

Flicking the Switch: Vaudeville Traditions and Myth-Making in *Keating!*

MARA LAZZAROTTO DAVIS

While the genre of Australian music theatre is descended from the American tradition it has never been subject to an equivalent level of academic attention. Scholars in the field have often commented on the “extraordinary neglect” of Australian works of music theatre in academic publications.¹ Peter Fitzpatrick argues that the reason for this neglect is not that it is just a “cultural peculiarity” of the Australian context but that it has been a challenge for music theatre scholarship in general to adequately respond to the “hybrid nature of the genre, and the correspondingly eclectic critical discourses and kinds of expertise that it calls into play.”² Casey Bennetto’s *Keating!* is an example of an Australian work of music theatre that calls for a type of analysis which can adequately deal with specific issues of genre. This paper draws upon historical, musicological and theatrical discourses in order to argue that *Keating!* can be interpreted as being in dialogue with traditions of vaudeville performance, a form of popular entertainment of North American origin which was extremely popular in Australian society at the turn of the twentieth century. Additionally, it is the contention of this paper that in *Keating!*, tropes of vaudeville performance assist to create and perpetuate a mythic re-telling of the period in Australian history in which the eponymous character Paul Keating was Prime Minister of Australia. In doing so, this paper will also situate the work in the broader Australian music theatre landscape, and suggest potential ways forward for analysis of Australian works of music theatre both past and present.

Keating! has not yet been the subject of significant scholarly analysis. Jonathan Bollen et al’s *Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s* makes brief mention of *Keating!* in its

¹ Peter Fitzpatrick, “Whose turn to Shout? The Crisis in Australian Music Theatre,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 38 (2001): 25.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

introduction but does not examine the work further.³ Brian Carroll's *Vintage Keating* contains a great deal of useful background information, a thorough plot summary and a list of awards the production received, but also lacks in-depth analysis of the production.⁴ The most significant published material to date is a short essay by Jack Teiwes, published in the volume *Telling Stories: Australian Life and Literature 1935–2012*. Teiwes's essay is a brief yet insightful reading of *Keating!* that not only contextualises the work as an important piece of Australian theatre, but also comments on some of its intriguing aesthetic features.⁵ This paper intends to contribute to existing scholarship in this field and expand on Teiwes's essay through close analysis of this key Australian work.

Keating! is a comedic and musical dramatisation of the rise and fall of Paul Keating's political career, and was the first musical created by Australian writer, musician and broadcaster Casey Bennetto (born 1969). Bennetto was not only responsible for the original idea for the work, but composed both the music and lyrics, and even performed in certain seasons of the work. He was inspired to create the show after Keating's successor and political rival, John Howard, was re-elected in 2001 for a fourth term as Prime Minister.⁶ Howard features as a character in the work along with a colourful cast of key personalities from the era: Bob Hawke, Keating's predecessor as Prime Minister; John Hewson, leader of the Liberal Party; Alexander Downer, Liberal Party Member and Shadow Treasurer; Cheryl Kernot, leader of the Australian Democrats, and Gareth Evans, minister in both the Hawke and Keating governments. It is a production that traverses the boundaries between comedy, music theatre and drama. The small cast function in tandem with the on-stage band, which plays a significant role in the production, often singing along with characters or shouting words of encouragement (or disapproval). Some members of the band also play characters. The story of

³ Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander and Bruce Parr, *Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2008), 13–14.

⁴ Brian Carroll, *Vintage Keating* (Kenthurst, N.S.W: Rosenberg Publishing, 2010).

⁵ Jack Teiwes, "The musical Australia had to have, *Keating!*" in *Telling Stories: Australian Life and Literature 1935–2012*, eds. Tanya Dalziell and Paul Genoni (Clayton, VIC.: Monash University Publishing, 2013), 553.

⁶ Carroll, *Vintage Keating*, 174.

Keating! is told through a series of songs and is devoid of spoken dialogue. Consequently, the lyrics of the songs function as a libretto in this context, and this libretto contains many references to Keating's colourful turns of phrase. There is no clear narrative running through the work—rather, the songs act as a roughly chronological series of vignettes that create a nostalgic portrait of Australian political life in the early 1990s.

Keating! is based on the premise that politics and show business are closely related fields, and a politics-as-showbiz metaphor runs through the production. Keating himself often made such comparisons, once remarking, “basically I think a lot of politicians are frustrated entertainers.”⁷ More notable, perhaps, is Keating's now infamous comment that sometimes in politics you have to “flick the switch to vaudeville.”⁸ In this spirit, Keating himself is cast as the “song and dance” man of the piece—a staple of the vaudeville genre. In his introductory number, “Do it in Style,” he dons a top hat, grabs a cane, and performs a short tap dance break during the song. While some reviewers have made reference to vaudeville in passing, it will become evident that there is far more than a superficial association with the vaudeville genre at play in the work.⁹

Keating! premiered at the 2005 Melbourne International Comedy Festival and was extremely well-received. It won several awards including The Barry (for the best show of the festival) and then went on to play numerous seasons in venues across the country.¹⁰ Building on this success, esteemed Australian theatre director Neil Armfield was engaged to re-develop the work in 2006. This new production, initially performed at Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney, was extended from one to two acts and six new songs were composed.¹¹ This revamped version of the work was also

⁷ Paul Keating, *Shut up and listen and you might learn something!*, ed. Edna Carew (Sydney: New Endeavour Press, 1990), 27.

⁸ Sean Nicholls, “Meet Luke Foley: Labor's reluctant leader,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 10, 2015, 30.

⁹ Reviewer Stephen Dunne remarked that the show ‘decisively throws the switch to vaudeville,’ but does not elaborate any further. Stephen Dunne, “Keating!” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 20, 2006, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts-reviews/keating/2006/11/06/1162661580136.html>.

¹⁰ Carroll, *Vintage Keating*, 175.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

enormously successful. It was televised by the national broadcaster, filmed for DVD sale, and was performed in most capital cities and a number of regional centres throughout the country.¹² According to a 2008 *Sydney Morning Herald* article, 223,879 tickets were bought throughout the course of its run.¹³ This is quite an astonishing figure for a show that first premiered in Melbourne's Trades Hall—a venue that seats just 90 people. The success even surprised Bennetto, who had not anticipated such a huge reaction to the work.

It's utterly, utterly surprising . . . when you start doing a show for the comedy festival your main concern is if anyone is going to show on opening night, are we going to make it through the season and does it make sense? You're not thinking (any further).¹⁴

Gabriella Coslovich's review of *Keating!* argues that the success of the show is due to the way that it responded to a "hunger" for "wholly Australian stories."¹⁵ Peter Wyllie Johnson's 2004 research on the state of the Australian music theatre landscape has shown that this is a significant achievement, as there have been limited works of music theatre which have engaged with local content or concerns, and even fewer have enjoyed critical acclaim and commercial success.¹⁶ Indeed, *Keating!* is an outlier in the sense that it is relatively rare for Australian works of music theatre to boast Australian creators, performers *and* subject matter.¹⁷ Also in 2004, the Melbourne Arts Centre curated an exhibition that explored the history of the music theatre genre in Australia, entitled *Making a*

¹² For the sake of continuity, it is this DVD version of the Belvoir production directed by Neil Armfield that will be referred to throughout this paper.

¹³ Clare Morgan, "All good things must end," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 2, 2008, 14–15.

¹⁴ Kilmeny Adie, "This Keating is a winner," *The Illawarra Mercury*, February 1, 2007, 26.

¹⁵ Gabriella Coslovich, "Bleeding heart songs from the 'arse end,'" *The Australian*, August 11, 2007, 13.

¹⁶ Peter Wyllie Johnston, "'Australian-ness in musical theatre': a bran nue dae for Australia?," *Australasian Drama Studies* 45 (2004): 157–179.

¹⁷ Wyllie Johnston, "'Australian-ness in musical theatre.'" Johnston divides all Australian music theatre works into six categories. *Keating!*, in my reading, fits into the fifth category—all-Australian but excluding Indigenous elements.

Song and Dance: The Quest for An Australian Musical. Implicit in the title of this exhibition is the uncertain status of the Australian musical: a form Hilary Bell suggested in 2005 is regarded as a “musical *terra nullius*.”¹⁸ Despite the continuing success of imported American musicals, Bell states “it has been suggested that The Musical is meaningless to Australians, that on a fundamental level we resist the idea that the protagonist arrives at a point where they must sing.”¹⁹ *Keating!* defies such a statement—not only was it a success, but its main character is an all-singing, all-dancing former Prime Minister. This sentiment has also been voiced by Teiwes, who argues that *Keating!* “defies its own improbability to triumph as a piece of entertainment.”²⁰

An examination of the literature regarding the broader Australian music theatre landscape confirms that the genre has been neglected in both academic writing and analysis of its place in the cultural landscape. Wyllie Johnston and Fitzpatrick both make this claim, with Johnson remarking that “whereas Australian art, literature, films, plays and even serious music have all been lauded, acknowledged and written about to varying degrees, Australian musicals have seldom been close to centre stage in analyses of our cultural life.”²¹ While music theatre from other parts of the world has enjoyed a great deal of attention, there has been limited attention placed on Australian works. This is despite the success of works such as Millar and Rutherford’s *The Hatpin* (2008), which toured to the New York Music Theatre Festival, Eddie Perfect’s song cycle *Songs from the Middle* (2010) and hybrid works like *Keating!*. There are some notable exceptions, namely the publications that discuss Australian Indigenous works such as *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) and *The Sapphires* (2004) (both of which have recently been adapted as films) and the October 2004 issue of the journal *Australasian*

¹⁸ Hilary Bell, “Song and dance,” *Storyline* 11 (2005): 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Teiwes, “The musical Australia had to have,” 553.

²¹ Wyllie Johnston, “Australian-ness in musical theatre,” 157.

Drama Studies devoted to the subject of Australian Music Theatre.²² However, Australian music theatre to this day still eludes in-depth scholarly analysis, and remains, to use Johnston's words, at "the periphery of the culture."²³

It is possible that this neglect is symptomatic of the fact that defining the boundaries of such a diverse genre has proved challenging. Gallasch and Ginters have offered that Australian music theatre "[entails] grand opera, chamber opera, music theatre in the narrow if often simultaneously expansive sense—experimental and political—and the musical."²⁴ However, Corinna Bonshek has argued that while this definition is "comprehensive in its scope, this inclusiveness tends to flatten distinctions between forms, emptying the term "music theatre" of all recognisable content."²⁵ This is a salient point. Works that traverse the precarious boundary between music and theatre have varied aesthetic implications and draw on diverse theatrical and musical traditions, and analysis of these works necessitates an awareness of this problematic facet of the field.

As a work of music theatre, *Keating!* has resisted categorisation. Descriptions of *Keating!* from critics and commentators are widely varied. For instance, some reviewers chose not to engage with the aesthetic dilemmas the work presents by taking the full title—*Keating! The Musical We Had to Have*—at face value, referring to it as

²² Published works that discuss *Bran Nue Dae* include Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, *Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 56–60; Paul Makeham, "Singing the landscape: *Bran Nue Dae*," *Australasian Drama Studies* 28 (1996): 117–132 and Wylie Johnston, "Australian-ness in musical theatre." For *The Sapphires* see Therese Davis, "Locating *The Sapphires*: transnational and cross-cultural dimensions of an Australian Indigenous musical film," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 28 (2014): 594–604; Rosanne Kennedy, "Soul music dreaming: *The Sapphires*, the 1960s and transnational memory," *Memory Studies* 6 (2013): 331–344, and Jon Stratton, "The Sapphires were not the Australian Supremes: neoliberalism, history and pleasure in *The Sapphires*," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 29 (2015): 17–31.

²³ Wylie Johnston, "Australian-ness in musical theatre," 157–158.

²⁴ Keith Gallasch and Laura Ginters, "Australian music theatre: continuity and hybridity," *Australasian Drama Studies* 45 (2004): 3.

²⁵ Corinna Bonshek, "Australian 'deterritorialised' music theatre: a theoretical and creative exploration," (PhD diss., University of Western Sydney, 2006), 9.

a musical in their writing and leaving it at that.²⁶ Others, like Coslovich, attest that people flocked to *Keating!* in spite of the genre, remarking that *Keating!* has been “embraced by people who would rather be flogged with lettuce than sit through the schmaltz and wafer-thin plots of conventional musicals.”²⁷ Similarly, Teiwes argues that despite its title *Keating!* “isn’t really a musical, either structurally or musically.”²⁸

One way in which *Keating!* does align with traditional musicals is in the way it deals with questions of national identity. The way that the American musical in particular has operated as a carrier of national identity has been explicated in Raymond Knapp’s 2005 book, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*. Knapp argues that American musicals developed out of a need to “define and refine what precisely it meant to be American.”²⁹ He says that the form is inherently concerned with “creating, developing, or in some cases merely exploiting a variety of American mythologies.”³⁰ For Knapp, music theatre has proved an effective forum in this sense, as it “not only brought a specific audience together within a constructed community, but also sent that audience out into a larger community armed with songs to be shared.”³¹ *Keating!* arguably carries out a similar function, as it is involved in a comparable process of “defining and refining” Bennetto’s notion of what it is to be Australian—and achieves this by mythologising a particular period in Australian history. However, in pursuit of representing a sense of national identity, it does not adopt the tropes of the quintessentially American musical theatre. Instead, by reading the work through the structural and

²⁶ One such example can be found in Cameron Woodhead, “*Keating!* stages a musical comeback,” *The Age*, April 14, 2007, 27.

²⁷ Coslovich, “Bleeding heart songs from the ‘arse end,’” 13. Keating had once said that John Hewson’s performance as leader of the opposition was like “being flogged with a warm lettuce.”

²⁸ Jack Teiwes, “*Keating!* Company B,” *Australian Stage Online*, November 13, 2007, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/sydney/Keating!-company-b-877.html>.

²⁹ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

ideological principles of vaudeville performance, *Keating!* can be seen to fulfil an analogous function in an Australian context.

At first, applying a vaudeville paradigm may seem anachronistic, given that *Keating!* is a work that deals so patently with Australian content. However, a historical examination of the vaudeville genre reveals that the histories of American music theatre and popular song and its Australian counterpart have long been intertwined. The Australian public were quick to embrace American music theatre forms when troupes of travelling performers first arrived in the colonies in the mid-nineteenth century. Variety theatre, minstrelsy and vaudeville shows, in various configurations, were extremely popular in Australia from the mid-nineteenth century right up until the advent of cinema in the 1930s.³² Richard Waterhouse argues that the Australian variety of vaudeville was not a “replica” of its American or British counterpart; but rather, it combined the “traditions of minstrelsy with the innovations of music hall and vaudeville.”³³ It was a highly variable form of popular entertainment, but “whatever precise form it took, variety entertainment was a regular, taken-for-granted feature of Australian life in the late Victorian era.”³⁴ Historian Robert Snyder claims that vaudeville was built on the simple idea of “something for everyone,”³⁵ and as a result, the genre aimed to attract a broad audience and to appeal across class divides.³⁶ The American vaudeville from which the Australian variety derives was intended to be “clean, wholesome, respectable entertainment.”³⁷ Vaudeville shows did not have a unifying theme or narrative; rather, they were compilations of varied acts and performers. It must therefore be understood as a hybrid form of entertainment, and generic distinctions between vaudeville, legitimate theatre and musical

³² Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788–1914* (Kensington, N.S.W: New South Wales University Press, 1990), 133.

³³ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁴ Melissa Bellanta, “The Larrikin’s Hop: Larrikinism and Late Colonial Popular Theatre,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 52 (2008): 132.

³⁵ Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xiii.

³⁶ Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville*, 127.

³⁷ Charles Stein, *American Vaudeville as seen by its Contemporaries* (New York: Da Capo Inc, 1984), xiii.

comedy were “very fine” and “frequently blurred.”³⁸ McLean describes vaudeville as a “highly derivative and eclectic form,” and notes that it did not develop from a “central tradition of either the theater or the itinerant entertainment, but rather combined the elements from a number of established forms to appeal to a new and different sensibility.”³⁹ This is certainly an apt paradigm in which to be viewing a work like *Keating!*, where hybridity of form is a key feature of the construction of the work.

The transformation of the title of the show underscores the importance of genre as a framing device for the work. The original title was *Keating! The Country Soul Opera We Had to Have*, and it was later changed to *Keating! The Musical We Had to Have*. Both titles reference Keating’s now infamous statement about the economic recession of the early 1990s that, in Australia, “we had to have.” These two alternate names for the work bring the idea of hybridity to the forefront. In addition, the Belvoir press release invokes this by playfully describing the work as “part French farce, part Greek tragedy, and all Australian history.”⁴⁰ While this does not really accurately reflect the aesthetic of the work, this phrase and the two alternate titles are evidence of humorous (but important) acknowledgments of hybridity as a significant feature of its construction. The alteration of the title demonstrates that Bennetto and Armfield were more concerned about the impact of the title than its ability to accurately encapsulate the genre of the work.

Jack Teiwes has argued that *Keating!*’s “unique makeup” arises from its “non-theatrical” origins, and prefers to see it as stemming from a long tradition of Australian musical comedy rather than as a descendent of the dramatic theatre.⁴¹ He cites Tripod, Eddie Perfect and Tim Minchin as examples of contemporary artists who are working in a similar way to Bennetto.⁴² While this is partly true, the tradition of Australian comedy upon which Teiwes draws is itself derived from vaudeville. Richard Harris’s essay “The Funny Country,” which chronicles the role of comedy in the formation of Australian national identity, argues that although Australian comedy

³⁸ Stein, *American Vaudeville*, xi–xii.

³⁹ Albert McLean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 33.

⁴⁰ ‘Keating!’, Belvoir, accessed August 23, 2015, <http://belvoir.com.au/productions/Keating!/>.

⁴¹ Teiwes, “The musical Australia had to have,” 553.

⁴² *Ibid.*

began to really flourish in the early 1970s the process had actually started a century earlier, and that vaudeville “played a major role in shaping our emerging sense of humour into something distinctly Australian.”⁴³ He goes on to say:

Australians have always been attracted to this kind of humour, often referred to as observational humour, which requires audiences to recognise the cultural or historical context of the joke in order to find it funny. This also extends to the way in which the joke is told. Apart from giving a room full of people a good laugh, it has a tremendous ability to draw them together by enabling them to collectively share memories. Certain kinds of comedy can play a major role in facilitating the process whereby societies define and celebrate their heritage.⁴⁴

Vaudeville, historically, was a space where a process of defining and refining national identity occurred. Historian Patrick Joyce has described the way in which the variety theatre (of which vaudeville was an off-shoot) acted as a “laboratory of social style and self-definition.”⁴⁵ Understanding aspects of the vaudeville genre, and the traditions of practice it gave rise to, can assist to illuminate how *Keating!* explores notions of Australian identity and experience in 21st century Australia.

Keating! capitalises on the way that theatrical traditions influenced by vaudeville’s hybridity are engaged in the creation of social and cultural mythologies. This relationship between vaudeville, ritual and myth has been theorised by Alfred McLean, who sees vaudeville as more than just mere entertainment, commenting that it “arose in an era of crisis to offer the American people a definitive rhythm, a series of gestures which put man back into the center of his world, a sense of the human community, and an effective emotional release.”⁴⁶ In a rapidly changing world, vaudeville was a forum in which “historically significant value judgments” were developed and crystallised.⁴⁷ McLean argues that it

⁴³ Richard Harris, “The Funny Country,” in *The Abundant Culture: Meaning and Significance in Everyday Australia*, eds. David Heaton, Joy Hooton and Donald Horne (St Leonards, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 92.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Patrick Joyce in Bellanta, “The Larrikin’s Hop,” 142.

⁴⁶ McLean, *American Vaudeville*, 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., ix.

created a “fantasy on the stage,” a “glorified and idealized” version of life, and that it ultimately became “not only a significant social institution but also a mythic enactment—through ritual—of the underlying aspirations of the American people.”⁴⁸ Vaudeville is thus engaged in a process of creating a common folklore—a “symbolic discourse which connotes more for its proper audience than it does to objective observers” through the act of performance.⁴⁹

Recognising vaudeville traditions in *Keating!* sheds light on how the show’s creators, Bennetto and later Armfield, have crafted a folkloric re-telling of the Keating period. The mythological structure presented in *Keating!* is foregrounded in the way that personality traits of Paul Keating are amplified and caricatured in the show. Robert Forster describes Mike McLeish’s portrayal of Keating as having a “youthfulness he never had in public life.”⁵⁰ Indeed, all facets of his persona—mannerisms, charisma, looks—are exaggerated. This has, of course, a great comic effect, but also works to transform Keating into a mythological character. Other characters’ personalities are exaggerated in the opposite direction, again resulting in comic but ultimately negative caricatures. John Howard, for example, is portrayed as an archetypal villain. One of Howard’s numbers, “Power,” a slow tango in a minor key, portrays him as an uncompromising and vengeful figure who will do anything to get to the top:

HOWARD:

They’ll pay for every time I scraped and bowed and cowered,
I’ll do what must be done,
To make John Howard number one.

By contrast, Hawke’s character is portrayed as a buffoon. At the beginning of the show, the band vamp an “oom pah pah” accompaniment while actor Terry Serio interacts with the audience. He first appears at the top of the seating bank, holding a microphone and wearing a garish blazer with “AUSTRALIA” emblazoned all over it. He is portrayed as a stereotypical “ocker” figure, whose character is in stark contrast to Keating’s slick and

⁴⁸ McLean, *American Vaudeville*, 10, 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁰ Robert Forster, “A West Side Story – Casey Bennetto’s *Keating!*,” *The Monthly*, February 2007, 50.

cosmopolitan persona.⁵¹ Hawke's songs also lack clever rhymes or inspirational statements, which positions him as subordinate to Keating's witty, deliberate lyrics. But the most strident example of Bennetto's mythologising is the number "Historical Revisionism" in which history is rewritten. In the mythic vaudevillian dreamland of *Keating!*, Paul Keating defeats John Howard to win the 1996 federal election. We hear reprises of Keating's previous songs—"Do It in Style" and "The Ruler of the Land"—as Keating delivers the victory speech that he never actually gave:

KEATING:

I thought no victory could be sweeter
I thought no day could dawn so bright
I thank my lovely wife Annita
She's been out the back all night
Don't need no glorious procession
Don't need no streamers to be tossed
Just wanna hear this man's concession.

HOWARD:

Well I'm sorry... that I lost.

In order to render Paul Keating's story mythic, Bennetto must necessarily elevate the protagonist to the level of demigod. By mythologising Keating as an almost messianic figure, Bennetto and Armfield are working against the notion that it is "perhaps not in the Australian character to ascribe heroism to our leaders."⁵² The strongest example of this in the work is the Act One finale, an Elvis-style number called "Sweet." As the number draws to a close, the onstage band shouts, "We Want Paul!" over and over as the song builds in intensity. McLeish embellishes the vocal line by riffing and dances wildly as oversized letters reading "KEATING" light up behind the band and begin to flash. What "Sweet" demonstrates is the idea espoused by McLean regarding the way that vaudeville can provide "not the happy ending but the happy moment, not fulfilment at the end of some career rainbow but a

⁵¹ An 'ocker' is slang for a stereotypical Australian 'everyman' character. It generally refers to a white male who speaks with a broad Australian accent, uses vulgar language, slang terms, and is a heavy drinker.

⁵² Teiwes, "The musical Australia had to have," 554.

sensory, psychically satisfying here-and-now.”⁵³ Bennetto presents his suave, exuberant depiction of Keating as someone that the public can rally around—as someone that “we want.” This seemingly highly partisan treatment of material should not be considered a flaw, but rather, an important feature of the construction of the work and the way that it is in dialogue with the vaudeville tradition. As Melissa Bellanta has said, “to criticise variety for its lack of realism... is to misunderstand its logic and appeal.”⁵⁴ The flexibility with which Bennetto treats history is an important factor in explaining how he creates the mythic retelling of the Keating years.

The decidedly pro-Keating stance of the production is further evidence that there is more than just biographical storytelling at play. There is no evidence that Bennetto is attempting to portray a balanced view of history. On the contrary, he has openly stated “this is unashamedly pro-Keating, in fact ridiculously pro-Keating. We’ve actually rearranged the facts to suit our own agenda.”⁵⁵ This has been widely acknowledged by critics including Alexander Downer, who wrote a short piece in response to *Keating!* entitled “The satire we had to have.”⁵⁶ Despite the fact that Downer’s infamous controversy involving his appearance at a charity event in a pair of fishnet stockings is lampooned in the production, ultimately Downer regards the work in a positive light. This is indicated by the final extolling remark with which he closes the essay: “Whatever you think of Keating, this is the show for you.”⁵⁷ He has also commented that his “overall take was that *Keating!* the musical was far better than Keating the prime minister.”⁵⁸ These comments demonstrate that Downer understands and accepts the way that the mythological nature of Keating’s tenure is played out. Even if *Keating!* does lean to the left side of politics, within broader discussions of Keating’s legacy people from the opposite side of

⁵³ McLean, *American Vaudeville*, 11.

⁵⁴ Bellanta, “The Larrikin’s Hop,” 134.

⁵⁵ Casey Bennetto in Gary Smith, “Kirribilli capers,” *The Daily Telegraph*, August 5, 2005, 76.

⁵⁶ Alexander Downer, “The satire we had to have: Keating!” in *The Best Australian Humorous Writing*, eds. Andrew O’Keefe and Steve Vizard (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 163–165.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁵⁸ Alexander Downer, quoted in Gabriella Coslovich, “Bleeding Heart Songs from the ‘Arse End,’” 13.

the political spectrum have acknowledged, independent of disagreements regarding policy, the lasting impact of his style of government. As Greg Barns writes, “One does not have to sign off on all, or any, aspects or specifics of the Keating record in office to appreciate that Australia needs many more politicians cut from the same cloth.”⁵⁹

It goes without saying that any work which deals with historical facts and biographical elements will involve careful decisions about what will be included and what will be left out. In *Keating!* the emphasis is decisively on the inherent comic potential of particular historical moments. The most pertinent example of this is Alexander Downer’s number, “Freaky,” in which the performer (Brendan Coustley) is dressed in fishnet stockings, suspenders, corset, high heels, tie and glasses. He gyrates up and down the stage, performing provocative dance moves and comically caricaturing Downer’s mannerisms. The accompaniment is inspired by the funk music of the 1970s, and the association of this genre with the music of pornographic films adds to the comedy. “Freaky” is a play on the burlesque, another offshoot of the variety theatre, which is distinguished from other comparable genres by the essential requirement of “sexual titillation.”⁶⁰ *Keating!* humorously subverts these tropes by applying them to a profession as serious as politics. Another example of this is the dramatisation of the romantic relationship between Gareth Evans and Cheryl Kernot. The resulting song, “Heavens Mr Evans,” is performed by two members of the band—Enio Pozzebon (the keyboardist and bandleader) as Evans and Mick Stuart (electric guitar and saxophone) in drag as Kernot. Bennetto calls “Heavens Mrs Evans” “the one song that didn’t remotely belong in the main narrative arc of the show. But, y’know, fuck the narrative arc!”⁶¹

The on-stage band plays an integral stylistic role in the construction of *Keating!* There are parallels here also to the vaudeville genre. It was not uncommon in vaudeville performance for bandleaders like Pozzebon to become a part of the action: “The

⁵⁹ Greg Barns, “Why Keating makes Kevin look bad,” *IPA Review*, November 2008, 15.

⁶⁰ Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, Vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 158.

⁶¹ Casey Bennetto, “Heavens Mr Evans,” *Drowsy Drivers*, July 12 2010, accessed 8 February 2016, <http://www.cantankerist.com/drowsy/?p=517>.

leader of the orchestra will often be expected to join in some dialogue with the comedian or to interrupt some speciality, or ‘fill in,’ in one way or another, in the many efforts to bring actor and audience into personal relation.”⁶² This is true of the band in *Keating!*, and this breaking of the fourth wall was also common in vaudeville performance.⁶³ In addition, *Keating!*’s cast of characters make no effort to maintain their integrity within the cosmos of the play. Hand-held microphones are employed throughout the show, which ruptures the illusion of a fictive cosmos. For example, Mike McLeish, who plays Keating, introduces himself to the audience when he first appears. He enters, microphone in hand, pausing at the side of the stage to wait for the applause from the previous number to die down, while the band chant in a whisper “Keating, Keating, Keating” in rhythm over a bass riff. When the Keating character finally sings, his first words are “Hey good evening, I’m Paul.” “Freaky” also involves audience interaction, as does Hawke’s opening number, “My Right Hand Man,” which is an extended comic monologue interspersed with verses and choruses of a beer-barrel waltz. Furthermore, the lighting is not naturalistic, often utilising hard-edged spotlights and flashes of coloured light. The set is very simple, consisting of a rectangular black platform that rotates, and a plush red curtain hanging at the back of the stage. Ordinarily in vaudeville performance the curtain would have been drawn at the beginning of the show, but in *Keating!* it remains in place for the entirety of the performance to reinforce its performative essence and support the politics-as-showbiz metaphor.⁶⁴

Keating! can also be interpreted as drawing on structural principles of vaudeville. Teiwes argues that the original title provides the key to unlocking the heart of the work, describing *Keating!* as “essentially a series of vignettes,” each of which is a “perfectly self-contained sketch.”⁶⁵ This is not dissimilar to vaudeville, where a typical performance consisted of a series of separate “acts.” While the vignettes in *Keating!* do not represent the

⁶² Caroline Caffin, “Vaudeville Music” in *American Vaudeville as seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Da Capo Inc, 1984), 212.

⁶³ Joel Schecter, ed., *Popular Theatre: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 178.

⁶⁴ Cullen et al, *Vaudeville Old and New*, 422.

⁶⁵ Teiwes, “The Musical we Had to Have,” 553, 555.

diverse media that a vaudeville show might contain, an element of the variety format remains, albeit in essence only. The vignettes in *Keating!* can be termed “numbers” and, as the show completely lacks spoken dialogue, there are only vague chronological threads that link one number to the next. In addition, these “numbers” can be easily removed and performed out of context. This notion that *Keating!* is structured through “numbers” is supported by Bennetto, who says that he only ever intended the work to be “a bunch of silly, fun songs.”⁶⁶

Notwithstanding Bennetto’s remarks, these “silly songs” do cover serious ground. Several of the songs in *Keating!* promote idealistic sentiments about contentious political affairs. Keating’s victory song “The Ruler of the Land” is a good example of this. On aboriginal affairs, the lyrics proclaim:

KEATING:

I am the ruler of a nation torn
By redneck scorn of the native born
Can we finally have a treaty please?
Apologies to Aborigines?

This is particularly relevant as in 2004 when Bennetto first wrote the show, the apology to the Stolen Generation was still a distant goal. In “The Ruler of the Land,” Keating’s character also speaks directly to the audience, and the lyrics cultivate a sense of Knapp’s notion of the collective “we” or McLean’s notion of the “proper audience.”⁶⁷ Keating sings:

Let me now address the chamber
Everyone from red to blue
(I’m talking to you!)

As he sings the last line he points directly at the audience. The lyrics then move to a more inspirational mode:

Yes, I’m at the end of the rainba
And now I hold a pot of gold for you

⁶⁶ Casey Bennetto, “Keating!,” *Drowsy Drivers*, accessed November 15, 2015, http://www.cantankerist.com/drowsy/?page_id=433.

⁶⁷ Knapp, *The American Musical*, 119; McLean, *American Vaudeville*, 48.

Here's the gist of my agenda:
Let's advance Australia fair
No retreat and no surrender
'Til we get our nation there – I solemnly swear

Bennetto asks the audience to imagine a time now past in which the world and politics perhaps seemed much simpler—"take me back to simple days of yore," as the Keating character sings in the Act 2 ballad, "The Light on the Hill." The work can thus be seen to be seeking to provide, as vaudeville did, a "haven of relaxation, comfort and laughter in times of crisis."⁶⁸ *Keating!* was intended to tap into a perceived cultural malaise in the community:

I think the main thing was that there was a large amount of sympathy for the idea of a show about *Keating!*, or a show celebrating what he stood for: Aboriginal reconciliation, republic, moving Australia forward socially... I know there were a lot of people who were really cheesed off with the current political climate. They wanted to go to something like *Keating!* and go: "YEAH!"⁶⁹

This is in line with McLean's argument that vaudeville is at the centre of a process of "secular myth-making." He says that even in heterogeneous societies there exists a desire to create a common folklore to replace traditions and myths of the past.⁷⁰ Bennetto's *Keating!* engages in this act of secular myth-making on behalf of 21st century Australia.

While Bennetto claims "the ultimate aim of the piece is as entertainment," it would be remiss to suggest that the entire production trades solely in humour, wit and situational comedy.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Charles Norman, *When Vaudeville Was King* (Melbourne: Spectrum Publications, 1984), 55.

⁶⁹ Jo Roberts, "The return of Placido Domingo," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 23, 2005, 6. Although *Keating!* refers to these issues, there are problematic aspects of the work in this regard, especially the lack of representation of Australian Indigenous people and women. While this arguably contributes to the mythical world of *Keating!*, the public's reception of this aspect of the work is unclear and is outside the scope of this paper.

⁷⁰ McLean, *American Vaudeville*, xi.

⁷¹ Casey Bennetto in Suzanna Clarke, "Cut to the funny bone," *The Courier Mail*, March 22, 2008, 6.

Keating! adopts various modes of address, including ballads like the aforementioned “The Light on the Hill.” While vaudeville mostly dealt in humour, serious songs were not unheard of, and such songs often took the form of patriotic songs or sentimental ballads.⁷² Thus a nostalgic ballad like “The Light on the Hill” can be just as integral to the mythic re-telling of the Keating years as the boisterous “Sweet.” A key element of this number is that the title of this song is borrowed from a famous speech given by former Labour party Prime Minister, Ben Chifley.⁷³ In “The Light on the Hill,” which is written in a folk idiom, the Keating character sits on the stage and sings with a strong Australian accent to an accompaniment of acoustic guitar. For the first time in the work, the layered humour and referentiality of the lyrics falls away to reveal a simple, unaffected lyric, with the key phrase—“dreaming of the light on the hill”—being a key ideological objective of the Australian Labor Party. One particular verse emotes a sense of nostalgia for the past:

KEATING:

Bring us back our comfy bloody country
 Take us back to simple days of yore
 Nothing alien or scary
 La-di-da or airy fairy
 Just put it back the way it was before

Other verses reach simultaneously forward and backwards, imagining a future Australia but also referring to the ideals of the past. This aligns with Svetlana Boym’s conception of nostalgia as “not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective.”⁷⁴

KEATING:

But still I dream
 Of a country rich and clever

⁷² Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, Vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1007.

⁷³ Ben Chifley, “The Light on the Hill,” in *Well May We Say: The Speeches that Made Australia*, ed. Sally Warhaft (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2004), 175.

⁷⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi.

With compassion and endeavour
 Reaching out towards forever, and I'm still
 Dreaming of the light on the hill

The last lines of this verse suggest that Keating's tenure was prematurely cut short, and that the audience has good reason to indulge in nostalgic feelings for the past. The song can thus be interpreted, perhaps, as an inversion of the "carry me back" genre of popular song. These songs, which were popular in the Australian vaudeville scene, tended to express nostalgia for rural life and "unease" in a rapidly urbanising environment.⁷⁵ Stratton and Waterhouse argue that Jack O'Hagan's "The Road to Gundagai" should be viewed as part of this tradition, with Stratton remarking that "O'Hagan's song, a piece of commercial popular music, is thus located within the Australian ballad tradition as a transformation of an established theme, which itself may have been influenced by the minstrel songs."⁷⁶ "The Light on the Hill," to my mind, can also be seen as a continuation of the genre—albeit an inverted one. Unease regarding the trajectory of Australian politics has been substituted for the original theme of rural nostalgia. "Carry me back" in this context means "carry me back to the Keating years."

Thus embedded into the work is a sense of the impermanence of the mythic landscape created by Bennetto. This period in Australian history is now definitively in the past and the optimism and (more importantly for Bennetto) the vision of the Keating government has arguably disappeared. In light of this, the show is not all positive affirmation. Directly after the victory number "The Ruler of the Land" comes the ominous "The Beginning is the End," where manifestations of Gareth Evans (Labor party minister under Keating) and Gough Whitlam (Labor Party leader and Prime Minister of Australia from 1972-1975) warn Keating that this triumph will not last forever. While Bennetto wrote the work in response to the Howard era, and it enjoyed success in the final term of Howard's Prime Ministership, the sustained success of the work into the late 2000s (and possibly beyond) indicates a sustained dissatisfaction with the state of Australian politics. One needs to

⁷⁵ Waterhouse, *Minstrel show and vaudeville house*, 129.

⁷⁶ Jon Stratton, "Producing an Australian popular music: from Stephen Foster to Jack O'Hagan," *Journal of Australian Studies* 31 (2007): 163; Waterhouse, *Minstrel show and vaudeville house*, 129.

look no further than George Megalogenis's 2011 article for *The Monthly*, in which he proclaimed: "We miss Keating" or Greg Barns's provocatively titled "Why Keating makes Kevin look bad" for evidence of such disaffection.⁷⁷ Bennetto's folkloric retelling of the period enables *Keating!* to function as a reprieve (or perhaps a distraction) from the perceived deficiencies of the Howard government and its successors.

This nostalgic aspect of the mythic landscape created in *Keating!* is significant in the way that audiences responded to the work. There is some evidence that *Keating!* did indeed manage to evoke a sense of myth and nostalgia for the people who came to see the production. Michael Norman, the company manager for the Belvoir season, witnessed patrons returning multiple times towards the end of the season: "There's one woman here bringing a group of 20 in and this will be her eighth time."⁷⁸ The experience of this particular audience member begets a consideration of the longevity of a work like *Keating!* On first impression, it seems likely that the nature of the material would mean that it would not enjoy a long life span. Indeed, Teiwes remarked in 2013 (five years after the professional production closed) that it "sadly seems unlikely to achieve significant longevity."⁷⁹ However, there is already evidence to the contrary. In 2009 the amateur rights were released and the first community production took place soon after, in Hobart in March 2010.⁸⁰ The show has been performed a number of times since. Jordy Shea, the director of a 2015 amateur production in Keating's childhood home of Bankstown, said in a press release "at a time where politics is lacking panache, presentation and chutzpah, this show will transfer you straight back to when it had all those things!"⁸¹ At twenty-one years old, Shea is too young to have any

⁷⁷ George Megalogenis, "The Book of Paul: Lessons in leadership and Paul Keating," *The Monthly*, November 2011, 28; Greg Barns, "Why Keating makes Kevin look bad," 12–15.

⁷⁸ Morgan, "All good things must end," 14.

⁷⁹ Teiwes, "The musical we had to have," 557.

⁸⁰ "Keating!," *David Spicer Productions*, accessed November 15, 2015, <http://www.davidspicer.com.au/shows/keating>.

⁸¹ "Keating Sings and Dances Back Into Bankstown," Stage Whispers, accessed November 15, 2015, <http://www.stagewhispers.com.au/stage-briefs/keating-bankstown>.

significant first-hand experience of the Keating government.⁸² Rather, he has absorbed the mythology of those years and is now actively involved in the dissemination of the folklore to new audiences. Another amateur production opened in November 2015 in the coastal city of Wollongong, N.S.W. Cast member Brigid Bohackyj, 19, who played the John Howard role, said of her participation in the production:

Even though I wasn't alive when Keating was Prime Minister... I wanted to... do the show because I was angry and confused how what is supposed to be a leader of a country is now a mixed blur of constant switching and replacing of Prime Ministers who can't maintain promises or have a connection with the people.⁸³

As Svetlana Boym argues, “fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future... nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.”⁸⁴ *Keating!*'s mythic storytelling is evidently capable of transgressing generational boundaries. These amateur productions support the thesis that *Keating!* not only created a mythic narrative of Australian cultural identity, but that this narrative has a continuing impact on its intended audience.

Another parallel to draw between vaudeville performance and *Keating!* can be found in the music itself. In *Keating!*, a variety of musical genres are employed, but as “departure points” rather than serious attempts to recreate these styles.⁸⁵ Forster describes Bennetto's music as an “unusual blend of influences—for Australia, especially—that is more centred on ‘black’ styles... So reggae, soul ballads, funk and a touch of rap are the musical backdrop.”⁸⁶ An excellent example of this is “On the Floor,” a freestyle rap battle performed by the characters of John Hewson and Paul Keating, where the rap battle genre is used as a foil for the argumentative

⁸² “On the Couch with Jordy Shea,” *Arts Review*, July 11, 2014, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://artsreview.com.au/on-the-couch-with-jordy-shea/>.

⁸³ Brigid Bohackyj, email communication, November 3, 2015.

⁸⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

⁸⁵ Forster, “A West Side Story,” 51.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

nature of the Australian House of Representatives. This number is not intended to be a stylistically accurate example of this genre. Rather, in *Keating!*, absolute fidelity to a particular musical genre is sacrificed for a desired dramatic and comic effect. Interestingly, for a work so ostensibly concerned with notions of national identity, there are few “Australian” characteristics present in the music itself, save for a few passing references such as the three note motif which stands for the ABC in “The Arse End of the Earth,” or a couple of bars of the national anthem in “The Ruler of the Land.” Certainly, the Australian “sound” has been a notoriously difficult thing to define, but for the most part, *Keating!* eschews even the most prototypical Australian genres (e.g. pub rock) and instruments (e.g. the didgeridoo). This absence of Australian content in fact has very relevant historical parallels with the vaudeville period. The historian Richard Waterhouse has drawn attention to the fact that much of the popular music at the turn of the century was as “overwhelmingly derivative,” and was heavily influenced by British and American trends.⁸⁷ In addition, Bellanta says that a key feature of Australian variety theatre was that it did not seek to present a “spurious nationalist ‘authenticity,’” but rather, that it was “explicit about [its] imitation of other cultural products and practices.”⁸⁸ She goes on to say that “spirit of parody infused variety theatre, making it well practised at the transformation of existing texts and styles.”⁸⁹ Interestingly, Bellanta also makes a comparison between variety theatre and hip-hop, seeing the way the two forms undertake a “knowing re-working” of existing material as being analogous.⁹⁰ The “spirit of parody” that Bellanta speaks of is alive and well in the music of *Keating!*, as is evidenced by the plethora of genres, like the “Mabo” mambo or the reggae influenced “The Ruler of the Land,” as well as the other styles already discussed. Thus, examining the music of *Keating!* through the lens of vaudeville explains why the genres employed are so diverse. Just as vaudeville performers would have, Bennetto has utilised the full popular music vocabulary available to him.

To conclude with a slight digression, in early 2015 academic John Senzcuk published a platform paper entitled “The Time is

⁸⁷ Stratton, “Producing an Australian popular music,” 153.

⁸⁸ Bellanta, “The Larrikin’s Hop,” 134.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

Ripe for the Great Australian Musical.”⁹¹ The title of the paper strongly indicates that Senczuk believes that such a work has failed to materialise. It is certainly true that homegrown Australian music theatre works have had great difficulty in achieving both commercial and critical success, and Senczuk discusses many of these in his paper. However, the way Senczuk defines what such a work would look like is quite narrow. In essence, his idea of the “Great Australian Musical” is one that follows the model of the American book musical. While this paper has attempted to distance *Keating!* from this aforementioned tradition, it is still somewhat curious that Senczuk has not considered *Keating!* as a possible contender for this title, especially considering the opinions expressed by both Teiwes and Neutze.⁹²

For in *Keating!*, a band of Australian politicians are transformed into a song-and-dance troupe of mythic proportions. The production uses tropes of vaudeville performance to mythologise Paul Keating’s term as Prime Minister, and in the process has employed many of characteristics of the vaudeville form. But vaudeville, like the Keating government, is now in the past. As Stein says, “Vaudeville is gone. This phase of our theatre is long since dead. Most of its people, performers and others, are also gone. All we have are old vaude programs, an array of memoirs and reminiscences and what remains in the public press and magazines of the time.”⁹³ Bennetto and Armfield’s production is now part of the recorded collective memory of the Keating years. Thus, in *Keating!*, vaudeville acts as both medium and metaphor. It is an important Australian work of music theatre—an unexpected success in a field that has often been ignored.

⁹¹ Senczuk, *The Time is Ripe for the Great Australian Musical*.

⁹² Teiwes, “The Musical we Had to Have,” 552 and Ben Neutze, “The Search for the Great Australian Musical,” *Daily Review*, March 24, 2014, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://dailyreview.com.au/the-search-for-the-great-australian-musical/4216>.

⁹³ Stein, *American Vaudeville*, xii.

ABSTRACT

Keating! The Musical We Had to Have is a comedic and musical dramatisation of the rise and fall of Paul Keating, Prime Minister of Australia from 1991–1996. It is a key work of Australian music theatre that, despite being critically acclaimed and commercially successful, has not yet been the subject of significant scholarly attention. This paper addresses the aesthetic of this Australian work, drawing upon historical, musicological and theatrical discourses to argue that *Keating!* is in dialogue with traditions of vaudeville performance, and that through this engagement, a mythic narrative of Australian history and identity is created.

With its roots in North America, vaudeville in colonial Australia was popular in the second half of the nineteenth century and remained so until the advent of cinema in the 1930s. Importantly, vaudeville was a space in which national, cultural and social narratives were defined and refined. It is this facet of the genre—as well as other structural and ideological principles—that are exploited in *Keating!*. Creator/composer Casey Bennetto and director Neil Armfield draw on tropes of vaudeville performance (rather than the more traditional model of the American musical) to engage in a process of nostalgic myth-making.

This paper also contextualises *Keating!* in the broader Australian music theatre landscape, and in doing so, contributes to existing material surrounding the music theatre genre.

BIOGRAPHY

Mara Lazzarotto Davis is in her final year of a Bachelor of Music Studies with a major in Flute Performance at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. She has an AMus in piano and also holds a Bachelor of Creative Arts in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Wollongong, which she completed in 2011 with First Class Honours and the University Medal. Mara is particularly interested in how music is used in contemporary Australian theatre, and has written previously about the work of Barrie Kosky. She is active as a musician, teacher, dramaturg and theatre-maker.