

Of Rugby, Beer, and Ballet:

The Depiction of Manhood in a New Zealand Folk Drama

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Introduction: Dance of the Dying Tractor

The scene is red Square, Muskva (Moscow to you). The Prime Minister of New Zealand and his entourage have arrived for an historic summit meeting with Mr. K. Before the diplomacy begins, the visitors are honored with a sample of Russian culture. Mr. K announces, “The Bolshy Ballet Company, led by their prima ballerina Madame Keilonova—hero of the republic tourist class—will present for you ‘The Dance of the Dying Tractor,’ to music by Ripzy Cosetsoff!” There follows two minutes of classical piano music broken by the stamping of a dozen pairs of feet, and thunderous laughter from the audience. The newspaper critic who reviewed the show said of this piece: “The murder of Act II of Swan Lake is wonderfully horrible. It would have been too horrible to watch if it hadn’t been so funny.” An odd comment, unless one realizes that the ballerinas in this performance were all male.

This little piece of folk theatre comes from a recording of “Carry On Phil,” the Victoria University Students’ Capping Extravaganza, recorded in the Opera House in Wellington, New Zealand in May 1960. The Extravaganza was an annual tradition in the city. They were full-length public performances, written, produced, and acted by university students as part of capping, the students’ annual festival in celebration of graduation. For a week each year, students left the campus to bring their licentious, carnivalesque capping celebrations literally into the streets of the city. They paraded through the town in a ludic, often drunken “Procesh,” during which they invaded pubs on horseback; manhandled spectators or sprayed them with water balloons (and worse substances); and

aggressively sold their magazine, *Cappicade*. These periodicals were full of cartoons, jokes, and satire—and sold very well. The public always responded to capping, whether by turning out to watch, or by writing aggrieved letters to the editor the next day; but a response was just what the students were seeking, whether positive or negative.

In the midst of this carnival, people would pack the Opera House for four or five nights to watch the Extravaganza (“Extrav.,” as it was usually called). “The Extravaganza was an ‘event’ in Wellington, reviewed at length in the daily press, they consistently filled the Opera House. ‘Everyone’ went to the Extravaganza” (Petty 1985:41). Here they were entertained with mass choruses, song and dance numbers, original satire, parody, and burlesque—and the male ballet.

Many of the former students that I talked to during my fieldwork in Wellington in 1988 remembered the male ballet. Nita McMaster, for example, was a student in the early 1940s. Although she was never a member of the show, she and her friends would watch it:

We always went to Extrav., as undergrads. When I think of it now, it must have creaked a bit, because it was thrown up in a hurry, it was written in a hurry; certainly produced in a hurry....It was a pretty boozy outfit. It was usually bits of political satire strung together pretty loosely. There was often a male ballet, with hairy legs and football socks.

Another memory, this time from one of the leading actors, circa 1944:

Of course male ballets were part of the shows. That was why Scrimgerella was wearing a tutu¹. She was the principal ballerina, with a male court galloping behind her. So corny, but it never fails to raise a laugh. The members of the ballet were not in the rest of the show. They got thoroughly plonked on keg beer. They'd be the football teams (Geoff Datson, who played the lead of "Jonnalio" in the same show).

A male ballet, of course, was inevitable, and as usual it was one of the high lights, first in the flower dance (with its very buxom bee),...and later in the can-can, which was obviously an endurance test for most of them. However, they creaked through it amiably, and the audience roared. (Newspaper review of "The Pirates of Finance," 1954)

The male ballet was not only well known in Wellington, but it was a feature of student theatricals at other universities as well. Otago University students established their "Selwyn Ballet" as part of capping concerts by 1928 (Elworthy 1990:54). In Cambridge, a male undergraduate ballet was a popular part of the May week shows of the Footlights club (Hewison 1983:16); while male drag shows such as Harvard's Hasty Pudding Theatricals have been amusing the socially privileged elite since 1844 (Garber 1992:59-66).

¹. This was in *Zealous Zombies*, 1944; Scrimgerella referred to "Uncle Scrim" Scrimgeour; played by G.S. (Gib) Bogle.

Returning to capping in Wellington New Zealand, we find that drag, or cross-dressing, was by no means confined to the male ballet. Men were donned many kinds of “fancy dress” during the carnivalesque license afforded by capping week. Of the various and motley costumes that appeared during Process were many parodic versions of femininity. Cross-dressed characters included the sexpot (Mae West being a favorite); the exotic native (hula girls, harem girls, and the like); schoolgirls, flowergirls, and ballerinas. In the Extrav. itself, female characters were often played by men in broad burlesque style. To give just two examples for which I have illustrations: John McCreary appeared as “Bertie the Benefit Brush²” in 1946, while Bill Sheat starred as “Electra” in 1953.

Moreover, this kind of cross-dressing was well known in New Zealand outside of student circles as well. According to geography professor Ron Hill,

That kind of thing was by no means uncommon. Sometimes at the university there were vice-versa dances, where the men went dressed as women and the women went dressed as men. That seems to have disappeared entirely. I suppose that the sexual overtones have become much greater.... A lot of church clubs etcetera had a vice-versa social too.³

² “Brush” was slightly crude slang for “woman.” Referring to the Family Benefit giving each family two shillings per child, recently passed into law by the Labour Government, she sang: “He gave us two shillin’ / And boy was I willin’ / I’m Bertie the Benefit Brush.”

³ Ron Hill; student 1953-56, 1959-60.

Along with the vice-versa dances, the students' male ballet disappeared from the stage, the last appearance being in Extrav. 1965. Those who were students after this date never mention it. Yet, there is no denying that it was extremely popular with audiences, and there is no record of any active opposition to it. Why then did this tradition come to an end? Was it that "the sexual overtones" became more obvious? Or was it, as another former student suggested, because "we've gotten more sensitive now about the implications of men dressing up in women's costume"?

What are the implications of men dressing up in women's costume? To ask that question today is to step into a controversy. Some would argue that drag plays with gender stereotypes and so destabilizes them. For others, drag only reinforces negative stereotypes. A recent article in the *Chicago-Kent Law Review* argues that drag is conceptually indistinguishable from blackface, and so should be anathema (Kleiman 2000).

Victoria University, unlike some other schools, always had both male and female players in its capping shows. From the earliest years, most Extravs included both male and female choruses, such as the "She-fairies" and "He-fairies" in 1930, or the choruses of "Blondies" (female) and "Zombies" (male) in 1944. There were female leads, and even occasionally women writers and producers. Nevertheless, Extrav. reflected a heavily male point of view:

Extravaganzas were showcases for men and catered for their exhibitionism.

There was usually only one principal part for a female and for this someone was

required who could sing and act the role of a sex-pot. I was accepted for a place in the female ballet. We danced and sang and did a lot of rushing around and saying “ooh” and “ah” in reaction to a statement from a male character. Basically we were decoration, a kind of support group for the male actors. (Geraldine McDonald, quoted in Hughes and Ahern 1993:85) [c. 1943-47]

From a feminist point of view, the cross-dressing in capping shows only parodied women, and so defamed them. To put this point of view most strongly, men who appear as women “rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves” (Raymond 1979). However, I would argue with Marjorie Garber to reduce the transvestite to this meaning is to look through rather than at the transvestite (1992:10). To take the male ballet as an example, they were simultaneously playing at being men and women.

In this connection, it is no accident that the male ballet was associated with the football team. Rugby football, New Zealand’s national sport, has established itself as the unparalleled outlet for displays of masculinity. To put it simply, in New Zealand, real men play rugby, and all rugby players are men. Thus, all that was needed to display the masculine side of the male ballet was to include symbols of rugby. As one former participant remembered: “we did a can-can wearing the best imitation tutus we could manage, but wearing rugby boots as well.”⁴ In the 1949 Extrav., “Jubileevit?”, the male ballet was introduced by blowing a referee’s whistle. In this connection, it is interesting to note the direct association that was made between rugby and maleness in a famous

Process float. It consisted of a Model T Ford, or “Tin Lizzie,” with a pair of rugby balls suspended from underneath. A sign on the car read, “You can’t call me Lizzie any more.” The message is clear: anyone in possession of rugby balls is a man.

The ballet mistress was the second important prop used in signifying the masculinity of the male ballet. As one old hand put it, the female ballet mistress “used to take the football team and turn them into ballet girls.”⁵

Although most of the writers, directors, producers and others responsible for producing the shows were men, the ballet mistress was always a woman—even when the choreographer (a separate role) was male. I do not think this is a coincidence. The male ballet functioned as a sign not only on stage, but also throughout the rehearsals. In the words of the 1965 program book, she “ably tutored and controlled the Male Ballet” (emphasis mine).

I ended up as ballet mistress for the male ballet. This required no great technical ability since the ballet was a form of folk art, handed down over generations of students. The job consisted of making sure the men turned up to rehearsals and didn’t get too drunk on the night. (Geraldine McDonald, quoted in Hughes and Ahern 1993:85)

⁴ Ron Hill.

⁵ Ralph Hogg.

In this “frame play,” the female ballet mistress appears--as women so often do—as the agent of civilization, taming and training the raw beastly masculinity of her charges and forcing it into a civilized mold, embodied by the obviously male bodies forced into tutus. And what better symbol of western civilization could there be than classical ballet?

Much of the humor of the male ballet came from this close juxtaposition of two opposites in a single figure: wild/tame, and female / male. To keep the humor, it was essential that both elements be visible simultaneously. Thus, reviewers complained if the ballet did not dance well; but they also complained if they danced too well:

Male ballet is, by tradition, another ‘must.’ This cavorting of hairy legs around the stage can usually be relied upon to raise a laugh, and it did. But it could have been vastly more funny if the dancers had some semblance of timing and coordination (*Salient* June 1, 1965).

The chorus of Y.M.C.A. maids was first-class.... Thought their ballet technique was too good, as a matter of fact. A men’s ballet should not be so perfect, but rather should be more of a burlesque, something to laugh at, not to be impressed by (Review of “Peter in Blunderland” (1945), *Salient* May 2 1945).

In other words, the ballet trod (or pirouetted) a fine line between performance and parody. When the football players (or football player substitutes) put on tutus, they were not just portraying women, they were also portraying themselves as men. Their masculinity was only accentuated by close contrast to the parodic feminine. In Garber’s

terms, the transvestite is not to be reduced to either male or female manqué, but is a third sex (1992:9-10).

What are the sexual overtones of drag? Certainly, one of those overtones is homosexuality. Marjorie Garber has an excellent discussion of the ways in which both gay and straight culture tends to conflate transvestism and homosexuality. That is, we tend to insist (or at least suspect) that all transvestites are gay, and vice-versa. However, she argues that there is no necessary connection between the two:

The history of transvestism and the history of homosexuality constantly intersect and intertwine, both willingly and unwillingly. They cannot simply be disentangled. But, what is also clear is that neither can simply be transhistorically “decoded” as a sign for the other (1992:131).

Did *Extrav.* Players and audiences decode the male ballet as gay? Possibly—at least for some people, some of the time. However, the homosexual overtone remained just that—an overtone, to be recognized by those in the know, ignored who preferred not to know, and unseen by those who had no clue.

For the men in *Extrav.*, the male ballet was one of the few places where they were permitted to express any kind of sexuality. In the world of *Extrav.*, as we have seen, real men drank beer and played rugby. Ideally, they did not have sex—much as they might

wish to. This ideology is expressed most clearly in a well-known Extrav. song, “Think About the Game,” sung here by a chorus of male football players:

When I was twenty, young and pure,

Met this doll in Rotorua

(Yeah? Yeah?)

Went into her caravan there

Sat upon her pink divan there

(Yeah? Yeah?)

She said the thing she liked most was a man,

Especially sitting on her pink divan...

(Yeah? Yeah? Yeah? YEAH?)

But then I thought about the game, the game, the game,

Oh yes I thought about the game, the game, the game,

Though she hinted at l’amour,

I went straight on out the door,

‘Cause I thought about the game.

When temptation comes your way, remember –

Be strong,

When a mopsy says you may, remember –

It’s wrong.

When you're taking home a doll,
Who starts giving you the eye,
You squeeze her hand a little
And she (Ah!) begins to sigh,

When she says, "Why not come in and have a drink?"
Tho' she's nice, just think twice, and you'll stay right in the pink.
When you find a doll especially fetching, take care;
When she says she'd like to see your etchings –
Don't you dare.

In spite of all their feminine guile
Let our motto ever be – self-denial – self-denial!

This song was so popular that it was repeated in several shows: 1959, 1960, and 1965.

In *Extrav.*, the sexual roles played by men and women are very clear. Women are sexual temptresses, but the strong and pure man is proof against her wiles. This song comes from "Carry on Phil," where the hero is football hero Phil Andrews. In the course of the play he is chased by three female sex-pots, all of who seek to seduce him. But he is so pure that he appears to be innocent of sex altogether. As one of the women complains, "I've been giving Phil the old one-two again...but I don't think he knows how o count."

Female characters, on the other hand, are almost always sexual creatures. Thus, when men parody the part of women in the shows, they too can be sexual. The male ballet in the 1950 Extrav., for example, appeared as Aladdin's harem:

Little Girl: Mummy, who are all those funny ladies?

Harem: We are the ladies of Alladin's Harem

He buy us clothes, we don't wear 'em in the harem.

Every maid here gets paid with bits of jewelry

For bits of tom foolery.

When we're with him

We've a rhythm

When we do the thing we'd rather be doing

Any night at all with you.

The male ballet did not depict just any women, but usually women who were on the moral borderline. As Marjorie Garber noted of the traditional female impersonators in Harvard's Hasty Pudding Club, "wearing women's clothing was not, apparently, transgressive enough; the kickline aspired to dress—or undress—like transgressive women, women on the borderline" (1992:83).

In conclusion, I hope I have shown that the male ballet cannot be reduced to a simple meaning—either sexist mockery of women, or covert display of homosexuality. The ballet member was simultaneously masculine and feminine, gay and straight, sexual and abstaining. In other words, to borrow the formulation of an old Capping cartoon, he was fully human.

--I don't think it right that our future lawyers, accountants, and teachers, and such should caper in so undignified a manner!

--With that, sir, we disagree. We like to think, when we meet a lawyer, that he in his youth played the cheerful fool, and was at odd moments fairy, sultan's favourite, ballet dancer, or sprite. We like to think of that, sir! It shows that once he was human.⁶

⁶ *Cappicade* cartoon (1944 p.17)

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