IN SEARCH OF THE COLONIAL 'AUSTRALIAN' PLAYWRIGHT

Veronica Kelly - *University of Queensland*

The title of this paper is replete with shifty terms — 'colonial', 'Australian' and 'playwright', and even 'play', all of which once seemed to me relatively unproblematic but are now fraught with grave instability. These misgivings are the result of several years' work on the University of Queensland project 'Australian Drama 1850-1900'. This incorporates Eric Irvin's work on the identification of plays premiered in Australia from 1789 to 1914, as published in his work *Australian Melodrama* (1981). A recent ARC grant terminating in 1996 has made it possible to expand on his work to complete a computerised database of plays identified as having their premiere in the Australian colonies, and which also records literary details of script content as well as theatrical details of performance runs and analysis of theatrical personnel.

I should explain the nature of the project's archival resources. Our material is derived primarily by sweep-searching daily newspapers of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane (Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia remain to be searched, as does the important Victorian goldfields activity of the 1850s). The information is entered on computer where it will ideally be accessible both for all-over perusal or selective searching on disc by users requiring specific information about colonial Australian drama and theatre. It is divided into four main files, linked by unique keywords. The first, the MAINS, collates information about the play: unique Keyword seven or nine-character (KY); authors's name (AU) and pseudonym if used (NU); gender and dates, if known (PD); the titles or title the play was performed under at various times (TI); dates of performance and/or writing and/or publication (DT); length (LG) if known; breakdown of characters by number and gender (CA); and location of MS, if any. The Abstract (AB) summarises what is known of the play: in the shortest version it at least lists the name and the genre by which it was advertised, with newspaper location verifying this reference. If the play exists either in MS or published form, it is read and summarised; if not, content information is derived from reading all available reviews. The next field (HF) lists historical figures appearing in the play (Hall, Ben; Burke, Robert O'Hara), and ST (special types), lists deviations from the normal twentieth-century paradigms of 'drama' - music, dance etc. Adaptations (AD) gives us literary source where verifiable, and Keywords (KW) a thematic breakdown of content according to a standardised list of concepts (e.g. Eureka, War-Crimean, Folklore, Lit-European, Invasion, Convicts).

Note, there is no field for genre. The integrity of the material as contemporary practice is respected, and we don't attempt to second-guess the nomenclature of the sometimes flowery advertisements, or to impose present-day definitions on a theatre practice which strategically manouvred concepts of genre very differently from those we are now familiar with. A 'farce' may or may not be the same thing as a 'comedietta', and 'extravaganza' and 'burlesque' might be hard to pick apart, but they go in the Abstract as advertised, and also as published

when, which is not unlikely, it may be described differently again; e.g. 'burlesques' may promote themselves to 'operettas' in the printed script.

The next file, PUBLICATIONS, is the smallest, and in format resembles any other conventional bibliography except that one or more versions of the advertised performance title (e.g. *Oberon; or, The King of the Fairies*) may differ from the published title (*Oberon;, or, The Knight and the Caliph's Daughter*).

The second major file, PRODUCTIONS, is much simpler in the information it collates. The keyword (KY) tells us which unique play it refers to. The author (AU) is the short form of the name, and the title (TI) gives the name under which it was performed on this specific date or dates, with 'aka' to alert us if on other occasions it was performed under alternative names. Note: alternative titles commence under 'aka' not after 'or', since lengthy alternative titles are a typical feature of contemporary theatrical nomenclature. Hence *The Maori Queen* is the title under which Whitworth's *Rangatira Wahena; or, the Maori Queen* was produced in 1862 at the Royal Princess's Theatre, Melbourne; the record picks up the run at this particular date and theatre advertised under its shorter title. Dates (DT) give not only opening and closing dates (e.g. 18620728-18620802 for *Rangatira Wahena* at the Sydney Royal Lyceum) but the number of performances (e.g. 6). We are talking repertory rather than en-suite programming practices in this period and a production kept in repertory over a longish time-span could run up a few or many actual performances. Matinees, just coming into vogue at the end of the 1850-1869 period, further complicate a simple date count as indicator of number of performances. The next field (ST) gives location in the order state, city, theatre. Company name (CY) is entered, where such a troupe is named (e.g. Chambers Family). The next field (PI) is a rather ambitious listing of ALL theatrical personnel advertised as involved, listed by theatrical function (e.g. DA, dance arranger; MA, music arranger/selector; LX, lighting/gas/limelight; SA, scenic artist; MG, manager; PF, female performer; PM, male performer, etc).

The fourth and major file, REVIEWS, collects just that. This is a very long and bulky archive, since we have searched just about every extant newspaper in the cities mentioned, and have collected all references, no matter how brief, to the performances we are after, with publication, date, page number and reviewer's name ('Cleofas') where signed. Hence, pantos with their long runs and daily notices have considerably hefty review files.

The classification of the material by fields is meant to enable selective and combined database searches. An enquirer may be after all the plays containing, say, Aboriginal characters, performed in Melbourne between selected dates. Or want to find out how many such plays were performed specifically at the Victoria Theatre, Sydney. Or s/he may be tracing the career of, say, J. R. Greville, and can find him filling at sundry times the various functions of manager, actor, lessee, stage manager, etc. Those tracing the impact of e.g. American culture on the colonial stage can access this by pulling LIT-AMERICAN from the Keywords in the Main file.

From 1850 to 1900 was about the time span I figured I could manage in this funded time, hence the first of my dodgy terms, 'colonial' is relatively clear since the project sits in political terms within the post-gold and pre-Federation period. Not, as has been rightly pointed out, that there is anything intrinsically theatre-historically valid in periodising Australian theatre according to parameters set by imperial or constitutional history. In his review of Richard Waterhouse's *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville*, Richard Fotheringham notes that 1914 is 'fair enough as a marker of the point at which even the most enthusiastic researcher is entitled to collapse with exhaustion' (1993, 183) but in industrial terms the patterns of 'colonial' theatre arguably continues till 1928. Eric Irvin's formidable industriousness did so terminate in 1914, but our project will slice into the continuum at least as arbitrarily, and even earlier. But this does at least afford what in political terms are indisputably five decades of 'colonial' Australian theatre. The present illustrations are from the 1850-69 material available in presently complete form in hard-copy and disc formats (Kelly 1995).

The other terms, 'Australian' and 'playwright', have proved considerably trickier. It is from Irvin's methodology, to take the first one, that our project inherited its definition of 'Australian' plays. He noted plays which received their first performance in this country. The term 'Australian' then, is rigidly defined as referring to a performance with — as far as can be reasonably ascertained in this international touring-oriented period — a local premiere. Thus arguably 'Australian', or Australian-born, figures such as Haddon Chambers, whose bushranger society play *Captain Swift* (1888) premiered outside the country, won't get in - productions of such writers' plays occurring in colonial centres will be for somebody else to chase. Likewise, foreign-written plays with major Australian topical content, e.g. Charles Reade's *It is Never Too Late to Mend*, won't get picked up by the database when performed here. This local-premiere marker is a primarily industrial criterion which cuts through tangles and thickets of nebulous and sometimes implicitly content-oriented definitions of 'Australian'. This content-blindness sometimes throws people, like tyro research assistants, who may be tacitly applying some kind of unexamined mimetic grid to the plays they are dealing with, expecting us to be merely reverently preserving the fossil traces of plays with local mimetic or historical content, or those which pursue 'the Australian identity' via representations of larrikins, bushrangers et al. My response usually is, how then would you classify (for example) Ron Elisha, who writes today? Are his Holocaustic plays 'Australian'? The answer, then as now, must be 'yes'.

Hence George Arabin's adaptation of Harrison Ainsworth's highwayman novel *Rookwood*, which premiered in Sydney in 1851, has in our list as much right to be considered 'Australian' as Charles Edwards' drama *Canowindra: Or The Darkey Highwayman and the Settlers' homes on the Abercrombie* which premiered in Sydney in 1863 and dealt with such topical local notables as Ben Hall, Frank Gardiner and Mad Dog Morgan. And, to leave the arguably nationally relevant outlaw theme far behind, both the above plays have equal but not superior status to George Fawcett Rowe's drama *Napoleon I, or the Fortunes of St Aubyn* (1861), or Robert Whitworth's *Maximilian: or The Empress and the Traitor* (1867), dealing with the failed French attempt to set up a Mexican empire. One could multiply

such instances of local writing with international themes, in genres spread over farce, minstrel shows, burlesque, melodrama, comic musical skits for travelling shows, even opera and opera-comique.

What are the gains and losses of this essentially theatre-historical and content-blind definition? The gains, as I see them, lie in the cutting down on value-judgements about the 'national' which are necessarily themselves self-blind and historically bound. While it is delightful to find in our files plays with an emphasis on the purely mimetic or topical, application of such criteria to the category 'Australian drama' is self-limiting, and not enabling for research into the full range of colonial cultural history. Insisting — assuming — that the term 'Australian' be applied to, say, bushranger farces but withheld from Dickens adaptations is to enforce a discursive construction of the national which is bounded by implicitly realistic and anachronistic genre expectations. Also, the privileging of a narrow range of such mimetic material is to prolong an archaic construct of 'Australian' which has been amply criticised for its ethnocentric, genre and gender biases, and which is in any case well past its shelf date.

The rather catholic collection of early post-gold subject material which our project has analysed and classified reveals what one might term a pre-nationalist industry. This industry's opportunistic and financially-driven inclusiveness makes it hospitable and permeable to the pressures of an internationalising commercial popular culture; pressures which, as today, have little use for nationalist cultural protectionism. Although our project is itself fairly parish-pump in detaching locally-written plays away from the background international repertoire into which they hoped to insert themselves, the theatre-historical criterion of the world premiere does at least indicate how local colonial writers responded to the currents of nineteenth-century international commercial culture, adapting and intervening in this vast industry. I'd like to think that our post-nationalist enterprise may prove appealing to researchers tracing the pre-history of that post-nationalist discourse, multi-culturalism. The Project would prove useful for those who need to find out that Australian popular culture was never as monolithic, insular or bush-obsessed as some recent discourses mystifying fancifully monolithic 'Anglo-Celtic' cultural energies might like to suppose.

The down side of this strict, and in some ways arbitrary, criterion of first performance in this country is that the data we thus foreground may shine with unnatural lustre against the indispensible background of the general run of the international repertoire as performed in the colonies over the span of this fifty-year period. Local writing accounts for a tiny percentage of the total colonial theatrical output. Our data may enable more sophisticated examininations of the full picture of colonial performance culture, but it cannot substitute for them. Such exercises have been in fact performed at high levels of sophistication by many scholars — Richard Waterhouse (1990) on the impact of the minstrel troupes and of American popular culture generally; Richard Fotheringham (1992) on the connections between the theatrical and sporting industries; Josephine Fantasia (1996) on the vital J.C. Williamson entrepreneurial empire; and just about everybody in Harold Love's indispensible but out-of-print *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History*.

Currency's compendious and monumental *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (1995) is the best authoritative source to date on current research output in Australian theatre across two centuries.

My misgivings about our bounded definition of an 'Australian' play lies more precisely in the area of its central and distinguishing feature — its author-centredness. This has the consequence of occluding the role of audience readings and cultural competencies in the early construction of 'Australian' meanings. If used uncritically, our project is going to give the unwary a narrowly selective perspective on how popular performance overall collaborated and intervened in constructing colonial Australian subjectivities and collective cultural meanings. A play of foreign origin can be as readily recuperable for local uses as one of local origin. *L'Africaine; or, the Fickle Geographer and the Fair Aboriginal*, Akhurst's 1866 operatic burlesque written for Christy's Minstrels, is certainly locally-written, and probably gave its audiences satirical perspectives on Meyerbeer's opera and on its local ethnic applicability. But what, to advert to the area examined in Waterhouse's minstrel show study, of the Australian readings of the long supply of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* plays? Whether locally-written, Australian re-mountings of foreign scripts or touring vehicles from abroad, these various 'Uncle Tom' performances provided material for the audience's various decodings of images and narratives of nation, race, slavery, christianity, female resistance, and much more. For more middle-class inflections of female-interest drama, the endless *East Lynne* plays, of indisputably international inspiration, would be the obvious place to look for the specifically feminine readings and needs of colonial audiences. *East Lynne*, as received by either a female or a discursively feminine-identified audience, is as susceptible to local meanings as any bushranger show (Kelly 1996, 120).

In Garnet Walch's 1874 Melbourne panto *Adamanta the Proud Princess of Profusia, and her Six Unlucky Suitors*, a local fantasia on the Turandot theme, we seemingly have a jackpot — local writing plus the popular New Woman social theme. But of course Walch's comic dealings with contemporary feminism need to be contextualised by his show's peculiar modification via such literary and industrial factors as its comic and fantastic genre, its immediate performance values, its *opéra bouffe* contextualisation through its performance by Lyster's musical troupe, and above all by contemporary popular discourses surrounding feminism. How Lyster's production 'did' the stage princess Adamanta, who is 'averse to marriage', can only be sited by examining not only 1870s French and English opéra-comique, burlesque and pantomime as performed in the colonies, but also the up-market operas and melodramas which they cannibalised. We need to know how the entire theatre enterprise articulated ice-queen figures across the range of genres, in order to specify how the Walch/Lyster show is specifically using it. The good news is that a researcher who turns up *Adamanta the Proud Princess* by searching under the term 'feminism' in the Keywords field of our MAIN files will be alerted to the existence of its local theatrical inflections — the bad news is that such a find is not of itself going to turn up the whole story.

What, lastly, is a 'play' in the context of colonial theatre, whose range of popular genres was considerably more various than our own? Eric Irvin's choice

was to exclude the tropically bewildering profusion of adaptations in musical-spectacular genres: burlesque, minstrel shows and pantomimes. In pragmatic terms, he was right in so doing, in that such a procedure creates a more stress-free life. But their omission not only obscures the visibility of local stage writing practice and identifiable writers, but it has set me numerous knotty problems to solve which have in fact provided me a faster education than any other aspect of the project. It lead to a search to identify endless proliferation of localised or performer-driven adaptations — from novels, other plays, other burlesques English and even Australian — as colonial theatre cannibalised itself in an endless, and endlessly bewildering, play of self-referentiality. Post-modern preferences for bricolage, pastiche and the play over surface over depth are nothing new to those who've churned through this colonial material. These are merely the distinguishing features of an internationalising commercial popular culture.

Hence our files abound in the flag 'adapt', posted after an author's name to indicate that somebody, somewhere in the Australian bohemian demi-monde where writers for the stage flourished, has been at it again. 'Anon', and his or her close relative 'Anon adapt' are two of our more prolific authors. Hence the 'author' of *Ali Baba; or, The Thirty-nine Thieves* at the Melbourne Royal commencing 18640903, which is (presumably) adapted from H. J. Byron's 1863 extravaganza *Ali Baba; or, The Thirty-nine Thieves, in Accordance with the Author's Habit of Taking One Off*, is registered in the MAINS database as 'Anon adapt'. We know that an Anon was adapting from advertisements ('adapted expressly for the Theatre Royal') and from the *Argus* review of 18640905 which comments on the witticisms of 'some local joker'. Such citations bring to notice the existence of a flourishing community of semi-artisan, semi-professional stage writers, who found some employment servicing the immediate needs of managers and actors for fresh topical material. The eventual construction of the professional category 'playwright' from the hack-status 'dramatic author' was the outcome of various adventitious legal and industrial reforms regarding copyright and performance right, combined with the financial exigencies of hard-headed actor-managers. Early-century theatre-literary functions based on the economist craft model of stage writers as suppliers of raw material to the theatrical industry only eventually modulated into the bourgeois professional model, and the files for 1850-1869 show this paradigm shift underway in the Australian colonies.

The precise professional placing of the Australian colonial dramatic author has however yet to be specifically investigated, and I'd be hesitant to apply the English model simply by default. Our fifties and sixties files show that colonial dramatic authors were a diverse and many-interested lot, with landed gentry, 'ladies', and clergyman all gaining performances of their pieces. Literatteurs such as Meyer Isaacs, R. H. Horne and Francis Belfield tried their luck. So did the odd distinguished press critic like James Smith, who devised a farce *A Broil at the Cafe* (1860) set in Melbourne's Café de Paris, and a topical historical drama *Garibaldi, the Hero of Palermo* (1860); or J. E. Neild who wrote two farces, one of which, *Turtle Soup*, (1865) jokes about the dire consequences of human consumption of diseased cattle. The amateurs produced material for their troupes, as did C. G. (or else C. A.) Wright in *The Merchant of Cadiz and the Spanish Bride* for the Brisbane

Amateur Dramatic Club in 1867, and educationalists (Miss Yonge) evolved material for their pupils, e.g. her classical pageant *The apple of Discord* written for performance at Mrs Saclier's Academy, Wynyard Square in 1865. But the largest number of stage writers come firstly from journalism, and secondly from within the theatrical profession itself — actors and managers looking for suitable re-usable material to tour. Journo playwrights include *int. al.* F. M. Soutten, W. M. Akhurst, Garnet Walch, G. R. Morton, Walter Cooper, Mary Fortune, Whitworth, Archibald Murray. Actor-managers lead the list of authors with a sustained interest in generating fresh local material, to be toured extensively around the Australasian colonies as the relatively small audience bases soon exhausted available material. The 1860s career of George Fawcett Rowe is a case in point, as later are those of George Darrell, Wybert Reeve and Alfred Dampier, major figures who arrived here in the 1870s. The other actor-manager arriving in this decade, James Cassius Williamson, is unlocatable in our files: his use of locally-written or local-interest theatre is conspicuous by its absence even in this early period of his lengthy management career.

Our collection of this adapted and localised material does however bring one close to the limit cases of what can be called dramatic authorship. Adapting a major pantomime might be a ramshackle collaborative business, but it was still a major undertaking - a lot was riding on it financially, and having a known 'name' of the adaptor on the advertisements seemed to be thought of as a drawcard. It is amongst the numerous examples of burlesque and farce activity, which unlike the published pantomime libretti have left comparatively few scripts for examination, that one's sense of an actual writerly presence thins out to a very faint trace indeed. Frequently no adaptor or localiser is cited in advertisements, just the telling phrase 'new locals nightly'. Or else reviews will disclose sometimes surprising details of specific localisation and topical jokes of which the adverts give no hint.

Who is the 'writer' here — the gagging actors; the decoding and contextualising reviewers; the in-the-know audience whose reactions signalled that a local 'hit' had scored; or some entity who can be detached and identified as a 'writer'? Clearly, somebody (or somebodies) were doing it, and that's as far as it can be pushed. So 'Anon adapt' is entered yet again in our files. Some of the localisations seem not just opportunistic but routinely so. The files disclose play titles *Did You Ever Send Your Wife to St Kilda/Emerald Hill/Parramatta/Sandgate* grouped around the early 1850s and 1860s. These are clearly performances, under another name, of John Stirling Coyne's 1846 farce *Did you Ever Send Your Wife to Camberwell?* How do we know we are dealing with a significant adaptation here, no matter by whom, at a period when reviews disclose little information? Basically, we don't. In recurring moments of impatience I have resolved to purge the lot of them, but seem always to decide against it. We have discovered a localising impetus, no matter how vestigial, and this of itself probably tells us something about the evolving self-positioning of colonial theatre. In the later material from 1870 the 'Anons' and 'Anon adapts' thin out to almost zero — by around 1870 it seems the Colonial Playwright has arrived.

At most, the Project hopes to identify and collate verifiable information and evidence of those known and unknown persons who in the colonial theatre laboured in the task we now categorise as local 'writing' 'Writing' is of course a notoriously slippery category and one which has ever had scant relevance to theatre activity, where polysemic play-making by varied collaborative skills supercedes the literary-derived prestige of the Author. We nonetheless are now in a stronger position to discern to what varied themes and narratives colonial 'writers' for the stage bent their attentions, and literary and cultural historians can be alerted to the task of discovering why and how they were at any particular moment pursuing particular strands of material. And for theatre historians there exists in the PI field of the PRODUCTIONS file an archive of theatre-historical information about the industrial practices of colonial theatre and its many named and anonymous participants.

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