

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



Hadley, Bree J. (2006) *Peta Tait, circus Bodies : cultural identity in aerial performance*.
[Review]

© Copyright 2006 Australasian Drama Studies Association (ADSA)

Bree Hadley

Review – Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural identity in aerial performance* (Routledge 2005)

Author's manuscript of paper published as Bree Hadley (2006) "Review – Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural identity in aerial performance*", *Australasian Drama Studies* 48, April 2006, pp. 252-255.

In *Circus Bodies: Cultural identity in aerial performance* Peta Tait positions aerial performance of the past 140 years in the context of changing cultural beliefs about bodies. She channels a wealth of archival research into a nuanced account of the ways in which the tricks, choreography and costuming of aerialists have responded to "shifts in cultural moods" (6), including cultural assumptions about male and female bodies. Her main contention is that the aerial body's complex combination of artistry and athleticism allows it to work with, against and beyond gender type, and so challenge "assumptions about innate physical gender difference" (2). Tait's argument is persuasive, skilfully balancing a roughly chronological account of technical advances in aerial performance with the more critical task of mapping cultural representation and reception of gendered, racialised bodies in aerial performance in the past century and a half.

Tait begins *Circus Bodies* with Jules Léotard's triumphant Parisian debut on trapeze in 1859. Though traditional rope and pole acts paved the way for Léotard's trapeze, and the still, swinging and flying return acts that swiftly followed, Tait suggests trapeze captured the public imagination in an unprecedented way (9). Her account contextualises public fascination with flying bodies in terms of a popular craving for spectacle established with nineteenth century exhibitions of empire (13), a longstanding spiritual and scientific aspiration for mastery of the air (11), and Darwinian notions of natural and social evolution (15). Playing into such nineteenth century cultural tropes "aerialists flew between scientific precepts and poetic accolades" (16) Tait says, with narratives framing aerial acts ranging from the birdlike, godlike grace of Léotard to the "comic pantomimes about macabre deaths" (25) of the Hanlon-Lees brothers.

For Tait, aerial performance is fundamentally paradoxical – it taps into ideas of freedom, defiance, transgression and danger, but only through the most disciplined muscular training (26, 28). This muscularity mixes up (9) or doubles (28) the aerialist's identity in unique ways, showing "the light gracefulness of males and the steely muscular strength of females" (1). In the early chapters of *Circus Bodies* Tait convincingly attributes cultural anxiety about aerial acts in the late nineteenth century to male-female interchangability in muscular prowess, and in flying, catching and weightbearing (28, 30-31). She looks, for instance, at the trapeze and

iron jaw work of Lala, Leona Dare and Emma Jutau (40-48). Taking the weight of themselves and their male counterparts on their teeth, these women's acts sat awkwardly with spectators' socially conditioned response to sex and race characteristics. Still, Tait reminds readers, while their acts showed a body that "momentarily outmanoeuvred its low social positioning" (45), their feminised iron jaw apparatus was soon recuperated into a "more socially conformist female aerial identity" (55) in anonymous aerial ballet and butterfly acts.

Turning to the twentieth century, Tait acquaints readers with cross-dressing and drag traditions in aerial performance. Her account of heightened hetero masculinity in the sometimes aggressive offstage behaviour of the well-documented 1920s female impersonator Barbette (72) is thorough and insightful. This said, I personally found her analysis of Luisita Leers, a female endurance performer from the same period for whom muscularity on a non-masculine body itself became a form of drag (77), more thought provoking. Tait's analysis unpacks press articles at pains to suggest that the tension between muscularity and inner identity need not queer Leers' femininity in a transgressive way (80-82), successfully underscoring her point about a cultural desire to recoup ambiguous representations of identities, relationships and power in aerial performance.

Another strength of *Circus Bodies* is Tait's analysis of how images of flying trapeze in film feed back into culturally acceptable identities in aerial performance, creating a period in the 1950s in which female aerial athleticism was sidelined from supposedly masculine competition, concealed in frilly costuming as Leers' athleticism never was (95, 105). At the same time, Tait notes, comparatively small statured male aerialists had to contend with "cultural preferences for bare-chested male action heroes" (104), and counter fears about the effeminacy of the male-male catch (111).

In the 1980s, Tait argues, the social, artistic and athletic character of aerial performance changed again with new circus which "set out to be deliberately socially provocative" (120). Coming out of radical theatre as much as traditional circus, and coinciding with a broader trend toward physical theatre in Australia and internationally, new circus recaptured some of the gender interchangability lost since the 1950s. Tait's reading gives an impressively strong sense of the diversity of the new circus aesthetic. She starts with the punk anarchy of France's Archaos, a circus several British councils tried to ban on the basis of its sexually deviant bodies, and its confrontational displays of colonisation, abjection and alienation in a technological age (121). She also analyses Australia's Circus Oz, arguing its slapstick social commentary in the late 1990s moved in the direction of aggro femme clowning, in which comic displays of menace counter the dominance of decorative femininity in mid-twentieth century circus (131-132). Tait further demonstrates the diversity of the new circus aesthetic – "from quaintly charming to outrageous to obnoxious" (120) – with discussion of Canada's Cirque du Soleil. Though Cirque's androgynous fantasy creatures have captivated middle-

class audiences, Tait argues that here too an harmonious aesthetic hides a more subtle subversion of gender identity (131). For Tait, the sheer contrast between new circus and 1950s cinematic notions of circus as a family entertainment (for all its covert sensuality) foregrounds its paradoxes and subversive potential (125-126), as a practice that sits on the margins geographically and culturally but not imaginatively (138).

Throughout *Circus Bodies* Tait continually touches on the bodily relationship between aerialist and audience. She concludes with the challenge of articulating the way spectators “catch” (141) the physical thrill of the trick and the cultural fantasies and fears the trick plays into. In this, the most explicitly theoretical part of the book, Tait draws on phenomenology, feminist theory and film theory to consider the complicity by which a spectator can momentarily catch the somatic force of a suspended body, and in the process perhaps “momentarily catch a surprising cultural identity” (150) – a fabulously evocative image. Tait firmly positions spectatorship in a social framework, dependant on spectators’ prior experience of movement in social context, and, despite universalising press descriptions (142), different for different spectators.

Tait’s *Circus Bodies* is, of necessity, selective in its scope. As the title suggests, it concentrates on aerial acts, covering other circus acts only insofar as they influence aerial performance. It also takes acts that made it to London, Paris and New York as representative in the international story of aerial performance (4). Tait’s description of acts participating in narratives about race (e.g. 35, 40-45, 99), and acts participating in narratives about national identity (e.g. 87-88), is at times briefer than her analysis of gender, but certainly sufficient to spark my interest in the way aerial representations of gender, race and ethnicity can be read by audiences across different times and cultures. Tait never explicitly sets out to assess the state of previous scholarship on identity subversion in circus and popular entertainment more generally either, but it contextualises her argument and its scope is evident in her references.

In the end, Tait’s *Circus Bodies* is a highly engaging read. It documents major moments and movements in aerial performance, doing an impressive job of charting a popular cultural practice in which successful acts and act names were soon appropriated by imitators. Its selection of press materials and pictures gives a good sense of the acts and their promotional strategies. Most crucially *Circus Bodies* does, as it claims, couple this historical content with the sort of critical analysis sometimes absent in biographically focused books on circus (6), offering the reader an accessible and compelling account of the aerial body’s capacity to “replicate but also challenge social power relations” (7) with resonance for a broader range of physical performance practices.