

# **‘The New Prima Donnas’: ‘Homegrown’ Tasmanian ‘Stars’ of the 1860s Emma and Clelia Howson**

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Even during the height of his career, Errol Flynn’s reputation was never really overshadowed by his ‘Tasmanian-ness’. In fact, both his reputation and his origins were often integral to his publicity. Around the same era, Merle Oberon’s publicists claimed that the famous actress was Tasmanian-born, specifically, into a wealthy Hobart family. Whether or not this was true, Oberon’s identification as ‘Tasmanian-born’ cast a glowing light on the State’s cultural credibility despite the fact that she lived 10,000 miles away and returned to the island only once, in 1978.

Modern-day Tasmanian celebrities encounter a similar emphasis on their State of origin. Tasmanian actress Essie Davis received considerable attention after playing the role of Dutch artist Vermeer’s wife in Peter Webber’s film *Girl With a Pearl Earring* (2003). *Sunday Tasmanian* journalist Danielle Wood claimed on 7 March 2004 that ‘Essie Davis is making her Tasmanian family feel proud for good reason’.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on the Tasmanian homeland is reiterated in a comment made by *Australian Idol*’s first Tasmanian-born top-ten finalist, Amali Ward. When asked why she wanted to be an Australian Idol, Ward replied: ‘To prove to mainlanders that Tasmania is not just about incest! The amount of jokes I’ve heard is ridiculous’.<sup>2</sup>

Exploring the ways in which Davis and Ward are represented in the media is useful to an examination of earlier Tasmanian-born ‘stars’ of the colonial theatre Emma and Clelia Howson. Ward’s remark reveals, among other things, how alongside her ‘Tasmanian-ness’ are pressures concerning State identity not necessarily projected onto the girl from Queensland or the guy from New South Wales. Ward’s aim to ‘prove’ a point to ‘mainlanders’ is akin to Woods’s claim that Davis ‘is making her Tasmanian family feel proud’. While Ward seeks approval, and Davis has apparently earned it, each construction narrates and enacts gestures of ‘Tasmanian-ness’. I suggest that these are reflexive articulations traceable to ideologies about being ‘Tasmanian’ that were first propagated by early settlers.

The representations of Ward and Davis (and indeed Flynn and Oberon) illustrate Veronica Kelly’s notion of the enactment of ‘serviceable identities’.<sup>3</sup> For Kelly, colonials continually rehearsed and renewed their sense of distinctiveness. This meant that identity resembled a series of ‘performances’, which were motivated by a struggle against ‘social and discursive abjection’.<sup>4</sup> From its early beginnings as a penal colony, Tasmania both created and inherited a range of identity types, some of which settlers were eager to overthrow. The performance of Tasmanian identity was, and is, enacted through a variety of mediums. For colonials, the interplay between identity and credibility was inextricably connected with theatre and press culture, a point exemplified by the media representation of Emma and Clelia Howson.

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When Lawrence Zion noted that ‘Music has never developed independently of business interests’,<sup>5</sup> he could easily have been referring to the development of theatre in Australia. From its earliest beginnings, theatre progressed alongside commercial enterprise. For instance, Hobart *Mercury* founder John Davies was quite successful at dividing his attentions as a journalist with his duties as the manager and lessee of the Theatre Royal throughout the 1850s and 1860s. During his tenure, the theatre was home to many of the era’s most popular players. ‘Stars’ such as the Howson family were part of a cavalcade of domestic and non-domestic performers, including the tragedian Gustavus Vaughan Brooke, opera star Anna Bishop, Lady Emilia Don and her husband, Scotch Baronet Sir William Henry Don, as well as circuses, minstrel troupes and various ‘novelties’ such as wizards, Japanese contortionists, acrobats and dancing dogs.<sup>6</sup>

The very assortment of such players made discriminating between ‘high’ arts and ‘popular’ pieces a relatively simple enterprise. While nothing too serious was expected of so-called ‘novelties’ or ‘amusements’, critics such as Davies had clear ideas about the function of the ‘legitimate’ actors and actresses of dramatic and musical works. In the same year that Tasmania secured responsible government,<sup>7</sup> the Hobart Town *Courier* suggested that the role of ‘Sterling actors’ was of ‘literally teaching them [the colonists] the art of dramatic observation, and preparing them for entering upon a critical analysis’.<sup>8</sup>

Hobart Town was established as a penal colony in 1803, making the history of its theatre culture second in length only to Sydney. Theatre on the island was influenced by a variety of social and economic forces. General Ralph Darling visited Van Diemen’s Land in 1825 and promptly proclaimed the island independent from New South Wales before declaring himself Lieutenant-Governor. By 1831, the Crown had taken Edward Wakefield’s advice and began charging five shillings per acre for land, ostensibly to raise revenue to fund the arrival of more free settlers under the ‘assisted immigrants’ scheme.<sup>9</sup> Some of the first players in Van Diemen’s Land arrived under this scheme.

At this time, theatre was endowed with a reflexive function. On 7 April 1837, the *Courier* claimed: ‘We shall endeavour [sic] to render the drama what it should be “A mirror wherein all may see: What bad men are — What good men ought to be”’.<sup>10</sup> Prior to the establishment of ‘professional’ theatre in 1833 (productions staged by experienced and reasonably expert players), public ‘amusements’ in Hobart sought to popularise cultural activities. These consisted mainly of amateur novelties, such as musical recitals, from 1826; intellectual lectures, from 1831; and later, a reading room established by John Davies in 1835.<sup>11</sup> Theatre life in Launceston was initially established in 1806, and inevitably took its lead from Hobart in terms of what it offered settlers as public entertainment.

By 1853, even though the State opted for a new identity as ‘Tasmania’ and professional theatre had found its feet, inhabitants still found it difficult to popularise a credible sense of cultural identity. The plan was not assisted by Joseph Jefferson, an American dramatic superstar who visited Tasmania in the early 1860s. Despite writing upon his return to America that Tasmania was ‘a most refined society’, he was fascinated by Hobart’s ‘strong flavor of the convict element’.<sup>12</sup> On the opening night of his performance as Bob Brierly in Tom

Taylor's *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1863), the actor was shocked by the appearance of 'at least one hundred ticket-of-leave men'<sup>13</sup> in the pit:

Before the curtain rose, I looked through it at this terrible audience; the faces in the pit were a study. Men with low foreheads and small, peering, ferret-looking eyes, some with flat noses, and square, cruel jaws, and sinister expressions, — leering, low, cunning, — all wearing a sullen, dogged look.<sup>14</sup>

While Jefferson's snapshot conceptualised theatre as a 'class-cultural' institution,<sup>15</sup> the picture he painted also underscored a cultural identity many settlers were keen to dispel — an identity created by the 'convict taint'.

Rose Gaby notes that the project of creating the illusion of Tasmania as 'little England' was actively pursued.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, print culture also adopted a role in this cultural transformation by enlisting stage stars. Such celebrities would mediate the national and international interactions between Australia and the rest of the world. Modern-day practitioners included Gough Whitlam, who, in 1975, qualified the value of 'native' stage stars in an address to the Italian Committee of Coordination President's Ball. Whitlam referred to a theatre couple who Hobart audiences of the 1840s would have remembered fondly. The prime minister claimed: 'Count Carandini made a famous prima donna of his Tasmanian-born wife Mary Burgess'.<sup>17</sup> Whitlam's recruitment of the Carandinis (although somewhat inaccurate) was a purposeful exercise. Given that Carandini had sought political asylum, Whitlam's conscription of the couple as 'identities' was especially powerful in 'servicing' a historiography of Australia as an open-minded and culturally receptive nation.

Digging a little deeper into Tasmanian theatre history, we find that by 1841 players were being recruited specifically from England by local theatre managers, as Anne Clarke did when recruiting a small troupe of 'imported' players — including Frank Howson and Jerome Carandini — for the company she established in Hobart. The troupe arrived in Hobart via the *Sydney* in 1842.<sup>18</sup> On board were (among others) Anne Clarke, Frank Howson, his wife and young son, Frank junior, as well as Frank senior's brothers, John and Henry.

Were it not for the enterprise of Anne Clarke, Tasmania might never have produced such a vital collection of theatre women. The 1840s and 1850s saw the rise of a number of very talented Tasmanian-born actresses and vocalists. Emma and Clelia were joined by a comedienne of the 1860s and early 1870s named Hattie Shepparde (later Mrs Hallam), opera stars such as Rosina Carandini (later Mrs Palmer)<sup>19</sup> and her sisters, Lizzie and Fannie,<sup>20</sup> as well as Amy Sherwin.<sup>21</sup> Hattie Shepparde was born in Launceston in 1846 and became so popular that she was critically acclaimed as 'a thoroughly Australian dramatic artist'.<sup>22</sup>

Rosina, Fannie and Lizzie were the daughters of Marie Carandini. Marie had shown great promise as a child in Hobart.<sup>23</sup> In 1840, her first public performance was heard by Tasmania's first (official) Lieutenant-Governor, Sir John Franklin, who, together with his wife, attended the inaugural ceremony of the Wesley Church, Hobart. Marie took to the stage professionally following her marriage to Jerome,<sup>24</sup> then became better known as Madame Carandini. She was often hailed not only as 'The Queen of Song'<sup>25</sup> but also as 'the Tasmanian nightingale'<sup>26</sup> and 'the Australian Jenny Lind'.<sup>27</sup> Later in the century she was followed by Amy

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Sherwin, who, like Marie Carandini, was also compared to Jenny Lind<sup>28</sup> and similarly claimed the title of ‘Tasmanian Nightingale’.<sup>29</sup>

Major shifts in theatre industry trends characterised the era of Shepparde, Marie Carandini and her daughters, and Emma and Clelia Howson.<sup>30</sup> After the radical changes brought on by the Victorian gold rushes in 1851, populations in Victoria swelled while those in Tasmania went into decline. This, coupled with the subsequent influx of non-domestic players into Australia, made theatre move toward more specialised genres, such as ‘localised’ burlesques and pantomimes, which the Howsons, among others, would make very popular.<sup>31</sup>

Although the Howson family excelled in ‘popular’ entertainment such as extravaganzas and pantomimes, their forte in classical music and operettas enabled the ensemble to capitalise on both ‘high’ and ‘popular’ theatre. This made the Howsons particularly unusual. While the early 1850s had ushered in an industry trend toward the separation of ‘legitimate’ (or ‘high’) and non-legitimate (‘popular’) entertainment, the Howson family found that by the 1860s they could offer ‘popular’ theatre without necessarily compromising on their appeal as a more classically oriented troupe. The ensemble’s hybridity would in fact lessen the tensions of distinction necessarily implied by ‘high’ and ‘popular’ material works. I would suggest that this was, in part, due to Frank Howson’s inventive approach to production.

In contrast to other classical ensembles, such as the Lyster Company, as well as solo artists, such as sopranos Octavia Hamilton, Anna Bishop and Catherine Hayes (all non-domestic acts), Frank Howson quite literally took serious opera, both classical and contemporary, back to its ‘homegrown’ roots. His daughters, as ‘homegrown’ performers, were of course vital to that development, and Frank’s finesse in nurturing Emma and Clelia’s potential paid dividends. *Bell’s Life in Sydney* on 14 January 1860 claimed that Emma possessed ‘one of those rare voices which must be heard to be fully appreciated ... two octaves and a half; ranging from low G to D in alt’.<sup>32</sup> Clelia, on the other hand, was described as a ‘mezzo soprano’. ‘Her intonation is perfection’, reported *Bell’s Life*, ‘and like her sister, she sings with the most perfect ease and self-possession’.<sup>33</sup> With Emma and Clelia’s impressive vocal ranges, coupled with their skills as accomplished musicians, the ensemble began to revolve more and more around the sisters as the nucleus by which to popularise ‘high’ material works in the form of classical music. After witnessing the Howsons, *Bell’s Life* contended that ‘The truest test of the excellence of a musical composition is its popularity’.<sup>34</sup>

In 1845, when Emma was less than one year old and Clelia only a few months, Howson, like much of Clarke’s original troupe, was attracted by the superior prospects offered by Sydney. On 14 January 1854 *Bell’s Life in Sydney* reported that Frank had assumed ‘the management [of the Royal Victoria Theatre and] ... intended that OPERA shall form one of the most prominent features of the new regime’.<sup>35</sup> Soon, the sisters too figured under the ‘regime’. Their bloodline, like that of Marie Carandini, had also indicated a potential for brilliance. Their aunt (Frank’s sister) Madame Emma Albertanzi had taken ‘the musical world by storm as an operatic actress’<sup>36</sup> some twenty years earlier, and Emma and Clelia’s debut in 1859 could not have been better timed in relation to bolstering Tasmanian cultural authenticity.

Mainland presses traditionally referred to Tasmania as a kind of geographical extension of Victoria and generally typified the island as distant and indolent. The *Age* published stories about 'Parliamentary scenes' in Tasmania that paled in comparison to 'Yankee rowdyism',<sup>37</sup> and in 1859 the *Melbourne Punch* asserted that 'the youth of Tasmania were more at home in the stable than in the drawing-room'.<sup>38</sup> In this discourse, Tasmania's reputation as a progressive and thriving cultural entity was contested. The focus shifted away from cultural achievements, such as the fact that the earliest surgical procedure using anaesthetics was performed by Dr Pugh in Launceston in 1847,<sup>39</sup> to the conflict between local and mainland print journalists.

The relationship between Tasmanian and mainland journalists changed as the success of the Howson sisters intensified. In fact, it would eventually propagate another discursive practice altogether wherein the social provenance of the sisters was claimed by both States. On 15 October 1859, around the time that a reporter for the *Examiner* defended how 'at home' Tasmanians were with 'a fist for their slanderers', *Bell's Life in Sydney* reported that 'immense applause' and 'showers of bouquets' had greeted Emma's performance of the 'Sylph' to the 'Jessie' of Clelia in John Barnett's opera *Mountain Sylph* (1834).<sup>40</sup> The applause following Emma's appearance as 'Adalgisa' in Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma* (1831) three days later was so great that it motivated *Bell's Life in Sydney* to claim that 'it might reasonably have been expected to have embarrassed her'.<sup>41</sup> Emma Howson was then only fifteen years old.

The presentation of performances such as these was significant to both colonial culture and theatre during the period. Music, particularly opera, was credited as a panacea for a range of social ills, from minimising disorderly behaviour to edifying the working classes. At a concert given by Marie Carandini, the *Mercury* observed that 'nightly a large number of persons assemble in the street, near the Town Hall, and listen to the singing throughout the performance'.<sup>42</sup> Opera's concurrent appeal as 'high' culture was also very attractive to a flourishing group of colonials eager to enact their social mobility. This class-conscious bourgeoisie found social value in material works such as opera as an expression of refinement and taste. The Howson family was among a number of ensembles appearing in the two decades from 1861 to 1883 that specialised in classical music. Their popularity peaked just after the beginning of what Manning Clarke has termed the 'Age of the Bourgeoisie'.<sup>43</sup>

In the year following Joseph Jefferson's season in Hobart in 1863, the popularity of the Howson sisters proved invaluable to the enactment of both 'Tasmanian-ness' and 'Australian-ness'. Importantly, this posturing was assumed by both the bourgeoisie and the working classes. The sister's origin as 'local' was an important source of pride during the period, and members of the troupe were repeatedly conscripted to help 'service' a variety of both geographical and class-cultural identities. Epithets such as the 'Tasmanian Nightingale',<sup>44</sup> the 'Australian Prima Donna'<sup>45</sup> and the 'New Prima Donna'<sup>46</sup> were accommodating enough to be used flexibly and interchangeably across social, geographical and economic divides. The sisters' proximity to such a range of 'serviceable identities' placed them in a unique position as cultural exemplars, particularly between competing States. It is not surprising to discover that 'Tasmanian Nightingale' was mostly

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coined by Tasmanian press while 'Australian Prima Donna' and 'New Prima Donna'<sup>47</sup> were more commonly the choice of mainland journalists.

In this sense, I would like to contribute to Kelly's concept of 'serviceable identities' by suggesting that the epithets used to articulate such identities, as demonstrated by the reception of the Howson sisters, were necessarily pliable enough to accommodate the tension of 'ownership' established by competing States. In the case of the Howson family, that tension is identifiable between not only Tasmania and the mainland but also between mainland States such as Victoria and New South Wales. While the *Illustrated Melbourne Post* claimed on 24 March 1864 that Emma Howson was 'our new prima donna',<sup>48</sup> the *Mercury* on 17 April 1865 reported that 'The Misses Howson and Mr Frank Howson require no introduction from us, they are Tasmanians'.<sup>49</sup> On 31 December 1859, *Bell's Life in Sydney* claimed Frank Howson as 'gifted' and congratulated his 'lengthy and indefatigable services ... in the introduction and promotion of Opera in this city',<sup>50</sup> whereas the *Illustrated Melbourne Post* in 1864 commented: 'Miss Emma Howson is a member of a family which, in more than one instance, has made itself celebrated throughout the world'.<sup>51</sup>

The sisters' potential stardom was soon realised as fact. 'Miss Emma Howson sings with the skill of an accomplished musician', claimed *Bell's Life in Victoria* on 11 February 1865 (while they appeared at the Prince of Wales, Sydney in the burlesque *Orpheus and Eurydice*)<sup>52</sup> 'and it may be safely asserted that she will attain a high position in the profession she had adopted'.<sup>53</sup> Clelia, on the other hand, was often admired as an actress. Her appearance as a fairy with Docy Stewart in *Harlequin Baron Munchhausen* motivated *Bell's Life in Victoria* to declare: 'One could scarcely desire ... a smarter, sprightlier, saucier Fairy Pariboo than Miss Clelia Howson'. The reviewer was especially fascinated by the 'troops of young creatures in semi-diaphanous short skirts!'<sup>54</sup>

While burlesques such as *Harlequin Baron Munchhausen* were plays founded on elements of fantasy and fairytale, the production values of such genres needed to reflect an understanding of, and loyalty to, the tenets of realism. The increasing drive toward realism was typical in reviews of the sister's performances in both 'high' works and 'popular' pieces. Emma's performance as 'Adalgisa' in *Mountain Sylph* was judged an 'accurate rendering' by *Bell's Life in Sydney* on 15 October 1859,<sup>55</sup> while the Melbourne debut of the sisters in *Cinderella* was claimed 'a complete success'.<sup>56</sup>

So whether in 'high' material works, such as *Mountain Sylph* and *Cinderella*, or more 'popular'<sup>57</sup> pieces, such as *Harlequin Baron Munchhausen*, it was critical that performances be rendered as natural and 'unaffected'. Realism was a twin function of style; it was inclusive of a player's dramatic representation and the production values of a piece as true-to-life. For a performance to justly represent the tenets of realism, a 'true to nature' style of acting was as important as the outward aesthetics of 'correct judgment' in a 'high' or 'popular' piece. Frank's inventive approach to material works and *mise-en-scène* was especially noteworthy because of his success in popularising a repertoire of 'high' compositions while simultaneously achieving the aims of realism in his production standards of both 'high' and 'popular' pieces.

In 1864, Tasmanians had an opportunity to see for themselves the accomplished performances of the Howson sisters. Their Hobart homecoming represented a major turning point for the city. Despite the fact that it was twenty-two years since Frank Howson (and arguably any of his family) had last appeared, the lapse of two decades had not undermined his former glories in the city. His ‘capabilities ... as a low comedian’, reminded the *Mercury* on 15 June 1864, ‘were many years ago favourably known to the Theatre frequenters of Hobart Town’. Moreover, he was credited as ‘the introducer of operatic music in this colony’.<sup>58</sup>

The program on the evening of 27 June 1864 began with the opening overture from *William Tell*<sup>59</sup> and was followed by a selection of vocal pieces designed to showcase Emma and Clelia’s talents. After the sisters’ performance of Constanzo Festa’s madrigal, ‘Down in a Flowery Vale’, Frank senior and Frank junior performed the ‘Bijou’ song from Charles Gounod’s ‘new opera’ in five acts called *Faust* (1858). Frank’s productions highlighted the talents of his children in general and the sisters in particular. Clelia’s rendition of ‘When all was Young’ was reported in the *Mercury* on 28 June 1864 to have ‘received a flattering ovation and an unanimous call for a repetition’, and Emma was claimed as both ‘the gem of the vocal division of the concert’, as well as a ‘prima donna’.<sup>60</sup>

On 31 May 1864, the *Mercury* reported that the family had visited Tasmania so that Emma Howson could pay ‘her native city, Hobart Town, a farewell visit, prior to her departure for Europe’. There is no evidence that she or any other family members had appeared publicly in Tasmania since 1845. As it was, her appearances included provincial locations such as New Norfolk (2 July 1864), Oatlands (13 July) and Campbell Town (14 July) while *en route* to Launceston for a one-night-only concert prior to their departure for Melbourne. Her grand complimentary benefit on Monday 11 July was attended by Colonel Eagar, Major Wilson, and officers and members of the Southern Division of the Tasmanian Volunteer Force. The performance even took precedence over the previously scheduled civic rehearsals in aid of the Hobart Town Hall organ, which were postponed.<sup>61</sup>

When the Howson family re-appeared in Hobart in 1865 as part of Lady Emilia Don’s ‘greatest galaxy of talent’,<sup>62</sup> it was more in support of Don’s star-power. This was evident in that Clelia and Emma were generally, though not always, allotted the subordinate parts in Don’s repertoire of material works, thus ensuring her status as principal. The sisters did however share laurels with Don by virtue of a piece composed for her by Issac Nathan (1790–1864).

Despite the fact that while they were with Don’s company, the sisters were subordinate to her celebrity, the press of the day remained eager to capitalise on their success. In fact, previous to their appearances in Hobart in 1864, and then later with Don in 1865, the siblings were claimed by publications such as the *Illustrated Melbourne Post* as ‘native Australians’.<sup>63</sup> Significantly, in the momentum leading up to the peak of their colonial popularity, Emma Howson in particular was referred to as ‘our new prima donna’.<sup>64</sup> Emma’s potential as an international star meant that her role as a ‘serviceable identity’ became more valuable to Australians. Her identity as a ‘new prima donna’ was intimately connected to that of her identity as a ‘native Australian’. Such markers, therefore, illustrate a particular preoccupation with various notions of subjectivity —

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‘Tasmanian’ in the case of Tasmania, and ‘native’ in the case of pre-federation Australia.

By 1866, Emma and Clelia’s significance as two ‘native’-born stars was important to enacting identity: ‘Tasmanian-ness’ to Tasmanians and ‘Australian-ness’ to Australians. While actress Eliza Winstanley is generally ‘hailed as the first Australian-trained actress to be successful overseas’,<sup>65</sup> she was not Australian-born. Prior to 1866, Australia appeared not to have exported any internationally successful, domestically born-and-bred stage stars of its own, only ever receiving them from other parts of the world. In 1867, vocalist Julia Matthews was probably the first Australian-trained performer to appear at Covent Garden, but like Winstanley, Matthews too was English-born. If Emma Howson was not Australia’s first ‘native-born’ star, she was at least Tasmania’s first ‘homegrown’ celebrity.

Frank senior died in America in 1869. Although mainland publications such as the *Illustrated Melbourne Post* reported that it was through Frank Howson that ‘the people of this division of the southern hemisphere were first made acquainted with the beauties of the musical drama’,<sup>66</sup> he was never really afforded due credit later in life. In fact, journalist James Smith’s eulogy of the efforts of Howson’s rival, the American businessman William Saurin Lyster, allots Lyster much credit for a movement that had already been in existence in the colonies for the previous twenty years, at least. Frank Howson’s significance in developing opera began in Tasmania (then Van Diemen’s Land) as early as 1842 — almost two decades before the first appearance of Lyster’s Opera Company in 1861. In 1888, while Lyster was said to have ‘contributed in no unimportant degree to raise the taste of the play-going public in many instances’,<sup>67</sup> Frank Howson deserves recognition. After all, almost twenty-five years before the recollections of both Smith and the *Argus*, Howson was named as ‘the pioneer of opera in Australia’.<sup>68</sup>

Unlike her father, who died in 1869, Emma enjoyed a long and successful career. After debuts in America (at Maguire’s Academy of Music, San Francisco, in June 1866 and New York in November 1869), she left for Europe in 1873 and studied in Milan. She toured the English provinces in 1876 and created her most acclaimed role, as Josephine in *HMS Pinafore*, in London in May 1878. Emma never married. She died in New York a well-remembered star in 1928. Clelia did marry,<sup>69</sup> but never eclipsed her sister’s success. She died in New York, also well remembered, on 24 October 1931.

Emma’s obituary in the *New York Times* raises many questions about what it meant to be ‘Tasmanian’ by the 1920s. Said to have been born in ‘Sydney’, Australia, Emma’s connection to Tasmania at the time of her death seemed as distant as the miles that separate Hobart and New York. Whether she chose not to publicise her origins as ‘Tasmanian’ or whether the *Times* was merely unaware of her exact birthplace is unknown. Perhaps, after some sixty-two years, it was conceivable that Emma simply no longer regarded herself as anything other than American and only ever promoted her past as ‘Australian’.

What is especially curious, however, is the fact that not so long after Emma’s death, Merle Oberon’s publicists took seriously the project of advertising the actress’s identity as ‘Tasmanian’. How is this contrast to be explained? Being ‘Tasmanian’ clearly held some currency during the height of Oberon’s career,



perhaps most likely to hide her real origins. Or, was the island's distance particularly attractive to Oberon's publicists in promoting her identity as somehow remote and therefore exotic? If so, was it that very 'otherness' that Emma possibly found out-of-place?

Despite the fact that by the time of her death, Emma's provenance as 'Tasmanian-born' had been written out of her history, the word 'Australia' was still pliable enough to accommodate the tension of 'ownership' between disparate countries. Remote though Australia was, the word itself was nonetheless potent as a gesture of distinctiveness. But still, the context of the reference was, quite literally, a world away from Hobart back in 1865. Then, the *Mercury* on 3 June printed what now seems in retrospect a poignant epitaph: 'May you even think upon this visit to Hobart Town with pleasure, and never regret, that Tasmania is the land of your birth'.<sup>70</sup> Whether 'Tasmanian-born', 'native' or 'Australian', Emma Howson's story illustrates that being dubbed 'Tasmanian' was only one aspect of a complex process in which performance and 'homeland' collide.

**'The New Prima Donnas': 'Homegrown' Tasmanian 'Stars' of the 1860s  
Emma and Clelia Howson  
Nicole Anae**

- 1 *Sunday Tasmanian*, 7 March 2004.
- 2 'Contestant Biography; Amali Ward', *Australian Idol*, Grundy Television, Australia and New Zealand, 11 October 2004.  
[http://au.australianidol.yahoo.com/contestants/amali\\_ward/index.html](http://au.australianidol.yahoo.com/contestants/amali_ward/index.html)
- 3 Veronica Kelly, 'Hybridity and Performance in Colonial Australian Theatre: *The Currency Lass*' in Helen Gilbert (ed.), *(Post)Colonial Stages: Critical and Creative Views on Drama, Theatre & Performance*, West Yorkshire: Dangaroo Press, 1999, p 40.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Lawrence Zion, 'The Sound of "Australian" Music' in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *Constructing a Culture: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble, Fitzroy, 1988, p 211.
- 6 The Wizard Jacobs was probably the best known illusionist of the 1850s. He performed in Hobart in April 1855. Circuses in the 1860s were followed by ensembles such as the Gregory Troupe, who appeared in Hobart in 1871 and included 'Mdlle. Gertrude's troupe of dogs,' and well-trained ponies (see *Mercury*, 29 May 1871). The 'Japs', as they were affectionately known, were a large company of contortionists and acrobats who appeared at Hobart's Theatre Royal during February 1872.
- 7 Ernest Scott, *A Short History of Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1964, p 213.
- 8 *Mercury*, 10 June 1856.
- 9 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance; How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974, p 156.
- 10 *Courier*, 7 April 1837.
- 11 Joan Goodrick states that John Davies opened his reading room in 1836. See Joan Goodrick, *Life in Old Van Diemens Land*, Rigby, Sydney, 1977 p 176. However, advertisements in the *Courier* throughout 1835 suggest it was opened in that year (and not in 1836).
- 12 Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson*, T Fisher Unwin, London, 1889, p 259.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 *ibid.*, p 260.
- 15 John Docker, 'Popular Culture and Bourgeois Values' in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *Constructing a Culture: a People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble, Fitzroy, 1988, p 241.
- 16 Rose Gaby, 'On the Edge of Empire: Hobart Town Shakespeare, 1864', *Theatre Notebook*, no 55, 2001, p 85.

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- 17 'Mr Whitlam Speaking at the Italian Committee of Co-ordination Presidents Ball, Melbourne, 21 November 1975', The Whitlam Institute, University of Sydney, 1 September 2004. [http://www.whitlam.org/collection/1975/19751121\\_Presidents\\_Ball/](http://www.whitlam.org/collection/1975/19751121_Presidents_Ball/)
- 18 The Hobart *Courier and Van Diemen's Land Gazette*, 28 January 1842, misspells the Howsons' name. 'Mr and Mrs Clark and child ... J Carandini, F Howser, wife and child, Henry and John Howser'.
- 19 While H G Taylor claims Marie Carandini 'had, besides Rosina, three other singing daughters', my research reveals she apparently had four daughters besides Rosina: Marie, Fannie, Lizzie and Isabella. Isabella, the youngest, was born in Sydney in 1851. See records of births in New South Wales, 1851.
- 20 Lizzie Carandini married John Adams. Fannie first married Walter Sherwin and then H Morland. Rosina Martha Hosannah Carandini was born in Hobart on 28 August 1844 and married Edward Palmer, 8 November 1860 (see microfilm of parish records). H G Taylor notes that Isabella was 'Mrs. Cotterill and, later Lady Campbell,' yet offers no details concerning Marie's marriage. See H G Taylor, 'Born to Sing; the Countess Carandini of Hobart and Her Daughters', *Parade*, March 1967, p 13.
- 21 See Judith A Bowler, *Amy Sherwin: The Tasmanian Nightingale*, Specialty Press, Hobart, 1982.
- 22 *Australasian Sketcher*, 27 December 1873.
- 23 James Burgess reportedly died in Hobart in 1835 at the age of thirty-eight. See Anne M Bartlett (ed.), *Cornwall Chronicle, 1835-1850, Directory of Births Deaths and Marriages*, Geneological Society of Tasmania, Launceston, 1990. A microfiche of assisted immigrants lists the arrival of the Burgesses into Hobart in April 1833 aboard the *Henry Porcher* out of London. The four children, while unnamed, were likely Marie (recorded as 'Mary'), her sisters Betsy (aged five) and Fanny (aged two), and their nine-month-old brother, James.
- 24 Matrimonial register for the Trinity Church, Hobart, records that 'Maria Burgess' married 'Jerome Carandini' on 11 March 1843 and was witnessed by Francis (Frank) Howson and his wife.
- 25 'Marie Carandini, The Queen of Song', *Mercury*, 11 April 1865.
- 26 Michael Roe, '1830-50' in Frank Crowley (ed.), *A New History of Australia*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1974, p 115.
- 27 John Kardoss, *A Brief History of the Australian Theatre*, New Century Press, Sydney, 1955, p 25.
- 28 Bowler, op. cit., p 18.
- 29 *Mercury*, 13 July 1887.
- 30 Emma Howson was born on 28 March, 1844; John Jerome Howson on 17 November 1842 in Hobart; Sarah Clelia Howson was born 8 June 1845 at the family's 52 Argyle Street residence. See Parish of Trinity in the County of Buckingham, Hobart records. Frank Alfred Giralomo Howson junior was born in London in 1841. Frank senior was born 22 September 1817, London (d 16 September 1869). He married Emma Richardson in London on 9 October 1839 (b 9 October 1820, d 7 December 1869). Two younger brothers were born in Sydney; William Sydney Howson on 23 September 1846 (d 17 May 1900), and Charles Edwin Howson on 15 January 1848 (d 4 November 1907, London). With the exception of Charles, all family members died in and around the city of New York.
- 31 Other stage players who were very successful in burlesques and pantomimes were English-born touring stars Adelaide and Josephine Gougenheim (who appeared in Tasmania in 1857) and Lady Emilia Don. Don first appeared in Tasmania in 1862 together with her husband (Sir William Henry Don), and returned as a solo star in 1865.
- 32 *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 14 January 1860.
- 33 *ibid.*
- 34 *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 8 August 1863.
- 35 *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 14 January 1854.
- 36 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 25 February 1864.
- 37 *Age* cited in *Ballarat Times*, 30 October 1857.
- 38 *Melbourne Punch*.
- 39 John Reynolds, *Launceston: History of an Australian City*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1969, p 80.
- 40 *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 15 October 1859.

- 41 *ibid.*
- 42 *Mercury*, 14 February 1872.
- 43 Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, Tudor, Sydney, 1969, p 140.
- 44 *Mercury*, 31 May 1864.
- 45 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*.
- 46 *ibid.*
- 47 *ibid.*
- 48 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 24 March 1864.
- 49 *Mercury*, 17 April 1865.
- 50 *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 31 December 1859.
- 51 *ibid.*
- 52 Perhaps an adaptation of Robert Barnabas Brough's 1852 production of the same name.
- 53 *Bell's Life in Victoria*, 11 February, 1865.
- 54 *Bell's Life in Victoria*, 6 January 1865.
- 55 *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 15 October 1859.
- 56 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 25 January 1864.
- 57 'Popular' was a word generally used by critics to described entertainment which attracted large and frequent audiences. Typically, these included circuses, pantomimes, so-called 'nigger' ensembles (such as the Ethiopian Serenaders and the New York Serenaders who each appeared in Tasmanian in the early 1850s) and illusionists. For more, see Richard Waterhouse's entry entitled 'Popular Entertainments' in Philip Parsons (ed.), *Companion to Australian Theatre*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1995, p 461.
- 58 *Mercury*, 15 June 1864.
- 59 Possibly from Gioachino Rossini's overture, *William Tell* (1829).
- 60 *Mercury*, 28 June 1864.
- 61 *Mercury*, 11 July 1864.
- 62 The notables in Don's company were Emma, Clelia and Frank Howson, Hattie Shepparde, Mrs Crosby, and Mr G H Rogers, whom Frank would have remembered from the 1842–1845 seasons at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Hobart.
- 63 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 25 January 1864.
- 64 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 24 March 1864.
- 65 See Helen Musa's entry on Eliza Winstanley in Philip Parsons (ed.), *Companion to Australian Theatre*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1995, p 647.
- 66 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 25 February 1864.
- 67 J W F Rogers (ed.), 'The Social Development of Australasia' [1888] in Lurline Stuart and James Smith, *The Making of Colonial Culture*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p 109.
- 68 *Illustrated Melbourne Post*.
- 69 Clelia and her husband, Hosmer Parsons, married on 9 June 1870, in New York. They had one child, a daughter named Emma Arabella Parsons (b 14 July 1872, d 22 November 1961, New York).
- 70 *Mercury*, 3 June 1865.

