

Multiculturalism and Mainstage Australian Theatre

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Abstract: At last count, Australians identify with over 270 ancestries, and speak over 400 languages, yet Australia continues to be represented as a racially and culturally homogenous society, especially in the field of mainstage Australian theatre. Using Ghassan Hage's concepts of containment, enrichment, and the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, this paper examines the governance of multiculturalism and of multicultural workers in the field of Australian mainstage theatre, through contrapuntal readings of two recent theatre productions. It suggests that it is only through the self-representation of what Hage calls the multicultural Real that mainstage Australian theatre can move from specular distortion to a true mirror of contemporary Australia.

Keywords: mainstage theatre; multiculturalism; Bourdieu; Hage

Introduction

Multiculturalism has been official federal policy in Australia since the nineteen seventies, with the latest multiculturalism policy launched by the federal government on February 16, 2011 (DIAC). Even before the embrace of multiculturalism as official policy, after white colonisation, Australia was not solely Anglo-Celtic¹, as Joanne Tompkins points out (Tompkins). The pre-colonial socio-cultural and economic links between Aboriginal and Asian people, the black West Indians transported here as convicts since the 1790s, including the chartist William Cuffay who was the son of a freed black slave (Delofski), Chinese goldminers, as well as camel drivers from south and central Asia, collectively called Afghans, who were brought to work the routes that opened up central Australia, all point to a culturally diverse society. Yet, as Jon Stratton and Ien Ang assert, “the ideological *representation* of Australian nationhood as racially and culturally homogenous (as in the heyday of the White Australia policy) did have real effects on both the expression and the experience of racial, ethnic and cultural difference: this expression and this experience were neither acknowledged nor accepted as part of *Australian life*” (Stratton and Ang 157). Closer to our time, as a result of large intakes of skilled migrants, and to a lesser extent, of refugees, 44% of Australians were either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas according to the Australian Census of 2006 (ABS, 2006). Further, the Australian population collectively speaks

almost 400 languages, including Indigenous languages, identifies with more than 270 ancestries, and follows an extensive range of cultural and religious traditions (ABS, 2010). However, even a cursory glance at Australian film, television, and theatre reveals that Australian nationhood still continues to be ideologically represented as white. The cultural and linguistic diversity present on Australian streets, and reflected in official government policy, is hardly mirrored on Australian screens and stages (Bertone, Perkovic, Gonsalves, 2009, Gonsalves, 2010, Vickery). Instead, if the performing arts are meant to hold a mirror to society, then the Australian performing arts sector functions as a specular distortion, not just whitewashing what is a multicultural reality, but also governing the way in which large numbers of the country's population represent themselves, access employment opportunities, and contribute towards the image of Australian nationhood as racially and culturally heterogeneous in the performing arts. When such representation does occur, its governance is clearly visible when such performers are relegated to playing roles such as that of the prostitute, the servant, or more generally as the outsider (Lo, 1998, Vickery), a practice that is linked to a "specific Orientalist and colonialist history" (Lo, 2000, 157). An examination of the representation of the multiculturalism of Australia across the performing arts sector in Australia, while much needed, is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper attempts to focus on multiculturalism specifically in mainstage Australian theatre, because it is here on the mainstages of Australia's major theatre companies², funded even if in part and however inadequately by the taxpayer, that the "symbolic space of the national narrative" (Lo and Gilbert, 2002, 34) is created, claimed, and legitimized. Yet, according to *Australian Plays: Attitudes, Development and Production in 2010*, a report commissioned by PlayWriting Australia, and now in its third year, out of the 269 productions of Australian plays that were staged in 2010 by the 70 companies surveyed,³ only 7% (16) were written by an author with an indigenous cultural background, and only 10% (28) were by an author from a non-English speaking background (Falsone). It must be noted that only 6 out of 8 theatre companies funded by the Major Performing Arts Board participated in the survey (Ibid). There have been numerous calls for a better and more sustained representation of multicultural Australia on Australian mainstages (Perkovic, Bertone, Lewis, Armfield, Mead, 2008, *Dramaturgies*#4, Gonsalves, 2010, Gonsalves, 2009) yet change has been slow in coming. In this paper I suggest that this governance of multicultural Australia in mainstage Australian theatre may be attributed to a perpetuation of what Ghassan Hage calls the 'White nation' fantasy. This fantasy may be interrogated and subverted by firstly naming some of the various forms this governance takes, and secondly, using a Bourdieusian framework, by specific interventions in the field in an effort to acknowledge and perpetuate the multicultural Real (Hage). The intention in this paper therefore is to use a contrapuntal reading of two recent productions to interrogate ways of subverting the hegemony of the 'White nation' (Ibid) so as to move towards the ideal of the multicultural Real (Ibid).

Multiculturalism and the white nation

Using Duncan Ivison's definition, multiculturalism may be conceptualised as "a broad array of theories, attitudes, beliefs, norms, practices and policies that seek to provide public recognition of and support for accommodation of non-dominant ethnocultural

groups” (Iverson 2). The use of the term multiculturalism has raised numerous issues, including the charge that the rhetoric of official multiculturalism is often used to gloss over “the mundane and embodied aspects of cultural and ethnic diversity” (Gilbert and Lo, 2009, 3), and that the term obliterates the dissimilarity and variety between and within the cultures it clubs together i.e. “all cultures in a location against the Anglo-Celtic majority” (Tompkins 119). Yet, rather than subscribing to the unity-in-diversity (Stratton and Ang 159) model of multiculturalism, or the “happy hybridity” model (Lo, 2000, 152-168), this paper calls for a stronger racial and cultural heterogeneity on Australian mainstages. Yet this position entails locating all non-white⁴ cultures vis-a-vis the dominant White culture. While this may appear contradictory on the surface, it is an unavoidable contradiction as it calls for a mirroring of the historical hegemony of the ideological representation of Australia as a homogenous White nation vis-a-vis Aboriginal and migrant people as “non-White objects to be governed” (Hage 19) within the nation. Therefore, the call for this heterogenous representation includes the call for the representation of indigenous peoples on Australian mainstages. The location of indigenous peoples within Australian society is different from recent immigrants not least because of the as yet unresolved “prior question about the legitimacy of the state” (Iverson 2). Yet, without attempting to obliterate the memory and continuing effects of colonisation, genocide, assimilation policies and the forced removal of children, and cultural loss so as to “homogenise indigenous cultures and erase their primacy with the consensual unity-in-diversity form of multiculturalism” (Stratton and Ang 159), the representation of indigenous peoples must be affiliated to the representation of Australian multiculturalism on Australian mainstages. This is because, as noted in the results of the PWA survey above, and in the works of Lee Lewis (Lewis) and Chris Mead (Mead, 2008), the stories and bodies of indigenous peoples as well as other non-white migrants continue to be largely excluded from the national narrative, as Australian nationhood on Australian mainstages largely continues to be represented as white. Such a critique follows the work of scholars like Ann Curthoys (Curthoys), Erez Cohen (Cohen), and Peta Stephenson (Stephenson, 2003, Stephenson, 2007) who challenge the continued separation of the distinct yet connected debates over indigeneity and multiculturalism

The work of Ghassan Hage provides a useful lens through which to view the governance of multiculturalism on Australian mainstages, particularly his ideas of containment, enrichment, and the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. Using the work of French thinker Pierre Bourdieu, Hage develops the concept of the field of whiteness which is dominated by those who have accumulated a high amount of national capital (dominant linguistic, physical and cultural dispositions) and governmental belonging, thus empowering them to position others within the field. He says,

both White racists and White multiculturalists share in a conception of themselves as nationalists and of the nation as a space structured around a White culture, where Aboriginal people and non-White ‘ethnics’ are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a White national will. This White belief in one’s mastery over the nation, whether in the form of a White multiculturalism or in the form of a White racism, is what I have

called the 'White nation' fantasy. It is a fantasy of a nation governed by White people, a fantasy of White supremacy. (Hage 18)

Thus Hage conceptualises the White Nation fantasy as a way of valorising the hegemony of Whiteness, shared by white racists and white multiculturalists alike, and Aboriginal and other non-Anglo Celtic migrants people as objects whose will is subject to that of the white nationalists. While concurring with Hussein's view of the current debate surrounding white skinned Aboriginal people and their entitlement to Aboriginal benefits, it is my contention that the governance of multiculturalism in the national imaginary of mainstage Australian theatre is based on the possession, or lack of possession of certain kinds of national capital such as physical characteristics possessed by the "dominant national 'type'" (Hage 54) . In other words, the governance of multiculturalism on the Australian mainstage is based on the visual perception of difference and inferiority. This view is corroborated by the idea of race as a marker for the conceptual limits of the Australian national imaginary (Stratton and Ang). Therefore, it is not so much the governance on Australian mainstages of people from a Non English Speaking Background (NESB), nor the governance of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) people⁵ that is problematic. Rather it is the governance of people described in the UK as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), or according to Ghassan Hage, Third World Looking People (TWLP). Hage points out that

when the White people who embrace the White nation fantasy look at a migrant, what they differentiate between are not those who are NESB and those who are not, or those who are European and those who are not, but those who are Third World-looking and those who are not (Hage 18-19).

Thus we have a conceptualization of the objectified other, in the white nation fantasy, not on the basis of language or culture, but on the basis of the visual perception of difference and inferiority, which in turn is a lack of kind of national capital.

Containment

Although Aboriginal and migrant people may be perceived as objects to be governed by the white nation, it does not mean that they perceive themselves to be so (Hage 19). It is this difference in perception, and difference in will, that leads to the notion of containment. Hage states that the white nation works at "containing the increasingly active role of non-White Australians in the process of governing Australia" (Hage 19), which is why it qualifies as a fantasy. It must be noted that non-white people may also share in this fantasy of Australia as a white nation, particularly because, as Hage points out, Whiteness is an aspiration and can be accumulated (Hage 16). While multiculturalism has found spaces to exist within the field of Australian theatre (Mead, 2008, Lo, 1998) such work has largely been created by non-white diasporic communities and individual artists, from the complex intercultural work of Doppio Teatro (1984-1997), to the more recent cross-racially cast work of directors such as Gorkem Acaroglu, Susanna Dowling, and the contemporary hip hop theatrical work of Candy Bowers, *Who's That Chik?*, where she takes on race and gender, telling her personal story of a brown girl "graduating into an industry of whiteness"

(TheArtsCentre, 2009) to name but a few. However, most representations of multiculturalism in Australia have mainly been contained within the festival circuit, such as within the now extinct Carnivale – Sydney's annual multicultural arts festival, or the similarly extinct Sydney Asian Theatre Festival at Belvoir Street theatre, or within shows dealing with specific contemporary political issues like Australia's treatment of refugees like such as *Through the Wire* (2004) directed by Ros Horin, and *In Our Name* (2004) directed by Nigel Jamieson (see the work of Rand Hazou for detailed analysis of work about refugees and asylum seekers), or within the small to medium and community sector, and thereby been largely excluded from the mainstages, the spaces consecrated as legitimate by the gatekeepers of mainstage Australian theatre. Similarly, the work of Indigenous artists has largely been labelled and thus contained within Aboriginal theatre, preventing a crossover into mainstage Australian theatre as part of a mainstage play that includes non Indigenous cast, and thus preventing the crossover into the ideological representation of Australia as culturally and racially heterogenous. Some notable exceptions are the work of Company B Belvoir, especially their productions of the cross-racially cast *The Tempest* (1998) and *Stuff Happens* (2005), and Urban Theatre Project's *The Fence* (2010) (UTP, 2009), which effortlessly combines Indigenous and non Indigenous Australian characters as part of the narrative.

Enrichment

Secondly, Hage speaks of the opposition between enriched and enriching cultures (Hage 133), noting that containment does not mean exclusion, rather it involves a positioning of migrants as "an enriching/tolerable presence, and therefore something exploitable that has to be included in national space." (Ibid). Hage likens such an opposition between enriched and enriching cultures to a multicultural food fair, where the centrally located White Australians tour the various stalls and enrich themselves. Hage notes that "While the dominant White culture merely and unquestionably exists, migrant cultures exist for the latter" (Hage 121). A case in point is the presence of a black African man as one of the supporting characters in *Gwen in Purgatory* (2010). This play was first produced by Company B Belvoir, and is startling and refreshingly different from anything else that has gone before it. The writer must be applauded for engaging with the Nigerian, and broader African, diaspora in Australia, providing one of the first Nigerian characters in an Australian play performed on an Australian mainstage, and for creating a role for a black actor in Australia. Tommy Murphy, the writer of *Gwen in Purgatory*, is a multiple award-winning playwright, who has been described on the Belvoir website as "canny, dangerous and very funny" (Belvoir) and has also publicly noted the lack of playwrights who "reflect the diversity of Australia at the moment" (Lane). His drawing of the character of the Nigerian priest is keenly observed, based as it is on many interviews with priests from developing nations including Nigeria who now work in Australia (Murphy, Playwright's Note). Yet the play brings up a conflicting set of observations. On the one hand, it provides a much-needed representation of multiculturalism, precious because it is so rare on the Australian mainstage. On the other hand, and precisely because of it being so rare, it is important to look at ways in which the play engages with multiculturalism within the national imaginary, and to interrogate how this engagement may help us reach the ideal of the multicultural Real. One cannot help but see how Hage's idea of the relation between enriched-enriching

cultures (Hage 133) is played out in this production. While the Nigerian priest, Father Ezekiel, is seemingly located in the centre of the drama, portrayed as an observer of a dysfunctional Australian catholic family, his position within the space of the play is that of an enricher (Ibid) i.e. a position, within the world of the play that is exploitable and therefore tolerable. He is included in the narrative only insofar as he is enriching it, providing Gwen, a “good white nationalist” (Hage 78-116), with the opportunity to love him. He is invited to bless her house, and she describes him as having a “big wonderful smile and wonderful sermons about just wonderful—and he’s very approachable and...From Kenya” (Murphy). Gwen can’t really understand him, although she says she can, and thus the playwright, while painting Gwen in an affectionate light, cleverly satirises her perceptions of otherness. Her inability to understand him doesn’t stop her from being enriched by him as he provides a real (in his role as a priest) and metaphorical (in his role as exotic outsider) service to her. This not only places the white family in a dominant position over the priest, but in a different mode of existence to the priest. While Father Ezekiel is always included in the narrative, this inclusion is regulated and allowed only as far as his role as an enricher, and never as an equal in the White narrative. Interestingly, the playwright skilfully uses the TWLP to serve as an agent to critique white perceptions of the non-white outsider, yet the TWLP always remains an outsider and never crosses the boundary into the White Australian family. Shows performed by Indigenous artists also work as a source of enrichment, primarily for a non-Indigenous audience. Such positioning of multiculturalism in theatre leads one to ask how power is distributed and by whom among the various cultures (including white) that are represented on stage, even if such questions may not be addressed in practice when directors make casting decisions, and in the rehearsal room, due to “Time pressure on choices, stress, and the possibility of there being ‘multiple non-racist explanations’” (Lewis 16) for any decision.

The dialectic of inclusion and exclusion

Thirdly, in examining the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, Hage provides the example of anti-immigration discourse in California which “by continually constructing the immigrants as unwanted, works precisely at maintaining their economic viability to American employers. They are best wanted as ‘unwanted’”. (Hage 135). Thus the desirability of their inclusion rested in their social exclusion (Hage 134). Similarly within mainstage Australian theatre, the value of TWLP lies in their being different, i.e. their inclusion is contingent upon their exclusion. Thus Griffin Theatre Company’s innovative production of black American playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney’s *The Brothers Size* (2011), was performed by three NIDA trained male TWLP, namely Aboriginal Australian actor Meyne Wyatt, American born actor Marcus Johnson, Tongan Australian actor Anthony Taufa. The director, Imara Savage, chose a play which demanded a cast of black male actors, despite being told it would be hard to find such actors in Sydney (Savage). It took a bold director willing to take a risk with an American play, in order to showcase the skills of black Australian actors on a Sydney mainstage. Again, this play threw up conflicting observations. While commending it for showcasing the depth of talent among black male actors trained in this country’s most prestigious acting schools, one cannot help but see how the desirability of the inclusion of these three black actors lay in them performing an American story with American

accents, thereby excluding them from the Australian national imaginary, and thereby perpetuating the ideological representation of Australia as racially and culturally homogenous. In other words, black actors may only be allowed on stage if playing non Australian roles, thus denying the multicultural reality present daily on Australia's streets. These notions of containment, enrichment, and the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion provide a way of interrogating not only the ideological representation of Australia as racially and culturally homogenous, but also of the racial and cultural homogeneity of playwrights, directors and actors in mainstage Australian theatre. Hage notes that

It is this recognition that we are a 'multicultural community in all our diversity' that is evaded by White multiculturalism, for it is the opposition between valuing diversity and being diverse that the White nation fantasy operates to reproduce itself. The 'we appreciate' diversity, we 'value' ethnic contributions, etc. Attitudes which abound in the dominant political discourse in Australia create a gulf between the 'we' and that which is appreciated and valued. In so doing, they work to mystify the real possibility, grounded in the very composition of Australian society, of a national 'we' which is itself diverse. It is this 'we' that is at the core of the multicultural Real: we are diversity. It is a 'we' associated with the verb 'to be', while it is the verb 'to have' (which always presupposes a subject a subject that has and an object that is had) that structures the imaginary of White multiculturalism. Indeed, 'to have' others is a necessary precondition for 'appreciating' them. (Hage 139)

Thus it is the denial of a multicultural Real that is the effect of this homogenous representation of Australia. The Eclipse Report (ArtsCouncilEngland) of the Arts Council of England explores this lack of representation within British theatre in great detail and names it "institutional racism" (ArtsCouncilEngland 3). One way of representing the multicultural Real would be to equip TWLP with the various forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1987, 4) necessary to represent themselves on Australian mainstages.

Representing the multicultural Real

The accumulation of symbolic capital, such as access to networks through which playwrights, directors and actors get work, is crucial in the representation of the multicultural Real in mainstage Australian theatre. As one TWL theatre practitioner quipped "How do we get our foot in the door if we don't even know where the door is?" (Mead 2010). For mainstage Australian theatre to be representative of the multiculturalism on Australia's streets, then firstly the habitus (Bourdieu, 1989, 19) of theatre workers must engage with the multicultural Real, the idea of a multicultural mainstage must be worn like a "second nature" (Bourdieu 1977 in Webb et al., 16), a second skin. Secondly, the strategic intervention of institutions, rules and practices is required in the field, in order to empower TWLP with the social, cultural and symbolic capital needed to access the mainstages.

Pacharo Mzembe, the NIDA trained actor who plays the black Nigerian priest in *Gwen In Purgatory* recently said, "...everyone is telling you 'it's not really going to work out' or 'there's not enough roles for Africans', and then you fight through it and you enjoy playing the priest and it's good fun" (Renton). Though Mzembe's words are appreciative of the rare opportunity to play an African man on stage, they also point to the dearth of acting opportunities available in Australia not just for Africans, but, for the larger community of TWLP who work in Australian theatre (DATA). There are not many roles for TWLP in Australia because there are not many TWLP playwrights to tell their stories. As Rachel Maza Long, the Artistic Director of Aboriginal theatre company Ilbjerri asked, "...where are the new writers under commission? Where's the next generation of plays to produce? Where's the rich and varied canon? Where's the work on the shelves?" (Mead, 2008, 2). Interventions to the field in this direction are already occurring for playwrights through PlayWriting Australia, which could be seen as equipping TWL writers with cultural and social capital, through specific programs such as their community outreach workshops in schools and regional and remote areas, and through The Salon – a playwriting workshop for culturally diverse writers. Some mainstage theatre companies have already been moving in this direction, recognising the capital possessed by TWLP playwrights, actors, and directors, and trading this in for commissions and other job opportunities, namely Sydney Theatre Company's *The Residents*, Bell Shakespeare's *Mind's Eye* Initiative, and Company B's continuing support of indigenous and multicultural directors and playwrights. The appointment of Wesley Enoch as Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company, making him the first indigenous artistic director ever to head a state theatre company (Sorensen), is a huge step in the right direction towards the ideological self-representation of Australian nationhood as racially and culturally heterogeneous i.e. towards the representation of the multicultural Real (Hage). Such initiatives work in parallel with organisations such as Diversity in Australian Theatre Alliance (DATA, 2011), The Colour Blind Project (Draisma and Son), and Facebook groups such as Diversity in Australian Media (Tiwari, 2010) which were formed specifically to address these concerns.

Conclusion

Thus, as we have seen, from containment, enrichment, and the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, the field of mainstage Australian theatre has been changing, if slowly, towards representations of Australia as racially and culturally heterogeneous. What is required is for this heterogeneity to not be restricted to, and therefore freed from, containment within the festival circuit, political theatre, and the small-to-medium sector, and contribute, via the multicultural Real (Hage) to the fluid, dynamic, "unfinished business" (Stratton and Ang 157) of the creation of the Australian national imaginary. One way that this may be achieved is firstly to wear the multicultural Real (Hage) like a second skin, and secondly to empower TWLP playwrights, actors, directors, and others who work or would like to work in the theatre, with the social, cultural and symbolic capital that will enable them to compete with theatre workers from the dominant culture in the field of mainstage Australian theatre, and eventually to be in positions of power that enable self-representation. It is only through this self-representation of the multicultural Real that mainstage Australian theatre can be what theatre is meant to be, a mirror of the society of which it is a part.

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Notes

¹ Siobhán McHugh points out that it is problematic to even use the term Anglo-Celtic as if it represented a monoculture that existed in Australia before the official adoption of multiculturalism as a policy, in her radio documentary that explores the bitter religious, social and economic divide that existed between the Anglos (English Protestants) and the Celts (Irish Catholics) (McHugh).

² This refers to the theatre companies funded by the Major Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, and henceforth referred to as mainstage companies or mainstages. For a list of these companies see http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/our_structure/arts_organisations/major_performing_arts_companies (Ozco)

³ The survey relies on self-reporting by theatre companies.

⁴ While Ghassan Hage uses an upper-case 'W' when referring to "White" as an identity category because he sees it as a construct to which people who don't have white skin colour may also belong (Hage 57-58), for the purposes of this paper I choose to use a lower-case 'w' when referring to white Australia to suggest that skin colour has been crucial in determining whom to include in and whom to exclude from the national imaginary in mainstage Australian theatre. In this I follow Benjamin Miller who uses a lower-case 'w' "in order to imply that skin colour has been central to – even if it is not the only factor in – racism and social identity in Australia." (Miller 5)

⁵ These categories have been used and continue to be used in Australia to describe people who are not Anglo Celtic

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