'Belly-Speakers', Machines and Dummies: Puppetry in the Australian Colonies, 1830s–1850s

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The purpose of this article is to give some attention to the characteristics and performative styles of Australian colonial puppetry during the first fifty years of European settlement. Both formal and informal modes of puppetry will be examined – from self-assembled 'toy theatres' in around the 1830s, to grand exhibitions of mechanical automata in the 1840s, and roadside glove puppet shows and marionette theatre beginning in the 1850s. In particular, the examination argues that it is possible to track key developments in nineteenth-century colonial puppetry to twin factors: shifts in attitudes to entertainment motivated by mechanisation and commercialisation; and the rising popularity of ventriloquism, magicians and minstrel shows in the early Victorian era.

Due to the ephemeral nature of puppetry, creating a 'history' of its introduction into colonial society can seemingly rely on both evidence and pure speculation. Indications do, however, support the idea that the roots of puppet theatre lie in the popular 'exhibitions' of the 1840s – not to be confused with the 'Intercolonial Exhibitions' beginning around the 1860s, which were massive affairs, usually staged in large exhibition halls and attracting hundreds of presenters and visitors from around the world. The intention of these intercolonial exhibitions was to showcase colonial culture – including displays of new inventions and design, but not theatrical entertainment.[1] By contrast, popular exhibitions of the 1840s denoted that fashion of bringing together for entertainment purposes of a variety of theatrical 'amusements', often billed as 'feats' of the 'WONDERFUL, INTERESTING AND SUBLIME'.

An eclectic production of mechanical constructions and visual and aural novelties characterises what many colonials probably expected to see in such popular exhibitions during the 1840s. A figurehead styling himself 'Professor' often synchronised the presentation consisting of manipulating 'puppets' of various kinds with simultaneous routines of ventriloquism, mimicry and magic. Entertainers of the 1840s promoted as 'Professors' owed much of their repertory choices and showmanship to optical illusionists, inventors and 'Monsieurs' of an earlier age: flamboyant men of
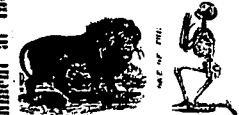
:he stage choreographing on-stage illusions and nimble-fingered simulations. In Europe during the early nineteenth century, Belgian-born Etienne-Gaspard Robert's (1763–1837) performances introduced Parisian audiences to the 'Fantasmagorie' – a 'magic-lantern' – which he manipulated to present vivid light spectaculars coupled with ventriloquism and puppetry. So-called 'Monsieurs' such as the English-born quick-change artist 'Monsieur Péremptoire' – otherwise known as Charles Mathews – combined ventriloquism with various dummies to great effect on stage in the 1820s. Real-life Monsieurs, such as the French-born showman Nicholas Marie Alexandre Vattemare (1796–1864), coupled ventriloquism and impersonation to entertain nineteenth-century notables from Queen Victoria and Goethe to Pushkin and Sir Walter Scott.[2]

One entertainer appearing in Australia during the mid-1840s to combine the showy feats of the European and English Monsieurs was a performer named Professor Rea. A close examination of Rea's performances reveals that while he favoured the repertory and stylistic choices of his European and English counterparts, he also took the elements that characterised their performances one step further in Australia. Rea's 'popular'[3] presentations relied on the audience's desire for fantastic feats of illusion, and his bills indicate that settlement communities found great value in his three-part exhibitions of life-like mechanical figures, magic presentations of floating crowns, brass ring tricks and 'ropery' feats, as well as his 'astonishing' performances of ventriloquism.[4]

Professor Rea advertised his 'exhibition' with a flair for grand style in Launceston's *Cornwall Chronicle* on 28 February 1844.

Rea made sure to distance his style of illusion from the unpleasant sleight-of-hand trickery that had contributed to magic and ventriloquism's reputation as a sham in the 1830s and 1840s. This he achieved by promoting past performances 'before Her Majesty the Queen and other Members of the Royal Family'.[5] His was an important strategy in an era when elaborate hoaxes and connivances were passed off as popular entertainment. Lecturers on mesmerism, for instance, thrived in England, presenting as public entertainment captivating performances interchanged with puppetry and ventriloquism, and many Victorians invested great stock into these elaborate pseudo-medical experiments.[6] In the United States, some territories passed

laws against such entertainments. In Vermont, for example, *Public Act 24* passed on 16 November 1836 held that: 'Circus riding, theatrical exhibitions, juggling, or slight of hand [sic], ventriloquism and magic arts, shall be, and are, declared to be common and public nuisances and offences against the state'.[7] While there appear to have been no such exclusions to performances of ventriloquism and magic in Australia, Rea asserted that his exhibitions were safe from 'contaminating ... the morals of the young' and entirely legitimate:

> ... being only action quicker than sight, is perfectly innocent; though, to sell goods, mixed with something of inferior quality, as good and genuine, is Roguery quicker than Honesty: but in the performing of deception, as deception, there is no false acting, robbery, quackery, or hypocrisy, as no individuals of common sense believe, or can be deluded into the belief, that it is reality they gaze upon with such astonished eyes.[8]

What so astonished the eyes of colonials were Rea's many mechanical waxwork figures. These he manipulated into various 'attitudes' while simultaneously displaying his prowess as a ventriloquist and mimic. His stock characters of waxwork automata included heroes of history and different species of animals, birds and reptiles from the natural world. Even despite the ventriloquy and mimicry, Rea's was a combined programme borrowing very much from the ideals of realism. His publicity announced that realism was a twin function of style, inclusive of Rea's 'natural' mastery as a ventriloquist – 'belly-speaker' – and the workmanship of his automata being true-to-life. 'We have no hesitation in asserting', claimed his publicity, 'that Mr Rea's natural talent, as a Ventriloquist, surpasses all we ever heard'.[9] The construction of his animal and human figures closely resembled that of actual birds, reptiles and animals: 'The joints of these figures are constructed similar to those of a human being ... their Dresses and Appearance give them a striking resemblance to life.' Astonished audiences witnessed the thirty-six different 'attitudes' of the artificial human skeleton, the dexterity and agility of a 'first-rate balancer', and the tricks of a 'celebrated Indian mountebank on horseback'.[10]

Rea's concentration on realism seemed ironic considering that he engineered performances to rely almost exclusively on illusion and mis-direction. The Professor was a specialist of both 'distant' and 'near voice' ventriloquism, and the style of his ventriloquy depended entirely on whether or not he included waxwork figures in the act. Rea's use of waxwork automata as 'performance objects', to quote Frank Proschan,[11] was not dissimilar to the use made of puppets by the puppeteer. For performances without automata, Rea 'threw' his voice in the tradition of 'distant voice' ventriloquists. These were the showmen who exploited the physiological weakness of the human ear to locate the exact source of sound, facilitating

the effect that voices, utterances, or bird and animal cries seemingly emanated from distant points of origin – such as above the ceiling rafters or deep below the stage. Alternatively, Rea's 'near voice' ventriloquy narrated 'the sounds caused by Machinery, Birds, Quadrupeds, Insects [and] Reptiles'.[12] His 'faculty of nature'[13] gave voice to the 'disputes and dialogues'[14] of his various heroes of history, and he roared as a lion while a waxwork serpent coiled around the automaton feline's body.

The Professor's shift to couple traditional aural and visual illusions with the exploits of early robotics makes a case for the argument that colonial puppetry in the early 1840s emerged coincidentally with the increasing popularity of ventriloquism with automata. Earlier, the art was influenced by Joseph Faber's European invention that produced sounds similar to a human voice – a device called the 'Euphonis' (c. 1830). Other automata had appeared in Europe much earlier, such as Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen's chess-playing invention – otherwise known as 'the Turk' – in around 1770. But because some accounts suggest that the contraption actually concealed an internal operator,[15] von Kempelen's 'Turk' was probably more like a mechanical puppet than an example of synthetic intelligence. Close inspection of Faber's Euphonis, on the other hand, assured spectators that the mechanism actually mimicked human speech patterns, and that the sounds it replicated were not those of a ventriloquist.[16] Faber's Euphonis, therefore, was the original 'talking head', and the advances in technology that facilitated such developments proved important innovations for the ventriloquist and puppeteer.

Performers such as Professor Rea offered waxwork 'puppets' that were not only programmable and automated, given their mechanical construction and 'automatic' movement, but were probably the closest that colonial audiences came to experiencing a blend of both von Kempelen's and Faber's automata in the 1840s. There was, however, more to the popularity of automata in colonial Australia than simply its novelty as mechanical marvels. 'The celebrated automata [of the eighteenth century]', claims Michel Foucault, 'were not only a way of illustrating an organism, they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power: Frederick, the meticulous king of small machines, well-trained regiments and long exercises, was obsessed with them'.[17] This suggests that the charm of automata during the early nineteenth century also related to their appeal as manifestations of pliable power. They were both figures of manipulation demystifying the operations of bodies, while at the same time being puppet-like robotics openly available as 'formal', albeit popular, entertainment to the common public.

Presenting realistic waxwork automata was a trend consistent with the emphasis on realism beginning in the early 1850s, and this coincided with an accelerated divergence of puppetry and ventriloquism from the 'exhibition'

as a form of entertainment. Mechanised technologies remained fundamental to formal theatre productions, but the technologies used for orchestrating sets and props in large-scale theatrical productions, for instance, varied greatly from that used to animate puppets. This suggests that the machinery used for occasional performances of mechanical marionettes in larger centres such as Sydney in 1852–53 was form-specific. In addition, these marionette productions relied less on the brassy attractions of magic and illusion fashionable in the 1840s, and more on the theatrical genres of burlesque, pantomime and variety. This also implies that as the life-like automata fell out of favour, so too did the role of the 'Professor' as ventriloquism, magic and mimicry evolved into more and more independent theatrical forms.

Perhaps the most significant social event precipitating changes in attitudes to 'legitimate' drama and popular entertainment[18] was the Australian gold rush, beginning in the early 1850s. During the gold boom, theatre thrived on blood-and-thunder dramas, abridged operas – sometimes even partly in French, German or Italian – grand-scale burlesque extravaganzas, and the celebrity of touring stars from England and the United States. Professors perhaps made more profit by concentrating entirely on magic tricks without the other 'feats' of ventriloquism and automation that had typified the exhibitions of the earlier Monsieurs/Professors. Additionally, it was conceivably much easier to tour out-reach communities without the bulk of sometimes true-to-scale automata and the mechanical apparatus needed to create the effect of animation. Such performers included Professor Lee in 1853,[19] Professor Sidney in 1854[20] and Professor Anderson – sometimes billed as 'the Wizard' – in 1857. In fact, it was only much later – toward the end of the nineteenth century – that revisionist trends embracing the old-school flavour of 'Professor' puppetry resurfaced. Pamela Heckenberg and Philip Parsons have suggested that the most popular theatre of the period relied on vaudeville and revue entertainment,[21] and that there appeared in the 1900s no fewer than 'three Punch "professors" performing in Sydney – Freeman, Blair and Beckford'.[22] That number also included Professor Davy, whose specialty was not as a 'Punch' Professor *per se*, but who was nonetheless a 'Professor' puppeteer. He appeared with his marionettes at the Tivoli in April 1900.

Shifts toward specifically theatrical genres during the gold rush perhaps limited the appeal of puppetry, although a twenty-three-year-old puppeteer named Henry Beaufoy Murlin (c. 1830–73)[23] did find ways of trading on the popularity of theatre genres while maintaining a concentration on puppetry. Murlin's presentations beginning in April 1853 relied on power-driven marionettes, and he organised their action by sourcing plays such as Shakespeare's *Othello* and a version of *Tom Thumb* – possibly by Henry Fielding, 1730. An interesting question about Murlin's performances relates to how he managed to present such plays without dialogue; as one critic noted, Murlin's 'able puppets [did] all things but speak'.[24]

Puppet operas by maestros reinforced the European tradition of puppetry as a relatively high artform on the Continent. Franz Joseph Haydn's *Das abgebrannte Haus* (*The Burning House*) debuted in around 1776, as did *Die Fee Urgele* (*The Fairy Urgele*) by the Austrian composer Ignaz Pleyel. Marionette puppeteers in London and elsewhere drew on a long tradition of commanding royal performances at Court, and even Punch and Judy glove puppetry was a favourite of the elite for a time. Yet despite the absence of regal patronage or noble benefaction in colonial Australia, puppeteers found inventive ways of promoting puppetry's appeal. Murlin astutely named his ensemble the Royal Marionette Theatre Company – probably after the venue in which he appeared, the Royal Hotel, Sydney. It was a name that he shrewdly maintained as he toured throughout country New South Wales. Other 'royal' marionette troupes followed in later decades, such as McDonough and Earnshaw's Royal Marionettes arriving from America in 1875, and Mrs Levity's Royal Marionettes in 1877.[25]

Despite the absence of residential royalty in Australia, puppetry continued to evolve thanks to the next best thing: a governor's whim. In December 1855, Sir William Denison, the then Governor of New South Wales (1855–61), happened upon a street-side Punch and Judy show as his carriage passed by. The story goes that he promptly called for the puppeteer to appear at Government House.[26]

This nineteenth-century snapshot of roadside puppetry probably closely resembles the makeshift Punch and Judy show that so infatuated Governor Sir William Denison in 1855. The 'booth' was essentially a small-scale version of an actual proscenium found in most purpose-built theatres. Source: dustjacket of George Cruikshank, *Punch and Judy, with Twenty-four Illustrations, designed and engraved by George Cruikshank. And Other Plates. Accompanied by the Dialogue of the Puppet-show, an Account of its Origin, and of Puppet Plays in England*, 6th edn (London: George Bell & Sons, 1881).

Sir William's attraction to the puppet show has implications for understanding colonial attitudes to social mobility, taste and audience. The interchange between a member of the colonial elite and the street-side puppeteer tells us a great deal, not only about social divisions based on class but also about the forms of entertainment accessed by colonials in a highly compartmentalised social world. A combination of chance and nostalgia brought together individuals from very different social realities.

Denison's interest in puppetry generally also suggests that the form, or at least its content, appealed largely to adults – an observation substantiated if the illustration of roadside puppetry is taken also to represent a 'typical' cross-section of spectators. That marionette performances in theatres typically staged drama and action based on 'classic' dramatic genres probably sustained the artform's reputation as 'adult' amusement during the first half of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the question of content is also important when examining the appeal of Punch and Judy among adult audiences. Punch's buffoonery, boorishness, vulgarities and consistently violent battles with his wife, Judy, no doubt suited the comic sensibilities of some adult audiences. Yet Denison's surprise at happening upon a Punch and Judy show is also interesting as an indication that glove puppetry was perhaps not represented in formal theatre as he had experienced it. This may imply glove puppetry's marginalisation as 'non-legitimate' during the nineteenth century, or its absence from formal theatre, at least according to the governor's experience, perhaps as the result of existing licensing laws.

Early laws restricted public performances to plays, and even these were subject to close surveillance and regulation of content. The original licence for theatrical performances in Sydney, granted by Governor Bourke in 1832 for instance, limited presentations to 'plays already performed at licensed theatres in London'.[27] This stipulation raises two significant questions with respect to glove puppetry. Was it possible that colonials excluded puppetry generally, and glove puppetry specifically, as simply not fitting within the category of 'play', or, was the concern more a question of how early colonial officials could regulate the content of the form? Maintaining social concord within theatres remained a prime concern. It was commonplace in the 1840s for example, that 'police were obliged to interfere' after some musical presentation 'spiced with low buffoonery, ribaldry, and interludes of riot and confusion'[28] led to public disorder.

Conceivably, puppetry may have required a much greater level of surveillance considering its popularity as a street-side novelty. This perhaps made it less likely that the bench of Magistrates recommended the license to the Colonial Secretary responsible for its issue. License-holders were probably also reticent to expose themselves to a court summons, lest they breach 'the Act of Council 9, Geo. IV, Sec. 2, regulating places of public exhibition and entertainment'[29] should the performance become 'low class'

Therefore, whether or not glove puppetry could inspire social disorder, or was subject to restriction based on its uneasy categorisation as theatrical performance, it seems plausible to suggest that some level of bureaucratic intervention determined the extent to which the form appeared in formal theatrical settings prior to the mid-1850s.

Adding to the subdivisions between performance styles, aesthetic values, and narrative content in puppetry was a strong disassociation with other forms – namely, what nineteenth-century critics colloquially referred to as 'juvenile drama'. One way of pinpointing the origins of this particular disconnect with so-called 'juvenile drama' is to consider the humbler form of puppetry from which it grew: 'toy theatre'. And to do this, it is important to consider one of Sydney's most enterprising theatre managers of the 1830s, Barnett Levey. A reporter for the *Sydney Monitor* attacked Levey soon after the season opening of the Royal Theatre in April 1837. The critic charged that Levey's opening night performance of *Napoleon Buonaparte* was a 'baby's book' edition taken from a commercially produced 'toy theatre' version.

'Toy theatres', sometimes called 'table-top theatres', were among the products of a blooming industry in stage merchandise proliferating throughout the 1830s and 1840s. English producers probably targeted the manufacture of these theatres to adults, although children would likely have participated in their enjoyment. Puppetry in England prior to around 1820 had been the domain of the adult market, but both producers and puppeteers began turning their attention to catering for children after 1825.[30] Toy theatres included small-scale reproductions of actors, essentially two-dimensional puppet-like dolls made from card-paper and affixed to lengths of card or fine wood. The form represented a simple way in which Victorians could arrange and re-enact popular – adult-oriented – plays in puppet-like form, and these were easily available as inexpensive black and white varieties, or as more pricey hand-painted styles in colour. Colonial adults, and children, enjoyed assembling miniature versions of a theatre stage, and moving the figures of players by sliding them into position as they read aloud the dialogue from heavily abridged playbooks, called in the vernacular 'baby's books'. The critic that attacked Levey accused him of sourcing Orlando Hodgson's commercially produced 'toy theatre' translation of *Napoleon Buonaparte* (c. 1830s), and for using Hodgson's 'baby's book' adaptation for the formally presented version of the play.[31]

Colonials understood toy theatre as 'Juvenile Drama', although, despite what this term suggests, it was 'a young man's pastime rather than a child's toy'.[32] The fact that the content of toy theatre materials drew directly from actual theatre performances and personalities of the era probably accounts for its popularity among young men. As David Currell claims: 'The Juvenile Drama was essentially drawing-room entertainment, taking its life and

inspiration from the theatre of the day.'[33] It is important to note here, however, that there is little evidence to suggest that the toy theatre merchandise available in Australia during the 1840s and 1850s drew directly from domestic theatre and local – expatriate – players, but rather reproduced Imperial traditions and celebrities.
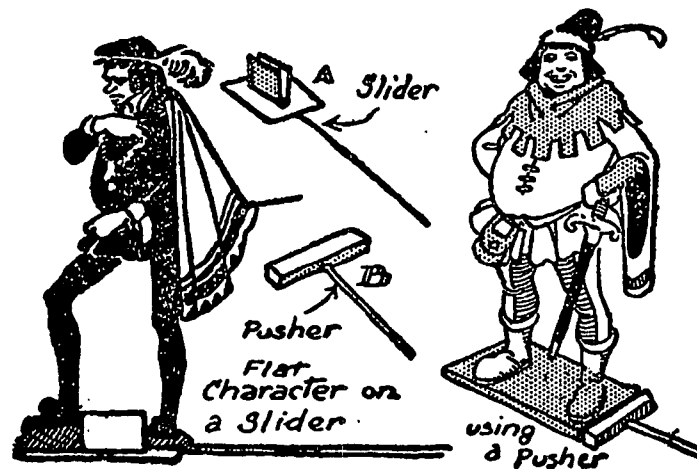
A pensive Hamlet-like character and a stout, barrel-bellied figure are examples of the kinds of 'flat character' puppets that Australian colonials probably used in the toy theatre box sets of the 1840s. Source: back-page advertisement for *The Bankside Stage Book*, in H. W. Whanslaw, *The Bankside Book of Puppets* (Surrey: Wells, Gardner, Darton & Co., n.d).

Advances in mass commercial printing technologies in the early 1830s, as well as shifting social trends toward commercialisation, would certainly have contributed to the popularity of toy theatres, but a variety of factors – including advances in mechanical invention and automata, as well as changes in dramatic tastes – probably contributed to the decline of this style of puppetry. Puppetry in the form of marionette shows conceivably grew in popularity because some puppeteers incorporated automation in their performances, and expanded their presentations to include a three-part programme that consisted of drama, music and farce. Similarly, marionettes with articulated joints were a very different breed from the glove puppetry typical of the Punch and Judy shows, and the distinction was further emphasised by the differing performance values characterising the two forms.

English accounts suggest that street-side presentations of Punch and Judy shows were highly crude affairs, and this arguably contributed to the

marginalisation of these performances. According to one witness, writing in around 1810:

> In the present day, the puppet-show-man travels about the streets, when the weather will permit, and carries the motions [puppets], with the theatre itself, upon his back. The exhibition takes place in the open air, and the precarious income of the miserable itinerant depends entirely on the voluntary contribution of the spectators, which, as far as one may judge from the squalid appearance he usually makes, is very trifling.[34]

The writer's tone suggests that puppetry in the manner presented by the 'miserable itinerant puppet-show-man' was generally undervalued, perhaps largely because these outdoor presentations catered to the poor and were aesthetically quite raw. Marionette performance values were much more sophisticated, and shows featuring them were traditionally performed in theatres following the European typologies of either 'dramatic' or 'variety'. The former style concentrated on presenting dramatic material, while the latter offered a combined programme of variety and tricks. Each method placed a greater emphasis on the design, costuming and manipulative techniques of the figures, and also appealed to the dramaturgical preferences of 'legitimate' stage styles.

This rear-view illustration of a Punch 'booth' is typical of the enclosures mobile puppeteers of this style used in the early nineteenth century. Cruikshank 25.

Sir William Denison's patronage of Punch and Judy likely sanctioned the popularity of the glove puppet form in the mid-1850s. And while the shows themselves would have contributed to popularising the character of Punch socially, his emergence as the symbolic mascot of the Melbourne 'illustrated periodical'[35] *Punch* was perhaps the most obvious manifestation of his appeal.

MELBOURNE PUNCH.

No strings attached. In the foreground is the unmistakable profile of Punch, symbolic figure of the Melbourne Punch, as he appeared overseeing the chaos of a Victorian goldfields settlement. Alongside him is his sidekick, Toby. Melbourne *Punch*, 2 August 1855.

The colonial publication took its lead directly from the London *Punch* prototype and quickly established an equally satirical tone from its inception in mid-1855. What makes the Melbourne *Punch*'s appropriation of 'Mr Punch' so fascinating is the disparity between the appearance of 'Punch' as a media mascot and the figure that typified 'Punch' in puppet theatre. What replaced the hallmark absurdity, coarseness and amorous nature of the puppet Mr Punch, was a self-styled exemplar of mid-nineteenth-century masculinity Supplanting the conical hat, the ruffle-neck tunic, the hunchback and the wife was a flat-brimmed 'pork pie', colonial trouser suit with tie, a monocle, a strolling cane, and a dog – of course named 'Toby'. Back-issues of the

publication reveal that Punch, the character, remained true to the subversive political role traditionalised by his forebears, despite the alternate dress code. 'Oh! You sly fickle young weathercock!', claimed Punch the Elder to Punch the Younger in one issue, 'My boy, use your eyes a little more generally, and your heart less particularly, or you wont go to the theatre any more to represent your respected parient [sic]'.[36]

A period of significant social and political change is one factor that perhaps precipitated the gentrification of Punch, the buffoon – here minus the monocle, and this time sporting a 'topper'. Melbourne *Punch*, 1 (1855) 172.

How much of an influence the commodification of Punch had on actual performances of puppetry in theatres can only be guessed. It is possible that his assimilation into popular culture increased an interest in performance; the first edition of the Melbourne *Punch* did, after all, predate the 'first' known presentation of a Punch and Judy show by around four months. However, processes of commodification may also have undermined the appeal of Punch and Judy glove puppetry, considering the differing semiotic figuring between Punch the media figure and Punch the puppet.

Another factor that arguably influenced the development of puppetry in colonial Australia during the 1850s was the arrival of offshore minstrel troupes. It is true that while reviews of performances by so-called 'black-faced' players in Australia rarely mention the use of puppetry, characteristic identity prototypes of the minstrel genre materialised in puppet theatre. In fact, even McDonough and Earnshaw's Royal Marionette troupe in the 1870s combined these elements to include a minstrel show and pantomime puppetry as the first and third parts of the three-part programme.

Traditional American minstrel Harry Kennedy (c. 1800–94), for instance, performed as a ventriloquist and often used two dummies simultaneously in his appearances across the United States. He was one of the most noted authorities on the art of ventriloquism and puppetry in the period, and later

authored a book entitled *How to Become a Ventriloquist: A Book for Everybody*, published in 1883. Ventriloquists' dolls also featured in the acts of American-born Richard Potter (1783–1835) and the Englishman William Edward Love (1806–67), who followed the styles of both Mathews (1776–1835) and the Frenchman Vattemare. The influence of antebellum theatre – featuring 'scenes descriptive of ... slavery'[37] – is clear in the fact that many minstrels used 'black-faced' dolls in their ventriloquy performances; sometimes two at a time – one on each knee – or as life-sized male or female puppets. It was a technique retaining consistent popularity throughout America during the nineteenth century.

It is plausible that by the time touring minstrel troupes appeared in Australia, on their way either to or from New Zealand, 'corner men' – also known as 'end men' – replaced the ventriloquist's function as a means of staging 'crosstalk'. Using double-act characters such as Mr Bones and Mr Tambo to exchange banter with one another and with the Interlocutor – also known as 'the middle man' – bears a strong resemblance to the minstrel showmanship of performers such as Kennedy with a puppet on each knee – but of course without the puppets. In fact, the American performances of E. P. Christy's minstrel troupe demonstrate that, by 1846, 'end men' were beginning to replace ventriloquists' dolls, while the 'middle man' had replaced the ventriloquist.

ROYAL HOTEL.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 1853.

NOVELTY AND VARIETY OF ENTERTAINMENT BY THE ORIGINAL

NEW YORK SERENADERS,

IN THE GREAT SALOON OF THE ROYAL HOTEL;
BEING FOR THE FAREWELL BENEFIT OF .
MR. J. B. KITTS.
LAST NIGHT BUT FOUR, AND BEST BILL OF THE SEASON!

Visiting minstrel troupes such as the New York Serenaders demonstrate
that the arrangement of 'black-face' ensembles had been standardised
by the early 1850s. *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 28 November 1853.

This shift in 'performance objects', from artificially animated bodies to real-life 'black-faced' white bodies, does assist in exploring what minstrel performers of puppet ventriloquism were actually attempting to achieve. Ventriloquism as 'voices at a distance from their source'[38] does bring

questions of individual identity, agency and cultural hegemony to the fore. Where ventriloquist minstrels of Kennedy's ilk invited audiences to identify with their dolls, those that followed invited audiences to identify with the often strait-laced observations of the middle man and the quick-witted ripostes of his end men.[39]

It is possible that some of the more traditionally oriented visiting minstrel troupes did include ventriloquism and ventriloquists' dolls in the second part of the programme, or 'olio': 'a variety section, a mélange, or an interlude ... in which song-and-dance-men, jugglers, contortionists, dancers, and instrumentalists took part'.[40] Some may even have performed as variety acts in saloons or music halls in goldfield settlements, reminiscent of performers such as Potter, Kennedy and Love, but perhaps these received little press. An illustration of the character Mr 'Bruder' Bones of Rainer's Serenaders in 1853, depicting him carrying a suitcase, is intriguing as evidence that perhaps the case did stow – or once had stowed – a ventriloquist's doll.

Bones promised spectators on the evening of 1 September 1853 that he would 'make an Hippodrome of his Brain for the exercise of his wit, when the LARGEST amount of jokes will be given, it being his INTENT to put before the public an Entertainment that nothing IN THE WHOLE WORLD can surpass'. *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 27 August 1853.

If Bones' suitcase did in fact contain not puppets but rather his instruments – tambourine, Jaw harp, harmonica, 'bones', and/or washboard – it is possible that it also included a 'Limberjack'. These were wooden, puppet-like instruments with articulated limbs that made a percussive sound when sprung back from the performer's hands or knee. Yet accounts of the percussive instruments utilised by the minstrel ensembles visiting Australia during the period typically concentrate on bones and tambourine.[41] This may suggest that these troupes did not utilise limberjacks, or simply that their illustrations and reviews featured other aspects of their musicality and repertory organisation.

FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE SERENADERS IN WHITE FACES, in a miscellaneous selection of Glees, Solos, &c.
An entirely original programme of NIGGER MELODIES—And a
BURLESQUE SCENE ON THE ITALIAN OPERA.
ARRANGED BY RAINER.

No sign of the limberjack in this illustration of Rainer's Minstrels in 1853, but it is possible that visiting troupes of the period incorporated this form of puppetry into their performances. *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 26 November 1853.

Colonial Americans replicated limberjacks from a toy exported to the colonies by the early British settlers. It is highly likely, incidentally, that the children of early Australian colonials played with the toy version of the puppet, called a 'Jumping Jack'. This was a flat, cardboard figure with articulated limbs, using rudimentary rivet-like fasteners. Children manipulated these puppets using a central controlling string, concealed behind the figure, and attached to the toy's legs and arms.[42]
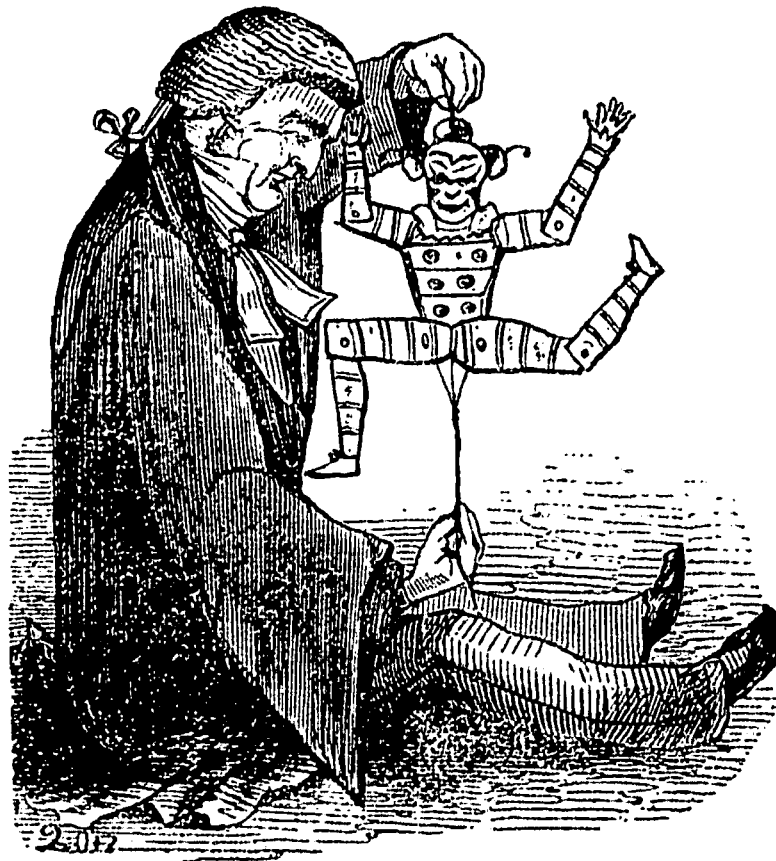
An issue of the Melbourne *Punch* verifies that colonials did enjoy the toy version of the
limberjack called the 'Jumping Jack'. The association of puppetry with juridical
power underlines concerns about individual agency and the structures of social,
metaphysical and bureaucratic control. It seemed a fitting metaphor considering
that the *Punch* issue ran the image in conjunction with its coverage of a
high-profile legal case involving the Irish tragedian, Gustavus Vaughan
Brooke (1818–66). Melbourne *Punch*, 1 (1855) 45.

The musical version of the Jumping Jack – the limberjack – was otherwise known as a 'clogging doll', 'dancing man' or 'shuffling Sam', and was sometimes used with a 'dancing board' in percussive performances. It is possible that this puppet-form also comprised the percussive repertoire of the touring 'black-faced' troupes appearing in Australia, considering the popularity of the instrument among American minstrel troupes in the United States.[43]

So-called 'locomotive lectures', displays of mesmerism, orations on phrenology and various 'mock' addresses such as 'the burlesque sermon, the lecture parody and the mock political oration'[44] reveal that many nineteenth-century American ensembles traded heavily on variety. The trend toward repertory diversity does support the theory that perhaps the early visiting troupes to Australia also performed novelties using puppetry. In fact, presenting, as some minstrel troupes did, 'animal acts' using 'basket' horses and/or elephants, demonstrates that a number of ensembles used puppetry in a form known as the 'humanette'.[45] Instead of using a stuffed puppet's body hanging from the puppeteer's neck, some minstrel troupes substituted the bodies of horses or elephants.[46] And while it is not clear whether 'animal' acts featured in the Australian performances of troupes such as the New York Serenaders, Rainer's Minstrels or other ensembles, it does remain a possibility. Humanettes may also have been included in the props and costumes used by theatre performers of burlesque, extravaganza and pantomime during the 1850s.

Early Australian theatre culture had of course always drawn heavily on the imported English traditions of visiting entertainers and expatriate performers, and by the late 1840s was drawing more and more on American trends. Evidence also supports the idea that public presentations of puppetry during the 1840s had their roots in the 'exhibitions' of old-school theatrical showmen such as Professor Rea, whereas after the early 1850s they were influenced more by the minstrel phenomenon. Rea's performances indicate that during the 1840s, elements of puppetry appealed to audiences captivated by exhibitions of automation, magic and ventriloquism. As the form matured, and traditional elements such as ventriloquism vanished, the puppeteers of mechanical marionettes adopted the three-part programme characteristic of the minstrel shows to coordinate the content of performances. It is more than simply chance that the trend to include minstrel interludes in puppet theatre coincided almost simultaneously with the arrival of the first minstrel troupes from America.

When George Speaight suggested that the Punch and Judy show 'not be regarded as a story at all, but [rather] as a succession of encounters, dictated by the conventions of its medium',[47] he could well have been writing about emerging trends in colonial puppetry. The development of the form in the colonies relied almost entirely on a succession of encounters and

traditionalised conventions imported from elsewhere. While it is unclear whether puppetry in the form of limberjacks, ventriloquists' dolls or animal baskets were staples of the minstrelsy phenomenon in Australia, these were aspects characterising the conventions of the medium used by the more traditionally oriented ensembles in England and the United States. Perhaps the unique succession of encounters in settlement colonies inspired novel, or context-specific, alternatives to the conventions of the medium favoured internationally.

Yet, even aside from the question of whether or not those ensembles included those forms of puppetry in their performances, it is clear that a complex succession of encounters influenced both the conventions and utility of the form. Colonial puppet theatre, for instance, clearly did absorb elements of minstrelsy, and also felt the effects of minstrels' popularity. Additionally, it is important to note that the waxwork automata of the Professors in the 1840s predated, by around a decade, performances of puppetry in theatres – such as mechanised marionettes and Punch and Judy glove puppetry in the 1850s. Other cultural evidence – such as the sanctions against Levey for sourcing a toy theatre 'baby's book' in the 1830s, and the Melbourne *Punch*'s 1855 illustration of the Jumping Jack – indicate that even 'unconventional' elements of puppetry occupied a significant place in the imagery of colonial life. In fact, the illustrations of Punch in the Melbourne *Punch* predated the Punch and Judy show patronised by Sir William Denison in December 1855. This suggests that even if that presentation was one of the 'first' known formal performances in New South Wales, Punch and puppetry had already established a viable presence as potent 'amusements' in the material world of Victorian popular culture.

NOTES

1   The 1840s style of exhibition may have influenced the Intercolonial Exhibitions that followed, considering that the exhibition of a ventriloquist/puppeteer in 1845 introduced one of the earliest 'formal' modes of puppetry into the colonies: automata.

2   See Pierre-Alain Tilliette, 'Alexandre Vattemare's International Document Exchanges and the Collection of Foreign Official Publications of the Bibliothèque Administrative de la Ville de Paris: A Historian's Treasure Trove', Conference Paper, 64th Annual IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) General Conference 16–21 August 1998, Amsterdam. http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla64/151-133e.htm (Accessed 21 June 2006).

3   'Popular' was a word generally used by critics to describe entertainment attracting large and frequent audiences. These included, among others, circuses, pantomimes, magicians and so-called 'nigger' ensembles – such as the Ethiopian Serenaders and the New York Serenaders who both appeared in the early 1850s. For more, see Richard Waterhouse's entry entitled 'Popular Entertainments', in

Philip Parsons, ed., with Victoria Chance, *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995) 461.

4   Gerald Taylor writes that 'Magicians began appearing in Australia during the first gold rushes', but the presence of Professor Rea does indicate that perhaps they appeared earlier, though not then concentrating on magic and illusion alone. See Taylor in Parsons, ed., 336.

5   *Cornwall Chronicle*, 28 February 1844.

6   See Alison Winter, *Mesmerized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 112–30.

7   See Doug Sinclair, 'Jonas Bartlett (1803–1877)' © 1998–2005 by Doug Sinclair. Online   http://dougsinclairarchives.com/bartlett/jonasbartlett2p1.htm (Accessed 21 June 2006).

8   *Cornwall Chronicle*, 28 February 1844.

9   *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 Frank Proschan, 'The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects', *Semiotica* 47 (1983): 4. As cited in John Bell, 'Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects at the End of the Century', *The Drama Review*, 43, 3 (1999): 15.

12 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 28 February 1844.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 See V. Pratt, *Thinking Machines: The Evolution of Artificial Intelligence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) and G. Wood, *Living Dolls: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

16 See D. Lindsay, 'Talking Head', *American Heritage of Invention and Technology*, 13 (1997): 57–63.

17 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 136.

18 'A term originally applied to plays with spoken as opposed to sung dialogue, or a play with music, an opera.' Eric Irvin, *Dictionary of the Australian Theatre, 1788–1914* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985) 159.

19 Professor Lee appeared with his sons at Sydney's Victoria Theatre in September 1853.

20 Professor Sidney appeared in the saloon of Sydney's Royal Hotel in April 1854.

21 See Pamela Heckenberg and Philip Parsons, 'The Struggle for an Australian Theatre (1901–1950) and the Decline of the Chains; Summary of Theatrical Events', in Harold Love, ed., *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1984) 118–35.

22 For more, see Richard Bradshaw's entry entitled 'Puppetry' in Parsons 468–70.

23 Henry Beaufoy Murlin also used the name of 'Merlin' (as well as 'Muriel'). He enjoyed a successful career as a theatrical puppeteer – one that he limited almost exclusively to New South Wales – then, after a brief return visit to London in the late 1850s, abandoned the craft to establish his reputation as a photographer. See

Richard Bradshaw's entry in Parsons 365. Also see Richard Bradshaw's 'The Merlin of the South', in *Australasian Drama Studies* 7 (October 1985) for a fuller story of Murlin's career.

24 Irvin 173.

25 Aside from Mrs Levity's ensemble – and that of Charles and Mrs Webb, who originally arrived in Australia as members of McDonough and Earnshaw's troupe – puppetry was one of the rare genres in nineteenth-century theatre dominated almost entirely by men.

26 Katharine Brisbane, ed., *Entertaining Australia: An Illustrated History* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991) 48.

27 See Elizabeth Webby, 'From Settlement to the Gold Rush (1788–1853), Summary of Theatrical Events', in Love, ed., 1.

28 Edmund Finn ['Garryowen'], *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 1835–52*, Melbourne 1888 1 451–2, 456, in Webby, 31.

29 Finn 32.

30 David Currell, *The Complete Book of Puppetry* (London: Sir Issac Pitman & Sons, 1974) 36.

31 For an in-depth account of the event between Barnet Levey and the *Sydney Monitor*, see Eric Irvin, *Theatre Comes to Australia* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1971) 202–4.

32 David Currell, *The Complete Book of Puppet Theatre* (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1985) 179.

33 *Ibid* 179.

34 Attributed to the writer Joseph Strutt, in 'Sports and Pastimes of the People of England', 1810: 152. See George Cruikshank, *Punch and Judy, with Twenty-four Illustrations, designed and engraved by George Cruikshank. And Other Plates. Accompanied by the Dialogue of the Puppet-show, an Account of its Origin, and of Puppet Plays in England*, 6th edn (London: George Bell & Sons, 1881) 24.

35 Bernard Smith, 'Art in its Social Setting', in Verity Burgman and Jenny Lee, eds, *Constructing a Culture: A People's History of Australia since 1788* (Fitzroy: McPhee Gribble Publishers, 1988) 223–40.

36 Melbourne *Punch*, 20 December 1856.

37 *Sydney Illustrated News*, 18 February 1854.

38 Stephen Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 12.

39 Also see Helen Gilbert's discussion of the idea of 'faces' ('whiteface'/'blackface') in minstrelsy as a racial performance affirming hierarchies of colour and the investment of power into colour codings. Helen Gilbert, 'Black and White and Re(a)d All Over Again: Indigenous Minstrelsy in Contemporary Canada and Australia', *Theatre Journal*, 55 (2003): 679–98.

40 Irvin 215.

41   See Graeme Leak and John Whiteoak's entry on 'Percussion-playing', in John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell, eds, *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia* (Strawberry Hills: Currency House, 2003) 504–7.

42   For an illustration of the 'Jumping Jack', see Currell (1985) 199.

43   Rodney Frost details the construction of traditional puppet instruments and toys including the limberjack. See R. Frost, *Whacky Toys, Whirligigs & Whatchamacallits* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 2002).

44   See William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) 38–9.

45   For an illustration of the 'humanette', see Currell (1985) 198.

46   For a description of 'animal acts' in minstrelsy, see Mahar 38–9.

47   George Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1955) 183.