

Harlequin in Van Diemen's Land

ELIZABETH WEBBY

I first met Harold Love in the late 1970s when I was invited to a planning meeting for what was eventually to become *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History*, edited by Harold and published in 1984. Although I had a long-standing interest in theatre and performance, I had not previously written or researched on it so was initially surprised to be involved in a work on Australian theatre history. The reason, I was told, was my familiarity with early Australian newspapers, as a result of my intensive study of them for my PhD thesis on the literary culture of Australia before 1850. And, indeed, it was necessary to return to the newspapers to find information, and most of the documents, for the pre-1850 section of *The Australian Stage*. Harold was a marvellous person to work with; both then and later, during our years together on the editorial board of the Academy Editions of Australian Literature, I remained in awe of his enormous store of knowledge and his seemingly always sunny temperament. I secretly thought of him as a kind of Father Christmas because of his beard and jolly nature, his generosity and the fact that he was always full of surprises. Given these personal and professional associations, a piece on the Christmas pantomime seemed an appropriate way to help celebrate Harold Love's life and work.

While there has been increasing academic interest in nineteenth-century stage melodrama, especially as a precursor of film and television drama, melodrama's twin, the nineteenth-century pantomime, is still relatively neglected, especially in Australia. Harold Love, of course, was well aware of the local significance of this highly popular form, since pantomimes as well as operas had been performed by W. S. Lyster's companies between 1861 and 1880. In *The Golden Age of Australian Opera* he notes: "Printed pantomime texts form the most considerable body of professionally performed indigenous drama surviving from the stage of the colonial period, and the best of them reveal remarkable resources of comic imagination."¹ The one now generally regarded as both the best and the most indigenous is Garnet Walch's *Australia Felix; or, Harlequin Laughing Jackass and the Magic Bat*, first performed by Lyster's company at Melbourne's Opera House on 26 December 1873.²

¹ Harold Love, *The Golden Age of Australian Opera. W. S. Lyster and His Companies, 1861–1880* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1981), 240.

² This is one of only two nineteenth-century Australian pantomimes to have been republished in scholarly editions: see Garnet Walch, *Australia Felix*, ed. Veronica Kelly (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988). Richard Fotheringham includes both the 1869 Melbourne and 1871 Sydney versions of *The House That Jack Built*, namely William Mower Akhurst's *Harlequin Progress, and the Love's Laughs, Laments and Labors, of Jack Melbourne and Little Victoria* and the anonymous *Harlequin Jack Sydney, Little Australia & the Gnome of the Golden Mine, and the Australian Fernery in the Golden Conservatory, the Home of Diamantina*, in his *Australian Plays for the Colonial Stage 1834–1899*, Academy Editions of Australian Literature (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006).

As Harold Love observed, its plot is “impossible to summarise in any intelligible way in under two pages.”³ But some idea of its topicality can be gathered from the fact that the magic bat in this case is not Harlequin’s traditional slapstick but a magic cricket bat that will enable Australia to defeat England in the Melbourne Test, which had also commenced on 26 December 1873. In true pantomime style, the Australian eighteen were played by the ladies of the ballet, while W. G. Grace and his All-England Eleven were played by children made up to resemble the English cricketers. And, in true Australian style, the good fairy Mirth had a chief attendant named Grogblossom.

When carrying out research for *The Australian Stage*, I discovered an earlier pantomime with a remarkably similar title, *Harlequin in Australia Felix; or, Geelong in an Uproar*, first performed at the Albert Theatre in Geelong on 21 January 1845. All that we know about this pantomime comes from an advertisement in the *Geelong Advertiser* for 18 January 1845, which provides a list of characters and scenes. It is clear, however, that the mortals in this pantomime, as in Walch’s *Australia Felix*, were Australian types easily recognised as such by the audience: the hero is “Luckless Looseall, (a Tax Ridden Settler in Search of a Wife)”; the villain is “Gregory Graball (a Wealthy Speculator, just arrived)” and the comic dame, played of course by a man, is “Araminta Shortweight, (widow of a wealthy Store keeper fond of ‘the ready’)”⁴ Araminta has a lovely daughter named Flora, who she decrees should marry Graball rather than her true love, Looseall. When all seems lost, in Scene 3 the good fairy Urania and her evil counterpart Rockalda appear and transform the mortals into the four traditional characters of the harlequinade: the lovers become Harlequin and Columbine, their two antagonists Pantaloon and Clown. The harlequinade consists of a further five scenes, with many chases as Clown and Pantaloon attempt to catch the lovers, comic turns by Clown, and magic tricks performed by Harlequin with the aid of his magic bat. Scene 6 is set in “The Bush” and includes bushrangers. In contrast, Scenes 5 and 7 are street scenes, representing two well-known Geelong landmarks, Mack’s Hotel and the Retreat Hotel. Eventually Harlequin is captured by Pantaloon and Clown and loses his magic bat. But again the good fairy steps in to change the characters back into their mortal forms so that all can end happily.

From this advertisement, it is clear that *Harlequin in Australia Felix*, like most other pantomimes performed in Australia before 1850, gave more weight to the harlequinade, which relied on action rather than words, and much less to the opening scenes that were text-based. This was the reverse of the situation later in the century, when productions featured a much expanded version of the original pantomime opening, usually based on a popular story or fairy tale, followed by an increasingly elaborate set of transformation scenes and a greatly truncated harlequinade. The

³ Love, *The Golden Age of Australian Opera*, 242.

⁴ See Harold Love, ed., *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1984), 40.

much greater reliance on spoken text, replete with puns, parodies and allusions to local and topical events, explains why later pantomime libretti were printed, so ensuring that audiences missed none of the humour, while also having a souvenir of the occasion. Advertisements, along with occasional reviews of performances, are, however, almost our only source of information on the many pantomimes performed in Australia before 1850.

The major study of this earlier form of the English pantomime remains David Mayer's *Harlequin in his Element* (1969). Mayer concentrates on pantomime from the Regency period, 1806-1836, the heyday of Joseph Grimaldi, the most famous pantomime clown. He argues that, during a time of strict stage and newspaper censorship, pantomime provided one of the most important forums for political satire, including criticism of the monarchy. Since the harlequinade, which then made up about three-quarters of the performance, involved action rather than words, it could not be controlled by the censor in the same way as dramatic works that were more script-based.⁵

The Regency style of pantomime was the one initially transported to the Australian colonies, with pantomimes being performed in local theatres from the 1830s onwards. This paper focuses in particular on some of those given in Hobart and Launceston in the 1840s and argues for the significance of the pantomime as a neglected window on colonial Australia. No doubt part of the reason for this neglect is that pantomime is now seen only as a children's genre. But in the nineteenth century, especially before 1850, it was aimed primarily at adults. At a time when little in the way of visual imagery was readily or cheaply available, and when much of the population was illiterate, the stage was one of the few places where people could enjoy seeing representations of themselves and others. Pantomime offered a unique mix of past and present, fantasy and reality, the folk tale and the everyday. In particular, as seen with the 1845 *Harlequin in Australia Felix*, the harlequinade combined magic tricks with scenes of local buildings and industries, the antics of Clown and Harlequin with jokes about local events and personalities. Because of its popularity, pantomime was soon being performed in the Australian colonies; because of its traditional stress on topicality, it needed to include local references and so became one of the first theatrical forms to be Australianised.

In 1846 Queen Victoria's birthday was celebrated in Launceston with a new pantomime, *Harlequin & the Fairy of the Coral Cave; or, The Magic Pancake*, which opened at the Olympic Theatre on 25 May. A large display advertisement in the *Cornwall Chronicle* for 23 May provides details of the characters and scenes. While there are no local references in the three opening scenes, after the mortal characters have undergone their transformations the four most important scenes of the harlequinade feature well-known Launceston buildings and make reference to recent political events:

⁵ David Mayer III, *Harlequin in his Element. The English Pantomime, 1806-1836* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 50.

Scene 5. – Exterior of *Nathan's the celebrated dealer of Elizabeth-street* – new way to obtain a suit of clothes – the patriotic six – the honest couple – the police in requisition.

Scene 6. – Exterior of *Benjamin's Emporium, Charles-street* – selling off at cost price – a tight fit – clown turned tailor.

A Reed shaken by the wind! – a new way to obtain Wool.

Scene 7. – Exterior of the Horse and Jockey (Radford's), York-street – Clown turned Jockey – *Figaro* the winner – *Vandyke* too good to be hurt – how to purchase a horse.

Scene 8. – Duchene's the Pawnbroker's, Charles-street – two to one – the clown up the spout – a visit to my father's brother – magic table and disappearance of the supper – Harlequin's leap – two to one he don't come back.

David Mayer notes that English shopkeepers and businessmen paid to have their premises and commercial enterprises represented in the harlequinade, and this may well have also been the case in Launceston.⁶ In addition to such traditional features of the harlequinade as spectacular leaps by Harlequin, magic tables that disappear just as Clown is about to feast, and visits to pawnbrokers, these scenes also alluded to recent local events. As the *Cornwall Chronicle* reported on 27 May 1846: "A good deal of pleasantry arose from a sly reference to certain mercantile doings, with which public attention has been occupied of late; and 'a Reed shaken by the wind—a new way to obtain wool,' was not inappropriately illustrated by the exertions of the family of the Gorgemups."

The reasons for both these allusions and the reference in Scene 5 to "the patriotic six" are explained in the entry on Henry Reed, a Launceston ship-owner and merchant, in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*:

In politics, Reed's experience was short and unpleasant. In 1845 when the Patriotic Six walked out of the Legislative Council in protest against increased taxation, Lieut. Governor Eardley-Wilmot had some difficulty in finding new nominees. Reed was persuaded to represent the northern mercantile interests, but after a few months of struggle against public opinion, he resigned his seat. The long depression that caused the rumpus was beginning to lift and prices for produce were rising. A business sensation was created in Launceston when Reed, as the agent of Buckles [a London bank], foreclosed on James Henty for the satisfaction of a large debt.⁷

As this Launceston example shows, pantomime in the first half of the nineteenth century fulfilled some of the functions later performed by the daily political cartoon, once newspapers and magazines began to be illustrated, as well as by the theatrical review and now also by satirical films and television programs. Reviews, films and

⁶ Mayer, *Harlequin in His Element*, 220–27.

⁷ Hudson Fysh, "Reed, Henry (1806–1880)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 2 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967), 372.

television shows often devote a lot of time to satire of the conventions and genres of theatre, film and television. That this was also true of the pantomime can be seen from two slightly earlier Hobart and Launceston examples.

While the 1844 Christmas pantomime at Hobart's Royal Victoria Theatre, *Little Bo-Peep; or, Harlequin and the Little Old Lady who Lived in a Shoe*, drew on well-known nursery rhymes for its opening, scene 8 of the harlequinade represented the "Outside of the ROYAL VICTORIA THEATRE" and included characters such as the manager and the coffee vendor who would have been well known to the audience.⁸ *Three Wishes; or, the Queen of the Fairy Lake and the Palace of the Blazing Sun!!!* was the Easter pantomime at Launceston in 1845. Somewhat unusually, this featured Shakespeare's Titania and Puck as its immortals, while the opening crisis did not revolve around thwarted young love but that other staple of the nineteenth-century theatre, the oppressive landlord. Just as the honest cottager Robin Homespun is about to be sent to prison by his dastardly landlord Sir Robert Brushwood Breakcover, Puck arrives to transform all the mortal characters into the traditional figures of the harlequinade. Its eight scenes include one that featured a "View of the Theatre and St. John-Street" and obviously involved much parody of theatrical types and styles:

Clown and Pantaloon apply to the Manager for an Engagement – Specimens of Abilities – Leading Tragedy – Heavy Bas – Light and Low Comedy – Tumbling – Old Men – First Singing – Irishmen, Scotchmen, and Principal Accountant (viz. Bill Deliverer).

A later scene offered a "View of the River Tamar" and featured a "GRAND BALLOON ASCENT" as well as "Clown and Pantaloon's Steam Carriage Manufactory."⁹

While most pre-1850 Australian pantomimes appear to have restricted their localisations to such scenic representations of particular places and landscapes, along with a few topical jokes, towards the end of the period topical issues were also being reflected in pantomime openings. One of the most thoroughly localised, *Transportation, and the Demon Discord; or, Harlequin in Van Diemen's Land*, opened on 28 May 1847 at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Hobart, under the Patronage of the Licensed Victuallers. The *Hobart Town Courier* of 26 May announced that

The whole of the opening pantomime has been written expressly for this occasion by Mr. Rogers, from a plot furnished by Mr. Johnson, mechanist, by whom the whole of the excellent and novel machinery has been arranged and completed.

The comic scenes, by Mr. Young, which are entirely new, and the tricks, will have reference to the leading topics of the day (as usual in London pantomimes,) without deferring to any party or opinions.

⁸ *Trumpeter* (Hobart), 27 December 1844.

⁹ *Cornwall Chronicle*, 22 March 1845.

The opening scenery, which is entirely new, and the comic scenes taken from well-known localities in Hobart Town, has been painted by Mr. Duke, in his most brilliant style.

William Duke was the Royal Victoria's regular scene-painter at this time. Interestingly, he and Richard Johnson later combined forces to open the Hobart Town Diorama in November 1847, which was "pronounced superior in scenic exhibition to anything yet attempted in the colonies."¹⁰ It is possible that their work on the local scenes for this *Transportation* pantomime earlier in 1847 led on to their diorama. As Anita Callaway has argued, theatrical scene-painting, especially the elaborate representations of local streets, buildings and views included in pantomimes, needs to be acknowledged as an important component of the visual representation of Australian landscapes and cities during the nineteenth century.¹¹

The appeal in the advertisement quoted above to the London pantomime tradition as justification for the inclusion of local satire suggests an attempt by the theatre's management (at this time, Messrs Clarke, Young and Rogers) to cover themselves against possible criticism or attacks from those with strong vested interests in the transportation question. It also perhaps suggests that Hobart had seen less of this type of pantomime than had Launceston, something borne out by my research. One of the main impetuses for this particular pantomime would seem to have been a major meeting on the transportation question, the "Great Public Meeting in Favour of Abolition," to which the pantomime particularly refers, held a few weeks earlier in the Royal Victoria Theatre itself, on 6 May 1847.¹² On 12 May, those "interested in the Question of Transportation" had given their patronage to the Theatre to thank the proprietors for allowing it to be used for the meeting. That evening's entertainment included an interlude song by Billy Barlow, a comic tramp-like character who traditionally commented on the events of the day.¹³ His performance was billed as "Billy Barlow will give his opinion on the Question and suggest a few ideas which will have the novel effect of pleasing all parties."¹⁴ The success of this performance perhaps inspired the theatre's management to present a full-scale pantomime on a similar theme.

While advertisements in this case did not give much detail about the pantomime's scenes and characters, the review in the *Hobart Town Courier* of 2 June 1847 fortunately provides a very full account of the opening scenes:

¹⁰ Caroline Von Oppeln, "Duke, William Charles (1814–1853)," in Joan Kerr, ed., *The Dictionary of Australian Artists. Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 226.

¹¹ Anita Callaway, *Visual Ephemera: Theatrical Art in Nineteenth-Century Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000), 154.

¹² *Hobart Town Courier*, 8 May 1847.

¹³ See Elizabeth Webby, "Billy Barlow," in Philip Parsons, gen. ed., *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 88.

¹⁴ *Hobart Town Courier*, 12 May 1847.

The plot is effectively conceived, and the tricks and transformations cunningly devised. We have in the opening scene an assembly of the gods, who, at Jove's request, are met to consider the best course to adopt with the Demon Discord. In the course of the proceedings, Jove intimates a desire that he shall be sent to Britain. This Neptune sturdily opposes, as the sons of Britain are triumphant on the wave—Venus, because it is the empire of beauty, Minerva, because it is the seat of science and art—and Mars, for their prowess in war—Jove, however, will have his way, although his Herculean son votes against him, the English being good boxers. Minerva afterwards intercepts the Demon, who with malignant joy is proceeding to distract the favourite Isle with his malicious energies, and induces him to proceed to Tasmania, where an ample field for the exercise of his diabolism is afforded by the theme of "transportation" which has involved the colonists in quarrels, with which "wisdom" has little to do. The terrestrial characters consist of William Homely, a young farmer in love with a fair damsel called Isabella, who, after various crosses in love, are induced to emigrate; Old Paunchey, a farmer, addicted to smuggling; and Lubin Lazybones, his man, who are severally transported for offences against the revenue, and proceed to these shores. The emigrant ship is lost in Storm Bay through the machinations of the Demon, but William and Isabella are saved through the interpositions of Neptune. The brace of convicts appear before the audience consoling one another, between decks, on their passage out, and the allusions to the pervading system of convict management are broad and hilarious. Arrived at Hobart Town, all the parties meet at "Gaylor's," when a quarrel takes place, and then the transformation.

This account raises a number of very interesting points. Particularly notable is what is perhaps the first comic representation of convictism on the Australian stage, one which looks forward to some of the stage adaptations of Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* later in the century.¹⁵ The intensely patriotic representation of Great Britain here is more characteristic of the period, and it is a nice joke that the Demon Discord is more or less treated like a convict, being transported to Van Diemen's Land to preserve peace and harmony in "the favourite Isle." There is an interesting anticipation of Garnet Walch's much more nationalistic 1873 Melbourne pantomime, *Australia Felix, or Harlequin Laughing Jackass and the Magic Bat*, where Kantankeros, the Demon of Dullness, having already taken over Great Britain, voluntarily migrates to Australia to try to do the same there. It is tempting to wonder whether Walch, who was living in Hobart in 1847, may have been taken to see *Transportation*, though as he was not quite four at the time any influence seems unlikely.

The *Courier* unfortunately gives a much less detailed account of what happened in the harlequinade:

¹⁵ Elizabeth Webby, "Adaptations: Stage, Screen and Other Versions of *His Natural Life*, 1886–1998," in Marcus Clarke, *His Natural Life*, ed. Lurline Stuart, Academy Editions of Australian Literature (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001), 599.

The busy scene of pantomime now commences, interspersed with rich and racy gems of wit, while some of the localities of the city are mingled in the scene. Frequent references to the late public meeting, and other public events, do not fail to excite risibility; the personification of several public characters is comically introduced, and contributes to the general hilarity. Ultimately the lovers are united by the interposition of Minerva in the Halls of Wisdom.

Transportation, and the Demon Discord; or, Harlequin in Van Diemen's Land therefore appears to be the first pantomime in Australia to represent actual personalities on stage as well as only the second to deal with local material in its opening scenes. The earliest found so far, *Harlequin in Australia Felix; or, Geelong in an Uproar*, from 1845, was, as already mentioned, much more broadly satirical in its representation of local types.

Protests against the continuance of transportation were of course not confined to Van Diemen's Land. The 1849 Christmas pantomime at Sydney's Royal Victoria Theatre carried the innocuous title of *King Pippin; or, Harlequin Valentine and the Wild Man of the Woods*. But it still included plenty of references to local events and personalities in its harlequinade, as *Bell's Life in Sydney* anticipated on 22 December:

All the leading topics of the day will (we believe) be glanced at in good humour. The railway job, the "California" mania ... Parkes on his rocking horse and Wilshire on his donkey, will all, as we understand, be depicted and embodied by Mr. Torning and the other favorite *artistes* ...

Mentioned here are indeed many of the leading topics of 1849—the first proposals to build railways in Australia, the mass exodus of population to the Californian gold-fields, the Anti-Transportation League's protest meetings. The last-named are represented here by two of the leading participants, Henry Parkes and James Wilshire, presumably involved in one of the comic riding acts so often found in pantomimes. Parkes is on his rocking horse because during this period he was a shopkeeper, selling "fancy goods," including toys; Wilshire ran a large tannery, which may be the reason he is on a donkey.¹⁶

California was definitely the hottest topic of the 1849 pantomime season. On 29 October 1849, the inhabitants of Launceston were treated to a pantomime that had apparently already been presented with great success in Hobart: *Harlequin in California; or, Emigration from Tasmania, and the Fiend of the Gold Mine*. According to a review in the *Cornwall Chronicle* for 31 October, "the departure of the Californian gold hunters from Launceston, the storm at sea and the transformations to the pan-

¹⁶ A. W. Martin, "Parkes, Sir Henry (1815–1896)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 5 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974), 399–400; G. P. Walsh, "Wilshire, James Robert (1809–1860)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 6 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976), 411.

tomime characters” were all excellently done. Rather more information is available about John Lazar’s Christmas pantomime at the New Queen’s Theatre in Adelaide, *Fairy of the Golden Regions; or, Harlequin in California*, which opened on 26 December 1849. As well as featuring views of Port Adelaide, the Sacramento River and the Bay of San Francisco, it included, according to the *Adelaide Times* of 31 December: “Some local references, humorously introduced, [which] gave a zest to the performances and kept the audiences in continued good humour.” A review in the *South Australian Register* for 29 December was more detailed, indicating how much the local and topical references appealed to the audience:

Coppin and Lazar hit off amusingly two stage Yankees, and Miss Lazar played cleverly Miss Marshall, from Adelaide, who, in the rough course of true love, is transformed into the most sylphlike of Columbines. ... As we were never at the diggings, we cannot answer for the accuracy of the presentation of the Bay of Sacramento, but we can vouch for the verisimilitude of the Cheap Printing Office in Gawler-place, before which was enacted, by way of episode, a criminal proceeding in a libel case, which gave great satisfaction to the physical force men present. We think Clown and Pantaloon were too severe in chopping individuals to pieces and tearing ladies’ wigs off before the *Mercury* office. That was a *cutting* sarcasm with a vengeance, but it took amazingly; and the more the desperadoes on the stage assailed the quiet citizens passing, the more consumedly did the audience laugh.

Then, as now, newspapers delighted in sniping at their rivals, and audiences loved violence.

University of Sydney