

## Book Review

*Staging Queer Feminisms*  
by Sarah French (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

PETA TAIT

*Staging Queer Feminisms* by Sarah French analyses transgressive, queer and feminist performance in twenty-first-century Australia and demonstrates the ways in which this type of work has become theatrically celebrated. French reveals how this highly innovative performance critiques gender, racial and sexual identities within the larger sociopolitical context in a substantial scholarly critique of her own. Although the artists in this book initially developed work for audiences outside mainstream culture, they now feature prominently in national and international touring programs. This performance has become artistically as well as culturally significant. It is worth noting that this is the first book of scholarship directly encompassing Australian feminist performance for a decade.

Performance about identity might suggest the staging of personal stories, but the artists in this book opt instead for non-realistic, heightened theatricality including different styles of drag. The book has a brief introduction to the recent political history of Australia in the beginning, which contextualises the performances and reveals how the artists responded to major developments. But their work does not present a dry polemic and instead performances are comical, satirical, ironic and parodic as they tease and provoke, even shock, while directly commenting on major political concerns. This in itself provides a fascinating dimension, as if queer political performance wears the jester's mantle of laughing at everything while 'telling the truth'.

The introductory chapter one covers the theoretical perspectives of the book that align queer and feminist theories by explaining how 'queer' had become separated from 'feminism'. French outlines how feminist theory was concerned with 'woman', which seemed to be misaligned with ideas of gender fluidity in queer theory and, in turn, the latter did not always recognise the great importance of how ideas of 'feminine' and 'masculine' were challenged by early feminism. As French points out, complex power structures are being effectively challenged when queer and feminist conceptual approaches are conjoined.

Some of the major arguments in theatre scholarship are summarised in the book including the issue of deliberate choice in performance versus Butler's disavowal of

agency in ideas of performativity. The book's case studies might be focused on Australian artists, but the conceptual framing and wide-ranging theoretical explorations locate this work within international scholarship and its theoretical approaches.

The case studies present the contrasting styles of Australia's leading queer and feminist performance-makers. Performances are analyzed for their aesthetic effect and with attention to the wider theoretical issues and using semiotic textual and phenomenological experiential perspectives. From short vignettes to full-length dramas, these highly theatrical works inspire and disturb in affirming and discomforting ways. They emerge within what is termed the 'independent' sector of theatre in Australia, in which the artists produce work on a project-by-project basis. Some of these artists have been subsequently invited to perform on more established and comparatively well-resourced theatre stages. This positioning within the independent sector is both a legacy of the origins of this art work as well as a way of maintaining artistic autonomy. The independent sector might be crucial to innovation in Australian arts, its capacity has been weakened due to the reduction in governmental funding and neoliberal interventionist policies about what constitutes 'art' and therefore what should be subsidised. The independent sector embraces weird and risky works that are often confrontational and edgy. An earlier generation of queer performance allied with drag traditions, which I sought to include in the performance history record, reflected the sensibilities of a marginalised minority and was outside the independent theatre sector, which did at least include the early feminist work. While this earlier queer performance was episodic and uneven, it was always refreshingly original and imaginative as it inspired as well as at times disgusted; I observed how Australian trash drag of the 1990s could confront a visiting queer theorist.

Knowledgeable readers will know of international performance precedents for the performances in *Staging Queer Feminisms* which include those of Australian Jim Sharman directing *The Rocky Horror Show* in London in 1973 and Australian Leigh Bowery performing in London in the 1980s and 1990s. Bowery's extraordinary stylised costume creations with fabric faces, some of which are now held in art gallery collections. Bowery famously (or infamously) performed as Madame Garbo in Copi's *The Homosexual or the Difficulty of Expressing Oneself*, in which the characters repeatedly switch gender in the text and seek sex-change operations. This seminal play was first produced in Australia within the independent theatre sector in 1976, shortly after the productions of the first feminist theatre groups and of Reg Livermore cross-dressed in his hit show, *Betty Bombshell*.

Artistically accomplished productions by the next generation of artists presented in French's book built on this history. Moira Finucane working with producer Jackie Smith, has sustained her career over three decades and now reaches a wide audience with her queer feminist work. Finucane's body-based performance surprises and amuses with its feminine grotesque aesthetic that, French explains, offers a type of drag. Of particular interest is how French explores the affective register of Moira Finucane's extraordinary characters and their neogothic sensibilities. French is pointing out that there is an unsettling effect to Finucane's short segments, which are highly visual and wonderfully

shocking in their physical action. The discussion of affect in reception captures the way that audiences do not know what will happen and are not reassured. Yet this riskiness contributes to the wide appeal of Finucane's work. Sarah Ward as the character of Yana Alana might be humorously provocative with her spoken and sung accusations and jibes, but as French explains, Yana Alana's narcissistic preoccupations vividly convey troubling aspects of contemporary society. Ward's performance both questions therapeutic norms while it reaffirms a central importance for dealing with complex pressures.

The book's chapter on comic performances by the actor Kamahi Djordan King – of the Gurindji people – and his artistic collaborators enlarge Australian and international understanding of the ongoing legacies of the oppressive treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. King presents brilliant satire in his theatrical interpretations of racial identity struggles including that of indigenous queer identity. French explains how his clever cross-gender character, Queen Constantina Bush, becomes both emblematic of the authority of the colonial Queen while she inverts the racial dynamic to expose the invisible privilege of white society. As French explains, even though King's performance involves female impersonation, it is gently feminine in tone rather than strident. French explains that these performances 'employ a disidentificatory stance as a strategy of resistance towards the constructions of Indigenous history, identity and culture by a white Australian imaginary'. To some extent, all the performance in French's framework are engaged in a process of disidentification with normative identities.

French describes and analyses the work of Ash Flanders and Declan Green as the Brothers Grimm who create full-length productions based on scripts that transgress the limits of theatrical gender and racial roles in nuanced interpretations and adding tropes of Australian historical identity. These performances invite a comparison with the internationally renowned performances of Split Britches, because they similarly mess with literary and cinematic classics in a delightfully imaginative way. This generation of artists expands on the techniques used by their predecessors – made famous by Caryl Churchill's 1979 *Cloud Nine*. Yet, as French explains, Brothers Grimm also develop serious characters who might evoke pathos in an expansion of ideas of drag. French explores how each production brings together a range of different styles of queer characterisation that encompass the parodic extreme to the realistic.

French explains how the Brown Council's clever performances by Frances Barret, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith manifest a wry humour as they make potent political points, expanding on the type of stunts pioneered by the Guerrilla Girls. Their works offer very smart, witty but tricky interrogations of the cultural condemnation of being feminist and being an artist while utilizing the conceptual possibilities of performance. One significant performance considered in French's book involves reclaiming the life and art of a visual artist, Barbara Cleveland, emblematic of an earlier generation except that the artist turns out to be fictional. This performance both reminds spectators that the recognition of predecessors needs to happen as it plays with the whole way that female artists are forgotten – and also queer artists. Kate Davis and Emma Valente of The Rabble take canonical classics like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Mary

Shelley's *Frankenstein* and make serious, full-length multimedia theatrical performances that are as upsetting as they are profound in probing feminist concerns about the gendered body. This work depicts the violence and trauma accompanying the transgression of gender identity because it highlights a fleshed biological body as much as an imaginative dimension. If these two groups suggest how feminist performance can be found across genres, the Hot Brown Honey burlesque confirms a pleasurable transgression.

No doubt readers everywhere will find the queer feminist performances in *Staging Queer Feminisms* as exciting to encounter as do the Australian audiences who attend these sell-out shows. The sustained practice of such performance represents artistic progression to theatrical recognition nationally. It is now possible to find the aesthetic traces of this queer feminist performance in more conventional theatre and its design. I look forward to seeing how the twenty-first century's artistically coherent and sustained queer feminist performances, inspire future generations of performance artists as well as accomplished scholars such as French.

---

PETA TAIT is Professor of Theatre and Drama at La Trobe University and Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities.

© 2017 Peta Tait



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).