

 TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE 

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

The first Australian play I ever saw was a guest production of John Romeril's *The Floating World* (with Bruce Spence in the lead role) at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa three decades ago. I remember how struck I was by the portrayal of Australian manhood shattered by the trauma of defeat and imprisonment during the Second World War, and by what seemed to be, to an ear attuned to the introspection of Canadian playwrights, discordantly raucous and aggressive satire. Australian plays are not often seen in Canada, but a decade or so later, I was able to catch Williamson's *The Club* (retitled *The Team* for Toronto audiences already confused by the details of Australian football). Again I encountered an enactment of masculinity that was new to me. Somehow, in both of these plays, the rules and structures of male behaviour were at once familiar and strange. Class and power intersected with masculinity in ways I couldn't quite grasp. They become much more understandable as dramatic methods through the discussions in this erudite study of the masculinities at play in contemporary Australian theatre.

In their examination of the shifting perceptions and experiences of masculinity in performance, Bollen, Kiernander and Parr are in fact providing a historical critique of masculinism, or manhood as ideological praxis. *Men at Play* emerges out of a long research project that has already produced an edited volume by the same team (to which, I must disclose, I was a contributor). Ambitious in its breadth, this book reflects what appears to be a growing pressure on academic publishing, as publishers nervously seek to expand potential readership markets beyond specialist university courses. It seems aimed at a double market. Its literary voice is accessible and almost conversational at times, as if aimed at junior students, but that does not weaken the careful expositions, the sophisticated theoretical foundation and superb archival work that underlie it. *Men at Play* is at once a discussion of the thematic locations of masculinity in theatrical enactment, and a history of contemporary Australian theatre through the lens of masculinity representation: the *Boy's Own History of Australian Drama*.

Masculinity Studies is an emergent field formed in a crisis of language and direction. Lacking the social movement, and indeed the consensus, that levered feminist critical theory into the academy, its critique of patriarchy and masculinism (however defined) is necessarily ambiguous. The critical terms we might expect to use in the study of masculinity in performance are freighted with contradictory meaning: both 'masculism' and 'masculinist' sometimes refer to reactionary anti-feminism, and to critical formations of gender equity. For reasons that this very useful study makes clear, the growing body of masculinity discourse is largely historical rather than theoretical in its orientation. The authors avoid framing their study in overarching critical categories, possibly at the expense of deeper analysis of the pressure that silent masculinist discourse exerts on other gender formations.

If feminism, in any of its waves, expresses praxis of resistance, advocacy and change, the praxis of masculinism has been patriarchy itself. Hence 'masculinism'

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becomes 'masculinity studies': less a coherent social ideology than an analysis that seeks to locate the relationship of masculinity, power and aggression in the multiple sites of modern identity. As an instrument of gender analysis, masculinism can be seen as a process of identity production in the negotiation of conflicting domains that bring different values to the typifying characteristics of masculinity. In this sense, masculinism is an operation of desire: desire for power, for reward, for the stabilized reconciliation of conflicting subjectivities. The illusion of masculinism is that this desire can be met by the application of forcefulness. In the patriarchal social formations that reward masculinity, habituated systems of power reward aggression and threat, and ensure compliance by channelling aggression in grids of power relationships, in domains of work, domesticity and leisure. Each place in the grid licenses the operation of aggression its own terms, bounded by social conventions, law and discipline. Masculine identity is produced by the social roles defined in these relations: by job in the domain of work, of lover, husband and father in the domain of domesticity, by homosocial mateship in the domains of leisure. Thus masculine identity is always plural, and as modern society brings these domains into conflict, stressed. The authors in this study affirm the notional of relational masculinities, and take it further, to argue that masculinity is a 'conflation of myths, stereotypes and caricatures' that produce behaviours (5).

This study takes masculinity as a historical phenomenon, and introduces it with a quick survey of what might be considered a template for masculine self-knowledge in the 1950s. The authors begin with the terse and captivating statement that 'Masculinity is theatrical' (2). That almost epigrammatic confidence is a rewarding feature of the writing, and it gives the simplified approach a welcome critical edge. The historical movement of the study frees itself from rough periodisation by working through synchronic and diachronic crises. Each chapter introduces new problems (of class, race, gender, desire and so on), opening into close-ups of several typifying examples. The double-track of the analysis takes us through a shifting terrain of dramaturgical strategies, thematic problems and changing social relations. Beginning with an entertaining dissection of received masculinity as outlined in *The Guide to Virile Manhood* published in 1957 by the Father and Son Welfare Movement, the authors examine masculinity in crisis in musical theatre in the 1950s (launching their study with *Reedy River*), and progress through a periodisation shaped by discussions of class (in which masculinity and power become profoundly complicated), race and colour (situated in an excellent survey of boxing plays), militarism and war (and defeat), to modern stagings of 'wog boy' performance, gay masculinities and fatherhood. They conclude, somewhat tentatively, in destabilizations of white masculinity, coming to a close with the apprehensions of 'an androgynous yet nevertheless sexualized genderlessness' in Meryl Tankard's 1997 dance performance, *Inuk* (183). If, as Cixous famously said, in order for the play to start the woman must die, the authors seem to suggest that for the play to end, the man must cry.

Shifting between published texts, archival prompt copies, manuscripts and performance documentation with ease, the authors offer a counter-canon of modern

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Australian theatre that locates performance, not publication, as the defining text. Hence musicals and dance enter discussions that have long been confined to narrative drama. One of the unspoken strengths of the book is that it offers a useful teaching model of a Theatre Studies methodology, which grounds textualities in considerations of enactment and spectatorship.

As a kind of status report on a long-term research project, *Men at Play* opens numerous paths of inquiry and leaves unanswered questions. Most important are those that touch on the ways in which masculinity is produced in and by violence against women, and the many ways in which relationships with women, as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and lovers, shape the performance of manhood. That these questions remain is not however a weakness of this book, which is one stage in a vaster study.

Beginning as a project of recuperating lost masculinities, *Men at Play* signals an important step in Theatre Studies, as scholars begin to find ways to detach masculinity from phallogocentricity.

**Alan Filewod**