

Veronica Kelly. *The Empire Actors: Stars of Australian Costume Drama 1890s-1920s*.
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In 1913 a theatrical touring sensation of three modern plays starring the ‘Empire Actor’ Julius Knight was slated for Broken Hill. Two thousand seats sold in the first four hours of bookings opening. This kind of startling statistic marks Veronica Kelly’s *The Empire Actors: Stars of Australian Costume Drama 1890s–1920s* as the excavator of uncanny hidden histories. Kelly’s text hints at an Australia scarcely visible under the surface of officially sanctioned and presently popular histories and yet it posits ‘scars on the mind and energy in the blood’ that owe to this Australia (18). The era Kelly holds up to the light is one which often falls into shadow—preceding as it did the Great War—as do many its key players whose popularity just pre-dates the eclipse of theatre by the more durable medium of film. Nevertheless, Kelly reanimates a world of characters, plays and players as ubiquitously recognised and cherished across Australia then as they are conspicuously absent from popular consciousness now. What made for such a momentary flourishing and its sudden evaporation? What conditions of culture; what imaginative preoccupations; what structures of industry and politics of identity can explain the moment that belonged to the Empire Actors? These complex questions motivate Kelly’s agile and compelling account.

The first three chapters of *The Empire Actors* are distinct in their approach from those that follow. In intricate prose they outline the methodological grounding of the work. In Chapter One, Kelly applies her considerable insight to the subject of Australasian modernity, usefully dismantling the accustomed binary of ‘intellectual’ versus ‘popular’. Historical drama, with its lavish costume repertoire, is shown to cater comprehensively to the paradoxical poles of modernism: expressing dilemmas and assumptions of the present as well as providing scope for experimental abstraction. Chapter Two introduces a vast breadth of theoretical knowledge on the subject of costume, delineating the complex relationship between stage clothes and the actor’s body and making the cogent point that historical costume is always marked by the needs of the present into which it is invoked. Chapter Three reinforces this insight with compelling Australasian examples of costume drama operating in the Edwardian era as ‘a sensitive instrument registering apocalyptic fears and social panics’ (41). Examples include an ambivalent fascination with revolution, a twenty-year obsession with the figure of Napoleon, and an avid interest in ancient Rome and medieval mysticism as channels in which Australasian preoccupations could run. In these dramatic treatments the newly federated Australia was, Kelly suggests, able to consult the world as an encyclopaedia to develop an understanding of itself, ‘appropriating and domesticating’ history for the purpose (40).

It is not until Chapter Four that the lives of the ‘Empire Actors’ themselves begin to structure the work. This makes for a sudden although not unwelcome shift in stride as dense theoretical material gives way to confident and compellingly woven passages of narrative and analysis. The first of the Empire Actors is Julius Knight and, carrying the burden of

explicating the term ‘empire actor’ for those who follow, Knight receives two chapters. His relationship with the evolving actor-manager system—its London West End base and its Empire-spanning extremities—brings to light the special predicament of the touring star actor. Chapter Four explores Knight’s peculiar identity within Australian cultural memory. Pointing out that the performer’s ‘display of the manners befitting “period” class and gender is an imaginative creation addressing the ideals of his moment’ (63), Kelly shows how perfectly Knight accomplished that display; his persona, both onstage and off being inflected by the roles of Marcus Superbus (*The Sign of the Cross*) and by Napoleon Bonaparte (*A Royal Divorce*). Chapter Five offers a fluent account of Knight’s life—his provincial Scottish origins, his oscillating activity of West End and British regional successes and five Australasian tours—and of the benefits and vicissitudes of working as a star for giant production conglomerates such as J. C. Williamson’s or ‘the Firm’.

Chapter Six takes up a very different kind of partnership, detailing the two great tours (1909-10 and 1912-13) of Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton under the auspices of the firm Clarke, Wren, Meynell and Gunn and also Asche’s later Australasian enterprises. Holding Asche up as the ‘pre-eminent practitioner and producer of Australasian costume drama’ Kelly includes among Asche’s many feats on the Australasian scene, popularising Shakespeare (89) and the consummate perfection of the lavish theatre spectacle—giving Australasian audiences ‘an Orientalist world at once excitingly Modernist and affirmatively fashionable’ (104). The detailed account of Brayton’s ambition, eloquence, diverse talents in business acumen, design and performance, and her resistant interpretations of ‘the feminine’ give a compelling edge to the chapter. Kelly also points out that Brayton’s ‘world famous beauty and artistic renown triumphantly validated’ the Australian-born Asche’s ‘eminence (and that of his nation) personally, socially and artistically’ (91).

Chapter Seven probes more deeply into the territories of culture, aesthetics, and politics of gender. Kelly makes the point that the Asche-Brayton partnership, despite the identifiable elements of theatrical throwback in its Shakespearean and Orientalist choices of repertoire, was a key innovator in Modernism. It is in this chapter that Kelly takes the opportunity to explore the way in which Asche’s work meshed with contemporary issues on the Australian cultural plane: his contribution to the formation of the larrikin stereotype, the incorporation of an Australian colour palette in his work with light and colour (117), and the stage experimentation with states of undress which spoke to an era when popular beach bathing practices were at logger-heads with public protocol (121). This detailed observation of intersections between stage practice and socio-cultural history set Kelly’s work apart from usual ‘stage histories’ and gives her book a unique dimensionality and vim.

Chapter Eight treats the American actress Minnie Tittell Brune, who toured Australia twice with J. C. Williamson’s between 1904 and 1909. What makes Brune unique is the degree to which her Australian stardom exceeded anything she achieved elsewhere, the way in which identifying as an ‘Australian actress’ supported her reputation elsewhere, and the vast following of female fans she attracted. Brune gives Kelly opportunity to explore the processes which were shaping the emergence of mass celebrity entertainment and the

evolving autonomy of young women who used the phenomenon of fandom to ‘produce themselves in social space as modern beings’ (128).

The final chapter of Kelly’s book deals with Maud Jeffries and Roy Redgrave, both of whom arrived in Australia as touring actors but who chose to make it their permanent home. Jeffries’ is the tale of a well-established international star who on her first Australasian tour with Julius Knight received superior billing and above twice his salary and whose iconic status as Mercia (*The Sign of the Cross*) was (like Knight’s Marcus Superbus) cemented in the local imaginary but who married James Nott-Osborne—a grazier from Gundaroo and then retired from her career to raise her family. Roy Redgrave’s life and Australasian work is rendered equally inviting to the reader: the curious marital circumstances of his forbears and the equally curious arrangements which he established, his inimitable charm and creative vision, his dissolute fiscal habits and the part he played or failed to play in the work of raising the son Michael whom he had with actress Daisy Scudamore. Once again, Kelly tracks the Empire Actor’s interactions with the issues of Empire—in this instance Redgrave’s performance as the lead role in Randolph Bedford’s *White Australia; or The Empty North*, a sensationalist drama warning against invasion of Australia. Kelly speculates that this ‘must have supplied Redgrave with a crash course in the complex political and nationalist passions aroused by Australia’s involvements in the imperial relationship’ (156). Kelly acknowledges that Redgrave, unlike all the other actors featured in her book, was a foot-soldier of the ‘empire’s theatrical army’ and points out the uncanny fact that early Australasian films do not preserve the work of the big stars but the labours and the presence of such lesser players on the stage and greater innovators on the cultural scene. In closing her book Kelly reiterates a point that is often overlooked in assessments of the dynamics of ‘Empire’—the extent to which Empire Actors were agents of multidirectional cultural exchange, ‘bearing traces of Australia and New Zealand experience into other regions where they worked’ (160).

The Empire Actors does credit to the vision of its subscribers, to Currency House, and most of all to the research and writing talent of Veronica Kelly. The generous proportions of its hardback format along with its many beautifully placed and arresting illustrations succeed in the task of lavishly reanimating a forgotten world. The book’s appealing strength and arguable weakness is its dual timbre. When reading the book from start to finish a retuning is required on the part of the reader. The virtuosic lexical convolutions of the early theoretical chapters showcase Kelly’s intellectual mastery of her subject areas as she ignites multiple filaments of conversation between them. The later chapters settle into a mode of reflective and engaging story-telling which draws on the earlier conversations while generating their own gentler heat and light.

The Empire Actors is an invaluable resource. The text unearths much that would otherwise have lain forgotten but also nimbly sets its scenes at play amongst the concerns of the Australasian context in which they took place, ably lighting all with a capable skill in contemporary performance theory. The book will appeal to specialists in drama as to general theatre enthusiasts and should be a compulsory reference point for Australian students of

drama and Australian social history recalibrating, as it does, the boundaries between those disciplines.

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