An Extravagant Burlesque: 19th-Century Blackface Minstrelsy and Its Contemporary Revival

Stephen Wye

Creative Work and Exegesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Statement of Originality

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Signed

(Stephen Q. Wye)

Date 6 March 2017

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sqy.wye@gmail.com
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Abstract

This project investigates the contextual and aesthetic frameworks for a creative work inspired by the practice and reception of racial transvestism and burlesque in the 19th and 21st centuries.

Few Australians may be aware of the depth and reach of a particular form of racial transvestism — blackface minstrelsy — in Australia during the 19th century. Likewise, few appear aware that “burlesque,” sometimes characterised today as “white-collar” striptease, once characterised an entire mode of 19th-century theatrical entertainment. During the 19th century, burlesques — parodies of mainstream operas and plays — came to be a fixture on blackface minstrel programmes.

The exegesis investigates the practice of burlesque and blackface minstrelsy in the Hunter Valley, a region of colonial New South Wales, and, using available historical evidence, conjures a speculative fiction: a blackface minstrel burlesque with a provenance suggesting a regional “premiere” in 1869. This speculative fiction is framed in popular sensibilities redolent of 19th-century humour — ludicrous and grotesque — and like some minstrel burlesques of the period, responds to a real event of some note: in this case, a public corroboree performed by Aboriginal groups to entertain a white colonial population in Maitland, NSW.

Although representations of Australian Aborigines in colonial drama were strongly influence by minstrelsy (and minstrelsy could be a vehicle for mocking any ethnic minority), minstrelsy per se appears to have overlooked indigenous Australians in favour of (black) American racial targets. A latterday attempt to correct this apparent historical oversight, the speculative fiction perverts what may have been the first piece of colonial literature with an entirely indigenous cast of characters, G.W. Rusden’s *Moyarra: An Aboriginal Legend*. 
There is no score or libretto for this speculative fiction: its “existence” and, indeed many of its features, are inferred from a fake advertisement purportedly taken from local newspapers in 1869.

But in turn, the speculative fiction based on Rusden’s text (Moyarra: An Un-Original Burlesque Extravaganza) itself becomes the subject for burlesque: a 21st-century neo-burlesque with more contemporary references, Moyarra: An Extravagant Undress, here represented by libretto, score, and recording. In spirit and form, Moyarra: An Extravagant Undress is a 19th-century burlesque treatment of the speculative fiction: the “low” vernacular libretto becomes “high” poetry; racial targets are cast aside in favour of post-humanist/technological targets; the music assumes a contemporary aspect and includes references to the modern canon of popular music; and the production acquires the trappings of a contemporary understanding of burlesque. While not entirely abandoning ludicrous and grotesque, the Extravagant Undress relies on a “camp” aesthetic or sensibility that, arguably, links 19th-century burlesque with the present.

A series of songs linked by somber narrative, the Extravagant Undress perverts its fictional 19th-century subject. But it may also be a vehicle for mocking blackface and the contemporary practice of burlesque.
Keywords

Burlesque, neo-burlesque, blackface minstrelsy, ethnic tranvestism, musical composition, composition, G.W. Rusden, Ned Faning, Hunter Valley

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