theatre. Indeed, over the long term it would be replaced by the Knight audience favourites *Monsieur Beaucaire* and *Scarlet Pimpernel*. The role-doubling in *Zenda* which Musgrove had recommended for economy's sake initially proved puzzling: Knight appeared in the eighteenth-century Prologue as the rake-hell Prince Rudolph the Red, and also, as

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[8] Letter of Musgrove to Williamson, London, 13 November 1896 (NLA).

was customary casting for this play, in the main action as two distantly related modern-day look-alikes: the English tourist Rudolph Rassendyll and the weak monarch Rudolph the Fifth, whom he impersonates for the love of the Princess Flavia. The initial audience caution worried the money-conscious Williamson. The Williamson-Musgrove organisation was still battling the effects of the general 1890s depression, and more immediately, its Australian partner was faced with the additional task of lifting the usual February financial slump following the Christmas pantomime, even in the case of the 1896 successful *Matsa, Queen of Fire* co-written by Williamson with Bert Royle. He obviously expected and needed something more, and more immediate, for his dramatic company than polite enthusiasm.

Immediately after its Melbourne first night Williamson was writing gloomy accusations to his partner that *Zenda* was a flop, especially considering the estimated reckless £1,900 worth of court costumes commissioned by the perfectionist Musgrove from a London court couturier. But when Wilson Barrett's drama *The Sign of the Cross* opened in Sydney in May 1897, Williamson finally cabled his partner in more optimistic vein. After having received many woe-filled missives from Australia, Musgrove at last got the good news on 4 June that *Sign of the Cross* was a managers' dream; a runaway success which fascinated audiences and which they couldn't get enough of. This popular enthusiasm was due to the play itself and to its novelty: the author Wilson Barrett toured to Australia later that year playing his original part, but by then the Knight version had imprinted itself locally as the true original. Knight's changing status is indicated by Musgrove's recommendation that he be accorded liberal treatment, recognising that he was in fact the main drawcard of this no-stars company.[9] The vice-regal set bestowed social favour, especially given that show's evangelical Christian message and its lavish high-art values. "The Government House Ball must have been a good advertisement for us," wrote Musgrove, "and what a thing for a young man like Knight! I hope he will keep his head."[10] A realistic man of the theatre, industrious but seemingly temperament-free, Knight did so. In his subsequent career he worked through bad voice problems and an occasional tendency to put on weight. During the Sydney epidemic of 1905 he barely survived a serious bout of typhoid, and coped for many years with the punishing inter-colonial touring schedules. Although loyally beloved of audiences, male and especially female, Knight neither became nor encouraged the kind of mass-culture popular fandom that surrounded, for example, Williamson's other drawcard, the young American actor Tittell Brune. He gave his favourite hobby as knitting. Mary Marlowe wrote of the uncanny sensation of passing Knight's dressing-room to see inside Napoleon seated in full military fig turning a sock (49). The cognitive disjunction of the fabulous historical figure of male ascendency "performing" from the repertoire of the domestic, feminine and the

[9] Letter of Musgrove to Williamson, 4 June 1897 (NLA).

[10] Letter of Musgrove to Williamson, London 3 December 1897 (NLA).

contemporary perfectly captures the eerie slippages which produce the powerful effects of historical drama. More significantly for the later Australian stage, Knight trained many actors, including Marlowe and the young Francee (later Dame Judith) Anderson. Both of these played at various times in the many *Royal Divorce* revivals. But even if *Sign of the Cross* was the main foundation of his Australasian fortune, Knight recognised that *Zenda*, the supposed "failure," was its foundation. In February 1941, aged 78, he was buried from his private residence in Hull, which was named "Rassendyll" (Obit.).

As a director, Knight laboured to ensure that his costumed figure was one harmonious element in a through-designed and colour-co-ordinated stage picture. Although given contemporary idioms in its cut and design, the costuming offered at least credible claims to period mood, even in dramatic vehicles such as *Royal Divorce* whose tenuous claims to historical veracity were vigorously contested in the colonial press. Knight's care for the equal status of his various and sometimes ineffectual leading ladies was generous and scrupulous. The Julio-Claudian Rome created for Australian audiences was a major frock opportunity, whose gorgeous colour schemes and sumptuous fabrics are lovingly reported in the religious, theatrical and fashion press alike. The scenic, historical and pictorial pleasures of the show are evident in images of this well-documented production. After huge success built for *Royal Divorce* and *Sign of the Cross*, Williamson was soon billing Knight and Ferrar in larger letters and printing lavish souvenir programmes.[11]

Artistically speaking, Knight understood that his function was to look gorgeous in those archaic masculine modes rendered socially obsolete by the sobriety and uniformity of early twentieth-century male dress conventions. Only in military or court uniform could men still compete sartorially with even informal feminine display, and *Zenda* was awash with both. Knight's Marcus Superbus is a study in fabulous and ambivalently gendered dress (Illus. 1). Marcus is the Prefect of Rome who, in a scandalous scene, vigorously pursues the pure Christian maiden Mercia around a room, to be rebuffed by her magisterial appeal to higher heavenly powers. At the play's conclusion, Marcus and Mercia, fallen foul of the plotting of Tigellinus and the splendidly histrionic madness of Nero, walk hand in hand

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[11] See advertisement for the Princess's Theatre, *Age* 20 August 1897, p. 8 for the 100th performance: "Fifteen Hundred Souvenirs were distributed to ladies in all parts of the house, but proved insufficient to meet the enormous rush." This is the *Souvenir of the 100th Performance in Australia of The Sign of the Cross*, which, with the photographs printed in the press, is an invaluable visual document for the staging of the Knight-Ferrar production.

offstage to the waiting lions. The mixed signifiers of masculine and feminine, manly and decadent, sexually predatory and redeemably domestic – not to mention piously evangelical and imperiously pagan – engaged audiences of all persuasions in a carnival of identificatory affects. Violence, religion, sexuality and sentiment amid imperial magnificence supplied a potent mixture of identifications for colonial audiences: whether as victims or inheritors of imperial ruthlessness and/or Christian

Illus. 1. Souvenir Programme for *The Sign of the Cross.* The Art Centre's Performing Arts Museum Collection, Melbourne.

moral ascendency. In repertoire terms, Knight frequently embodied models of noble, embattled and physically forceful men whose virtue must be redeemed by strenuous physical and moral action, particularly by manly resistance to sexual temptations. He was not of course the first or only performer to convey to Australian performers the peculiarly late-century configuration of masterful and wounded masculinity (Kelly). But his readings of this contemporary figure in historical dress particularly allowed simultaneous access to a "past" and to imaginative cross-figuration of social and gendered contradictions in the present.

Zenda recalls for the modernising present the scandalous libertinism of the eighteenth century, and the play's "present" action occurs in Ruritania. This is a fabulously sumptuous virtual site of essentially feudal government, whose smooth dynastic succession is assailed by royal reluctance to rule and the scheming of

disaffected scions and their opportunistic officer-class cohorts, but foiled by British decency and enterprise assisted by the womanly constancy of the dutiful Princess Flavia. Its management of the anxieties and hopes of British and colonial audiences at the time of the end of Victoria's long reign is clearly inferable. As has been noted, Knight performed in three roles, which is what appeared to have confused the first-night audience. This doubling conflates the masculine subject positions of socially archaic but bold seducer; the weak, reluctant and drink-prone king; and the ordinary contemporary Englishman (Rudolph Rassendyll) who by assuming the gorgeous costumes of Ruritania, accedes for a limited time to the pains, pleasures, adventures and duties of romance (Illus. 2). Edward Rose's adaptation of Anthony Hope's

Illus. 2. *Souvenir of the Farewell Performance*. The Arts Centre's Performing Arts Museum Collection, Melbourne.

novel serves as a metacommentary on both the pleasures and the evanescence of costume drama itself. Rassendyll is the audience substitute through which Ruritania is accessed by the modern subject for a magical but limited time period. For Australian ladies, Musgrove was careful to stipulate the appeal of the sumptuous and modish London-made court costumes worn by a selection of artist's models and society beauties such as Mary Elliott Page and Gertrude Maesmore Morris, the much-postcarded Adelaide socialite turned actress. In February 1908 Knight produced Barrett's ultra-lavish late-classical drama *Claudian* and adventurously

employed local costumiers, and then extravagantly redesigned from scratch the already sumptuous *Prisoner of Zenda*, but now using costumes constructed locally or sourced from David Jones and Emily Nathan.[12] Part of the point of this *Zenda* revival was to fast-track the fashion cycle by displaying in advance next winter's ladies fashions, which can only be done in Australia due to seasonal differences.[13] In a prolonged dialogue satire, the *Bulletin* (19 March 1908: 22) portrays Knight as the "arbiter elegantiarum/frockiorum" of "Aust" society, even deigning to design native Australian costumes. This is a telling piece of colonial fashion leadership in an industry frequently seen as dominated by centrist dissemination: assumptions which studies of specifically Australian dress have contested (Maynard).

Knight's Napoleon in W. G. Wills' *A Royal Divorce* seemed to endlessly fascinate Australian and New Zealand audiences. It premiered 2 October 1897 at the Melbourne Princess's with Ada Ferrar as the faithful and "womanly" Empress Josephine and Elliott Page as her rival the ambitious and cold Empress Marie Louise of Austria. With various successive empresses it played repeatedly up to Knight's last Australian performances in 1916. Over this time span its central figure underwent several complex shifts of ideological meanings. Knight's Napoleon had to compete in the Australasian theatrical arena with rival Napoleons of operetta and specially that of Harry Rickards in vaudeville. In his study of the Regency period, Philip Shaw writes of the defeat of a "solitary, tragic and glamorous" Napoleon at Waterloo being seen as a titanic over-reaching and failure, and of its ability to awe and confound the Romantic imagination: "the British nation [could] glimpse, in the spectacle of the retreating French Empire, an image of its own potential dissolution" (1-2). Part of the persistent glamour of the Emperor a century later seems to lie in English culture's ongoing fascination with its great defeated adversary, especially at a moment in European political alliances when the French were losing their role as the British Empire's principal opposing bloc and became available to occupy other cultural subject positions (the Entente Cordiale was signed in 1904). Partly too the play relied on the bankable domestic "women's interest" – Napoleon as "fallen man": fallen from domestic virtue and loyalties, whose dynastic ambition drives him to divorce a loyal and loving Josephine, and consequently to commit such fateful public acts of hubris as the Hundred Days and Waterloo.

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[12] *Bulletin* 27 February 1908 notes a controversy as to whether Knight or the visiting American Ola Humpheys designed her gowns (she had played Flavia in the USA). Press controversy again noted 5 March 1908.

[13] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 1908: 5.

Critics continually complained of this plays' many crimes against literal history, but audiences kept coming back to renew their fascination, less with the alternative "history" dreamt up by its author Wills than with the "presence" of the man Napoleon. The charisma of fated and vulnerable authority is embodied by Knight in a role depending less on verbal text than on physical presence (Illus. 3).

Illus. 3. Knight as Napoleon in *A Royal Divorce*. The Arts Centre's Performing Arts Museum Collection, Melbourne.

For history on the grand scale there were the four grand historical tableaux, which are continually reported as galvanising audiences. These special effects were specifically created in Melbourne for the Australian production by the scenic artist team of George and John Gordon. Musgrove had advised that some kind of tableaux be produced to replace minor costumed figures in exactly-rendered and expensively-created military uniforms, but his advice was to limit them to one.[14] In fact, Williamson had four created, suggesting that even leading scenic artists were cheaper than men's military tailors. These tableaux were "The retreat from

[14] Letter of Musgrove to Williamson, London 1 May 1896.

Moscow"; two Waterloo pictures "The Charge – Napoleon's Final Effort" ("Julius Knight in *The Royal Divorce*") and "The Rout – "Up, Guards, and at Them." Finally there was the much praised "At St Helena – Alone" of Napoleon standing on a bare rock gazing out over the empty sea as the sun sets. Many commentators dwell on the eerie effects of chill pathos evoked in audiences by this static but powerful image of exiled imperial grandeur in decline.[15] But for an increasingly anxious and isolated Australia during the height of the invasion scare period consequent on the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902) and the visit of the American Great White Fleet (1908), this representation additionally expresses disturbing sentiments of wistful cultural isolation, while iconically picking up current national fears of permeable borders where both threat and rescue loom from the sea.

At the outbreak of war, *The Royal Divorce* was remounted to "stir the blood with its martial spirit and the pomp and panoply of war" and touted as "the play of the moment" (*Age*, 11August 1914: 12; 25 August 1914: 12). It is clear from contemporary accounts that the favourite scenes were those of the battle tableaux (*Table Talk* 23 July 1914: 33), and the "personality" of Napoleon/Knight (*Table Talk* 13 August 1914: 17).

> Mr Julius Knight's speech regarding "those British bulldogs" arouses a storm of applause that fairly shakes the roof. In fact, every three or four words are followed by an outburst of cheering. At previous productions of the play, Napoleon was regarded by the audience as an enemy. "Now," says Mr Knight, "every time I come on I am applauded, because Napoleon was a Frenchman and Australians and Britishers generally have a warm spot in their hearts for the French." (*Table Talk*, 27 August 1914: 25)

The *Bulletin* more sceptically wondered whether the "eager citizens" flocking to the revival will fight as well in reality as those decades-old soldiers painted on canvas by the Gordons. "The fact that they have changed their enemies and allies since Waterloo doesn't matter" (27 August 1914: 9). Colonial identifications are mobile, situational and driven by clashing historical loyalties and world events to seek out multiple sites of anchorage in the dramatic spectacle.

It is to performance as an embodied bearer of historical signifiers that we now turn. Knight's press contemporaries loved to write of the uncanny presence of the past which the colour and kinesics of theatre can so authoritatively conjure up, of which this awed account of *Sign of the Cross* is typical: "the gorgeous color and pageantry of ancient Roman magnificence, the animated movement of the street

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[15] In 1909 Knight claimed credit for introducing the tableaux "The Retreat from Moscow" and "St Helena" to replace the English production's original unhistorical meeting of Napoleon and the English at Plymouth. *Table Talk* (2 Sept 1909): 27. Unfortunately no pictorial representation of this tableau has been located.

scenes, the striking dress and stalwart forms of the lictors, and the occasional peeps into the glory and luxury of the most remarkable civilisation the world has known" (*Age* 5 July 1897: 6.) It would be easy to dismiss this as mere "ancientism": Orientalism with lictors and gladiators; or, where appropriate, Merrie England with face patches, capes and swords. But how useful a response is this for approaching an understanding of how popular historical imagination might actually operate? Here the giant names of critical modernism tend to deflect our own attempts at a properly historical comprehension of popular cultural transactions of a century ago.

Since Brecht's dismissal of a dehistoricised theatre of "barbaric delights," the genre of popular historical melodrama as a legitimate site for the encoding of historical awareness fell into high-Modernist critical opprobrium. Its increase in "scientific" verisimilitude does not compensate, Brecht says, for the "restriction of language, plot and spiritual scope." "The greater the subtlety of the representations subtracted from one pleasure without satisfying another." At worst, the early modern spectator is reduced by these totalising spectacles into a "cowed, credulous, hypnotised mass" (188 ff). George Lukác's influential study *The Historical Novel* also writes of "sophisticated, barren dramas which have sought to make up for the lack of drama in the theatre by using epic substitutes" (132). According to Lukács' account of late nineteenth-century historical and artistic developments, bourgeois historians such as Nietzsche, lamenting the advent of democracy, in a gesture of negation withdrew from history its dialectical agency. They reduce history to a "gigantic iridescent chaos" whose historicisation is confined to "pictorial and decorative grandeur" and "exotic anecdotes" (177-182). His reading of what *historians* allegedly did could pass for a description of the affective and ideological ambivalences of costume *drama*. More tellingly evident is the paradox of Lukács' own choice of theatrical metaphors, which suggest that he needs theatre to think with perhaps more than it needs him. He does however concede that representations of "historically exact costumes and decorations," while merely a "pictorial frame against which a purely modern story is unfolded," can be read as a muted protest against totalising and alienating capitalism (189-95).

Nietzsche, for his part, believed that the crucial malaise of modernity was in fact its very surfeit of historical consciousness caused by the nineteenth-century German project of turning history from an art to a science. Such historical "oversaturation" which he sees as entering European discourse in his own time, renders the subject impotent to act in the face of an overwhelming past, and even introduces "a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism" by which "the forces of life are paralysed and at last destroyed" (*On the Uses* 83). In his 1874 essay *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, he classifies contemporary constructions of the past as either "monumental," "antiquarian" or "critical" (67). Of the monumental – the narration of the deeds of exemplary heroes – Nietzsche declares that his age's "inartistic natures" (71) assume such historical narratives as a "masquerade costume

in which their hatred of the great and powerful of their own age is disguised as satiated admiration for the great and powerful of past ages" (72). As for Nietzsche's "antiquarian" historical project, this has been seen as "the unavowable, disreputable side of historical consciousness" which is established, not by awesome examples but "through goods"; the fetishisation of any and every detail handed down from the past (Bann 150). Bombardment with the past creates inability to take anything seriously and instead prompts the desire for the acquisition of more and more "new things worth knowing that can be stored tidily away" (*On the Uses* 79). The pleasures of the Australian audiences in witnessing Knight's impersonations of historical heroes (actual or fictional) can be seen, but not exclusively seen, as partaking of this Nietzschean fragmentation of the overwhelming but urgent past into pleasurable consumerist frissons; snippets of history and "personality" framed by the magnificent visual verification devices of careful historical dress and scenic environments. But as the argument above on the reception of *A Royal Divorce* suggests, other more urgently situated and strategic "monumental" responses were also arguably part of the cultural processes of a society's theatrical communion with its imagined past and immediate present.

The work of recent theatre scholars does however cogently demonstrate how popular theatre using pre-modernist forms can in fact speak directly to the immediate concerns of its audience: David Mayer's analysis of toga drama is obviously relevant to *The Sign of the Cross* – or more recently to the movie *Gladiator* – as encoding late-imperial anxieties wherein Rome becomes both the noble and commanding Self and the exotic and brutal Other. Bruce McConachie writes of the immediate meanings within the American Jacksonian cultural moment of Edwin Forrest's roles as the ancient heroes Spartacus, Virginius and Brutus as exemplars of combative democracy and muscular self-reliance. The "monumental" ancient world, both pre- and post-Christian, was a site of endless fascination to late-imperial Western audiences: if such magnificence could fall, so too could current global empires. In a study pertinent to *A Royal Divorce*, W. D. King traces Irving's complex dealings with Napoleonic cultural memory in his many hundreds of performances commencing in 1895 of Conan Doyle's playlet *A Story of Waterloo*, and examines the fascination with the "man of destiny" widely current in European culture and literature of the nineteenth century. Such studies clearly identify popular and pre-Modernist theatre as a powerful, flexible and urgent site for addressing and constructing modern awareness of political and historical discourses.

What, then, is vitally at stake for audiences of costume drama? Do they crave, legitimately or not, the uncanny effects of Freudian "home-coming": a window, however dimmed by nostalgia, into the concrete unmediated realisation of the past? Or are they willingly and knowingly seduced by the carnival of identities and the "storage room of costumes" which Nietzsche saw as the recent characteristic "historical consciousness" of the mass-democratised early modern subject? (*Beyond*

150). As one ironic reader-critic commented, gleefully and aberrantly decoding the evangelical pageantry of *The Sign of the Cross*:

> It is good to lose the present in a dream of long a-gone
> When the lions ate the Wowsers, and the bad men held their own
> (O.K.)

I have argued that early modern colonial audiences necessarily partook of the ambivalences of the range of Nietzschean historical positions of antiquarian fetishisation, reverent monumentality and light-minded dangerous modernist irony. In the Knight repertoire we see the colonial stage labouring with all its considerable technical ingenuity to produce a "real" Ancient Rome, Ruritania or Waterloo, meanwhile providing as necessary or unintentional side-effects various contemporary lessons and ambivalent resonances. Vital to its romantic cultural appeal are the immediate pleasures afforded by gloriously-garbed women and imperious males in abbreviated mauve skirts, or delight in skilled sword-play, big boots and glorious jewellery. My reading of the early modern reception in Australia of the Knight repertoire suggests the potential mobilisation of any or all of these responses. Brecht's or Lukacs' stances intertwine with those of the bourgeois lover of ahistorical illusionistic presence, or the fashion victim's critical eye for the latest fabric drape and colour detail, or the social and sexual nuances encoded in skilled tailoring and the new industrial dyes (Ball). This potential for multiplicity is essential to bear in mind when theorising the various specific and situated nature of that foreignness of the Federation-era past itself, whose complex ambivalences must be respected when read from the position of a supposedly post-colonial present. While we are still able to recognise and share in some of the pleasures and uses of colonial costume drama, those distant audiences with their own specifically situated knowledges, remain – like historical drama itself – both familiarly ourselves and uncannily not ourselves.

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