

- ³⁵ Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*, rev.ed. (1964; Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1965) 17.
- ³⁶ White, *The Twyborn Affair* 250-1.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 284.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 296.

- ³⁹ Clayton Joyce, ed., *Patrick White: A Tribute* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991) 26.
- ⁴⁰ White, *The Twyborn Affair* 294.
- ⁴¹ White, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait* 155.
- ⁴² White, *The Twyborn Affair* 259.

6 THE QUEER NINETIES

In Australia the 1990s was the decade when what had been censured and repressed but nevertheless present in Australian culture since 1788, unorthodox sexualities, queerness and gender-blending, assumed an unprecedented public visibility. Whereas the country's largest city was disparagingly referred to by some critics as the 'Sodom of the South' in the early nineteenth century, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, Sydney acquired the label 'Queer City' and was looking forward to hosting the sixth International Gay Games in November 2002. In two hundred years Australia changed its reaction faced with the queer from one of suppression, or killing, to making queerness a commodity and a money-spinner, turning it in fact into a tourist attraction.¹

Queerness did not begin to manifest itself Down Under with the first Mardi Gras march in 1978. It had been an essential feature of life in the convict barracks in Sydney for fifty years. It had been noticed in the Outback wherever there were congregations of males. During the First World War, the queer moved to the trenches in Turkey. Back in Australia before the next war, it has been argued that 'there were a series of well-developed, varied and discreet layers of male homosexual social activity in Australia's major cities by the end of the 1930s'.² In the 1920s, dancer and choreographer Sir Robert Helpmann, according to his biographer, 'indulged his taste for flamboyant clothes and even experimented with nail polish. He was as exotic a sybarite as the city of Sydney had to display'.³

In his introduction to *Being Different* (1986), historian Garry Wotherspoon points out that during the Second World War: 'In Sydney and Brisbane, two cities which had large concentrations of servicemen and women – both Australian and foreign – there is evidence that a range of venues existed that catered for lesbians and homosexuals'.⁴ In the late 1940s, Sydney became home to a number of queer artists including Donald Friend and William Dobell.⁵

Australia has often been in advance of other English-speaking countries in making visible gender-blending, the camp or queer in literature, the arts and television. Camp made its way into the Australian cinema as early as Ken G. Hall's film *Dad and Dave Come to Town* (1938). Taking his origin in the stories of Steele Rudd and made into a folk-hero by radio and film, Australia's mythic rustic 'Dad' is taken out of the bush and finds himself a dress-maker

in the city in Hall's film. One of the secondary characters is a camp-acting shop walker by the name of Entwhistle who gave the impression that he was free more than thirty years before Mr Humphries made Mrs Slocum's pussy famous at Grace Brothers. Television and the stage were both remarkably ahead of their time when it came to giving visibility to heterodox sexualities. Between 1972 and 1977, the sitcom *Number 96* featured a popular, happy male character who just happened to be gay. This was daring for the time. The 1970s were the years when television and theatrical male-to-female cross-dressing made a household name of Reg Livermore with his character Betty Blockbuster. Barry Humphries who has been in drag since the mid-1950s, took his Melbourne housewife persona Edna Everage to the London stage in *Housewife-Superstar!* (1976) and *A Night with Dame Edna* (1979). In the late 1990s political satirist Simon Hunt invented a well-known drag queen persona, Pauline Pantisdown, to mock the racist One Nation leader Pauline Hanson. There is nothing surprising in the fact that a Lily Savage type character should appeal to the media and public in the 1990s. In Australia, however, cross-dressing on television and the stage had first gained popularity twenty years before with Livermore and Humphries.

The decriminalization of homosexuality which gradually took place in Australia from the 1970s onwards helped queerize the 1990s. After South Australia altered its laws from 1972 to 1975, the Australian Capital Territory followed suit in 1976 and Victoria in 1980. The next decade saw changes in NSW (1984), the Northern Territory (1984), Western Australia (1990) and Queensland (1990). A noticeable gap in time separates the decriminalization of male homosexuality on mainland Australia from the last state to change its laws, Tasmania, which only fell in with the rest of the country in 1997 three years after a United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled that the anti-homosexual laws of Tasmania were a breach of human rights. Inconsistencies in favour of heterosexuality exist in relation to the age of consent. The age is fixed at sixteen or seventeen for heterosexual relations in the whole country. In the Northern Territory and NSW, the age of consent for male homosexual relations is eighteen, Queensland requires an age of consent of eighteen for anal sex and Western Australia has chosen twenty-one as the legal age for male homosexual relations. Homosexual activity of males between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one is considered criminal in Western Australia and offenders can be imprisoned for up to five years.⁶

The steady growth of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras since 1978 has provided a focus and forum for public exhibition of

the queer in Australia for more than twenty years. The 1990s saw the first television broadcast in 1994 of what Graham Carbery in his history of the Mardi Gras calls 'a cultural extravaganza of national importance with an international reputation. There is nothing else like it in Australia, and no other gay and lesbian event anywhere in the world can match the scale of the Mardi Gras parade and the party which follows it'.⁷ The annual festival which lasts for a month attracts over three quarters of a million people who line up to see the parading of gay, lesbian and transgendered identities. In 1999 the parade featured a hundred floats, 7,000 participants, 20,000 at the party afterwards in a country of only nineteen million people. It is estimated that the Mardi Gras brings in almost A\$100 million (US\$60 million), more than any other cultural or sporting event.

If Sydney was chosen to host the Gay Games of 2002, it was due to the capital's strong history of event management such as the Mardi Gras festival, a history of activism and tolerance as well as the fact that Sydney is a visible and accessible gay and lesbian destination. An example of the queering of Sydney in the 1990s linked to the Mardi Gras Arts Festival is Queer Screen, set up in 1993 to organize the annual lesbian and gay film festival and to actively promote queer film culture. The Australian Mardi Gras Film Festival presented every February by Queer Screen is the largest of its kind in the world. An innovative aspect of Queer Screen is queerDOC, the world's first lesbian and gay documentary film festival which began in 1998.

The cinema took a privileged position in foregrounding camp à l'australienne in the 1990s. Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), starring Paul Mercurio, was the precursor of the more macho dance film *Boatmen*. A later film by Luhrmann, *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), included a camp *coup de théâtre*: a black Mercutio appears in the ballroom scene decked out in white suspenders, thigh boots and a blond wig. Gale Edwards' hit musical *The Boy from Oz*, inspired by the Australian singer and song-writer Peter Allen, became a national box-office success in 1998. The most significant spectacle of song and dance from the 1990s was undoubtedly Stephan Elliott's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994). This film can be seen as a highlight of the Queer Nineties' celebration of camping Down Under, an activity recommended by all the tourist guides.

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert proved that the Australian film industry is alive and vibrant, provided an excellent picture of signs of the times, as well as reflecting theoretical problematizing of sex, gender and the body in the early 1990s. In choosing to make a film about two drag queens and a male-to-female transsexual, the director flouted the popular image of

Australia as a 'man's country', gave a voice to queer identity politics and, above all, showed non-normative sexualities in a favourable light. Unlike previous Australian films, *Priscilla* foregrounds camp, celebrates transgenderism, and shows that in Australia the non-normative not only survives, but is the means of having a ball to boot.

The fact that in *Priscilla*, femininity is mostly, if not entirely, observable on stage (in the Broken Hill shopping scene, the streets are the stage), and takes the form of an act or performance—the singing and dancing queens, Benjamin's charade of Lindy Chamberlain, Cynthia's ping-pong show—invites us to interpret gender as a ritual and repetition of subjectivating norms, distinguishable from sex. Such an interpretation of gender was popularized by queer theory in the early nineties, especially by Judith Butler, at precisely the time *Priscilla* was being written. The film offers a practical demonstration of a queer theorization on issues such as the performativity of gender and the formation of subjectivity.

Queer theory can help make explicit the relationship between normative heterosexuality and non-normative sexualities, as well as account for the disjunction between sex and gender identities. *Priscilla* is built on such problematics. The comedy relies on a confusion between sexualities; unexpected alignments and realignments of male and female with, or against, the masculine and the feminine. Added to this is an almost permanent queer and camp sensibility.

THE PERFORMATIVITY OF GENDER

Characters such as Bob, the garage mechanic, and Frank, the Outback miner who attacks Felicia in a Coober Pedy car yard, are set up as representatives of normal and normative Australian manhood, like The Man from Snowy River and Crocodile Dundee. Bill Hunter, the actor who plays Bob, is well-known to Australian audiences, and easily recognizable as an 'Aussie bloke', what Al Clark, the producer, refers to as 'the Australian counterpart of the Marlboro Man'.⁹ Another specimen of manhood is Mr Spencer, the owner of the four-wheel drive who, accompanied by his wife and a stinking dead kangaroo, speeds off into the desert leaving a trail of dust and three stranded queens left to fend for themselves.

One may be tempted to interpret Bob and Frank, the two principal incarnations of Outback masculinity, as 'real men', in contrast to Tick and Adam, who temporarily relinquish their manly status in order to perform as drag queens on stage. Bob, and

especially Frank, appear to be the 'real thing' itself; they are down-to-earth, virile examples of beer-swilling cockerdom. Together with those pot-bellied, bearded Ned Kelly clones in the Broken Hill pub reminiscent of the locals in Walkabout Creek, here surely we have the best of what passes for honest-to-God, 'fair-dinkum' Aussie manhood.

Australian masculinity is shown once again to have a uniform: a broad-rimmed hat, a grubby singlet, boots, and nearly always, a beard or a moustache and a beer-gut. It covers specific jobs and occupations, like mining and car repairs. Leisure time is spent in pubs, swilling back the local lager. Masculinity is associated with verbal and physical violence, finding a 'sheila' and homophobia. Characters like Frank and Bob cite, repeat or carry out most of these constitutive norms, automatically and unconsciously. The more the masculine ritual is respected, the more one is considered a 'real man'; the more these rituals correspond to traditional myths of masculinity, the more truly *Australian* one is considered to be.

Tick/Mitzi, the bisexual drag queen, makes an attempt to assume the sartorial signs of Australian masculinity, especially during the scene of father-son bonding in the bush. Described by the producer as 'a borderline straight',¹⁰ Tick takes on the bushman image at the Kings Canyon picnic in order to impress his son Benjamin. He drags out of his suitcase all the accoutrements of Australian fatherhood: moleskin trousers, a western shirt and R.M. Williams boots. Living in Sydney away from Marion, his estranged wife, Tick had left behind his heterosexual and paternal roles, in favour of a career selling cosmetics and doing drag performances. Tick's hypermasculine accessories (hats, shirts and boots) are, and always have been, a form of drag. Wearing an Akubra hat, moleskins, boots and a bushy beard can be just as potentially amusing and inappropriate for a man as the queens' get-up in drag. This bushranger gear may be masculine-looking, but it belongs to a nineteenth-century perception of male fashion. In the 1990s, such garb had become (a) drag.

Adam/Felicia and Ralph/Bernadette also show divided loyalties. As a muscle hunk, Adam corresponds to the image of virile Australian manhood, but as soon as Felicia opens her mouth, we realize that she is a drama queen with a vile tongue and a camp sense of humour. Ralph has permanently given up his masculine sex and trappings of masculinity to become the transgendered Bernadette. These three Aussie boys treat masculinity as a pastime, rather than a destiny. Early in the film, Tick commends Adam to Bernadette as 'a bloody good little performer'.¹¹ In a sense, all the men in *Priscilla*, are bloody good performers, each approximating,

imitating, trying to reach, yet never attaining that monolithic, culturally determined fantasy, an 'Aussie bloke'.

Frank, Bob, Mr Spencer and the drones of drinking mates have learnt to exist and think they are comfortable within the normative constraints of masculinity, despite the ockerizing and, at times, barbaric behaviours encouraged (and demanded) by the masculine ritual. In contrast, the two drag queens and the transsexual openly resist and displace a gender assignment that society expects them to perform exclusively. They reject the stifling, limiting and reductive possibility of (only) being an 'Aussie bloke', preferring to cross the gender border. Much of the comedy derives from this cross-over, as shown by Adam's mockery of the married Tick: 'Mowing those lawns must have been murder on your heels!'¹² Adam and Tick move between masculine and feminine subjectivating rituals in order to find a more liberating and pleasurable expression of their personalities and humanity. Adam can be inspired by the cowboy myth and wear chaps one moment, then, as Felicia, imitate a Verdi heroine the next, dressed in a long-veiled silver gown. Rejecting the more boorish and brutal aspects of the masculinity script, the two drag queens and Bernadette are more complex and interesting than the victims of the hypermasculine gender 'straight'-jacket.

Priscilla offers different performances of the feminine in the bar scene, both of which are deprecated by men. As transgendered performers, Tick, Adam and Bernadette incur the incomprehension, intolerance and animosity of men who respect the masculinity gender script *à la lettre*. The drag queens face danger in an alienating landscape when Priscilla breaks down in the middle of nowhere, but they also have to cope with abuse, violence and rejection once they leave the Aboriginal campsite. It is noteworthy that the prejudice and criticism encountered by the queens only comes from white Australians. When the Aborigines come into contact with two cross-dressers and a transsexual, their reaction is one of acceptance and sympathy. One even joins in the fun. Transgressing gender scripts is seen to be a particular problem for white Australians in *Priscilla*.

Bob is an exception and seems more comfortable courting a male-to-female transsexual than his Asian bride. Ironically, he turns away from one outrageously constructed feminine performance (Cynthia's drag) to endorse another (Ralph's drag) which for some is even more outrageous, and not just obviously constructed, but reconstructed. The overtly erotic and hyperfeminine Cynthia, as well as a pair of fairies, are chased from the Outback since they are seen as a threat to traditional gender scripting.

THE OUTBACK OUTED

Priscilla follows two separate conventions, those of the road movie and romantic comedy. Typical of road movies, there is a move away from the relative security of a known urban centre and a voyage out into the interior. The film is structured according to various stages of a journey distancing the protagonists more and more from their point of departure, and leading them towards a specific destination near Alice Springs, symbolically the centre of Australia. They progressively penetrate a geographic interior leading to the centre of the Outback.

Leaving behind a 'gutless pack of dickheads'¹³ in Sydney, only to find a beer-gutted pack of dickheads in the Outback, Adam, Tick and Bernadette find their way eventually to the heart of Australia, where they are confronted with one incontestable reality—gender trouble. The so-called 'red centre' hides a troubled and troubling picture of sex and gender. Each of the stages of the voyage out (Broken Hill, Coober Pedy and Alice Springs), before the triumphant mounting of Kings Canyon, *faute de mieux*, reveals its own form of gender trouble. In an ironic reversal typical of comedy, it is two occasional cross-dressers and a male-to-female transsexual, who are instrumental in foregrounding trouble in the normative population, convinced of their own 'normality' and the difference of the three drag queens. *Priscilla*, a particularly effective and observant satiric comedy, provides a powerful critique of gender, sexual and national scripting in Australia. In an attempt to 'out' the Outback, the non-normative turns around and points the finger at two centuries of abnormal, but normalized gender trouble.

The 'outing' in *Priscilla* begins by showing the compulsory repetition of subjectivating norms which work to animate and constrain a gendered subject. Three rivaling feminine performances are enacted. In parallel with the hypermasculinity of the ocker bushmen, we have Cynthia, Bob's Filipina immigrant wife, the embodiment of a highly eroticized hyperfemininity. Two women show signs of a particularly Australian phenomenon, female masculinity: Marion, Tick's lesbian wife, the manageress of the cabaret hotel in Alice Springs and Shirl, Bernadette's drinking companion at the Broken Hill hotel. Then there is the masquerade of femininity donned by the three queens in drag, singing and dancing their way to Alice and back. The only case where sex and gender coincide is that of the non-Australian, Cynthia. After doing her performance, she is quickly ejected from the script, leaving the

place to the locals, all displaying some gender trouble in the form of a disjunction between sex and gender roles.

In *Priscilla* a Filipina Madonna called Cynthia bursts into the bar wearing a zebra-patterned bustier, suspender stockings and high heels. With the help and encouragement of Bob, the three queens are performing their spectacle on the Broken Hill stage before a lukewarm public, hardly impressed by the Sydney 'girls'. Cynthia de-stages the drag queens, all *bouche bée* when confronted with a woman displaying her feminine body and sexuality without the help of silicon or sticky-tape. The image of Cynthia's ping-pong balls locked up in a high cupboard is suggestive of a hidden and secure feminine sex, out of reach from male and female hands. When Cynthia breaks open the padlocked doors, out flies a barrage of bursting balls, a sign of fecund and reproducing female sexuality. A similar flow is repeated soon after on stage, except that this time the balls are ejected from Cynthia's vagina. She bends over in her bustier and hurtles projectiles into the appreciative audience and their drinks. This Asian sex-machine, corresponding to a U.S. imperialist military-base fantasy, dethrones the Aussie queens shown to be *poseurs* faced with the materiality of vaginal femininity. The embarrassed Bob intervenes to carry away the exuberant and delirious performer of sexotica.

The expulsion of Cynthia, taken away against her will on Bob's shoulders, then freely in her packed car, indicates a rejection of such an overtly eroticized and imported femininity. It is as if Australia and male Australians find it difficult to accept and are threatened by (foreign) hyperfemininity. In this backwater, the gyno-gymnastics of Cynthia, who is no virgin goddess, represent an unacceptable model of what a woman should be like. Her (re)jection is more than suggestive of misogynist phobias at the centre of Australia. Marion, a separated mother with an eight-year-old son, would seem to adhere to heteronormative practice, but this possibility is quickly put into question in the flashback to the wedding ceremony. Here she is cross-dressed as the groom in tails and a black tie, whereas Tick, the husband/wife is frocked out in a white wedding-dress. In this parody of a traditional wedding, the role-swapping genders Marion as masculine, as Mitzi's 'husband'. Felicia's bitchery then turns her masculinity to butchness: 'That's quite a wife you got there, Mitzi! What does she do in her spare time? Sand back the hulls of oil tankers with her tongue?'¹⁴ We later learn from Benjamin that his mother had a girlfriend during Tick's absence. Marion's portrayal as a lesbian and gender blinder alters our perception of her as a 'normal' heterosexual woman. She is a capable business-woman who says what she thinks, including the odd expletive.

The script refers to Shirley, the loud-mouthed drinker at the Broken Hill pub, as 'a squat, rugged woman [...] as mean as dish water'.¹⁵ The Shirley-Bernadette duo is an opportunity to demonstrate noticeable sex/gender dislocation. Bernadette, formerly male, is polite, feminine and outwardly female, whereas Shirl, a not uncommon specimen of rural Australian womanhood (Al Clark refers to her as 'a tough Outback woman'¹⁶), is gruff, surly and a piss-pot. She is outwardly more like the male customers in the bar than the three 'girls' who have dropped in for a drink. Critics from abroad fall into the trap of believing Shirley to be a lesbian, given this hardened exterior. One calls her 'mean dyke Shirl' on one page and a 'bull dyke'¹⁷ on the next. Another, incredibly, refers to her as 'an awesome and offensive sexual deviant'.¹⁸ Nothing in the film invites such interpretations. Two miners' wives in the bar, similar to Shirley, are just as leathery-faced. There is no reason to believe that any of these women is a dyke. A gross stereotype has been naively applied to a masculine appearance. Such a female masculinity, as represented by Shirl, is a non-feminine performance which is normalized and non-sexualized.

Contrasting with Outback female masculinity, *Priscilla* offers a rival male femininity performed by the trio of cross-dressers. Tick, Adam and Bernadette impersonate female singers for a living, dolling themselves in exaggerated feminine attire. The three 'girls' arrive in the mining town of Broken Hill and decide to go on a shopping spree as if they were women. They walk down the main drag in drag: Mitzi flicks her hair and wobbles her bottom, wearing a dress made entirely of pink and orange 'thong's' (Australian for beach footwear) with matching ear-rings; Felicia, in feathers, boa and a beehive wig, gasps in disbelief when she sees what passes for fashion in the shop windows. In this scene of colourful camp, three divas imitate the appearance, actions and antics of *grandes dames* shopping in the sticks, in contrast with the local yokels. Based on stylization, duplicity, theatricalization and humour, this parodic *mise en scène* of feminine subjectivating norms provides an effective contrast with the mundane, mining-town décor. The three Antipodean queens like to take on the mask of femininity by means of a playful indulgence in the trappings and activities of what passes for the feminine: veils, high heels, long hair and make-up, frocks and frillies, and all the other familiar signs of the fair sex. Activities like sewing, using cosmetics, dancing and shopping are gendered feminine. Poise, gestures, running mascara and looking for a rich husband are a help as well.

The three alternative feminine performances ranging from the hyperfemininity of Cynthia, the masculinized femininity of Outback

women to the drag queens' camp insist on the constructedness of gender and its performativity by both sexes. Once Cynthia, Tick and Adam leave the Outback, we are left with a lesbian, a mannish woman and a post-operative transsexual to represent Australian femininities. Variations of femininity (homosexual, heterosexual and transsexual) are accommodated in a way that is not possible for competing masculinities. Despite the fact that Marion, Shirl and Bernadette do not correspond to one single stereotype of 'normal' femininity, they are all able to assume their individualized sexual and gender identities without the problems that beset men. This is because the Australian femininity script does not impose hyperfemininity and compulsory heterosexuality in the prescriptive manner of the masculine gender script. The main gender trouble in Australia concerns men. When the Outback is 'outed', we find homophobia and repressed homoeroticism.

Priscilla outs (bush)man's homosexual panic. Since the drag queens do not fully subscribe to most of, if not all, the requirements of what is perceived and agreed as Australian masculinity, they are made to see the error of their ways and encouraged to conform like everyone else. Such an attitude is revealed in Broken Hill when the interlopers wake up to find spray-painted in red over one side of Priscilla, 'Aids Fuckers Go Home', or when Frank screams at Felicia, 'You fucking freak!' Rule one of the masculinity script Down Under may well be 'No Poofers! To be a "real man" in the Ozscript implies a heteronormative, homophobic ritual, carried out most forcefully by the miners.

Priscilla questions the equation of masculinity with heterosexuality, suggests that the concept 'real man' is a fiction, and goes even further by outing male heterosexuality showing it to be profoundly dependent on the homosexuality it seeks to eradicate. Frank, the archetypal ocker, is shown to flirt with Felicia, Adam's drag queen persona, until he notices her hairy arm. Like Crocodile Dundee in New York, this manly heterosexual is duped by a man masquerading as a woman. Humiliated for responding favourably to the sexual advances of another man, Frank tries to recover his heterosexual image by resorting to violence. This fails, however, as he is upstaged by Bernadette, the transsexual. She kicks Frank in the crotch, proving to the onlookers that she is a (wo)man superior to the oaf, now on the ground, clutching what is left of his masculinity.

Likewise, Bob's manhood is put into question during the scene where his wife is packing her suitcase into the car before clearing out. Her final line in the film is a comic-serious swipe at her husband's virility: 'You got little ding-a-dong'.¹⁹ With Cynthia out of

the way, Bob is able to pursue his love-affair with Bernadette, formally known as Ralph. The producer of *Priscilla* was well aware of the risks taken in attempting to have Marlboro man Bob fall for a transsexual. Another quintessential Australian bloke (the words are Al Clark's), Bryan Brown, rapidly refused a role in the film, probably due to the number of infelicitous frocks. One may well wonder why this paragon of bush manliness chooses to give up the overtly erotic Cynthia so easily and turn his attentions to a post-operative male. The Bob-Ralph duo confirms what was already present in bush bonding, homoerotic attraction. Bob's purported penile insufficiency and romantic attraction for a male-to-female transsexual make him a suspicious model of heteronormative masculinity.

Male heterosexuality is therefore constantly troubled in *Priscilla*. Bob and Frank appear to be paragons of heterosexuality, yet behind the macho façade lies another possibility: Bob is being courted by a (wo)man who is prepared to kick (other) men in the balls, and Frank is erotically aroused by Adam who happens to be sporting a wig, high heels and noticeable tits. Both men are heterosexuals 'at risk' of turning homosexual. All the males in the film imitate and approximate, with varied degrees of success, a cultural ideal of heterosexual 'man', and *all* fail, one way or another. Tick gives an imitative parody of heterosexuality, while at the same time allowing for the possibility of homosexuality since he tells his son that he may find a boyfriend upon returning to Sydney. In other words, he embodies the naturalized failure of heterosexuality, already suspected in the 'original' heterosexuals, Bob and Frank. If heterosexual identity in the Outback is not 'the real thing', but is itself an imitation and approximation of an imagined origin or ground, then the idea that bushmen are more manly, masculine and Australian than Sydney boys is a fantasy. A 'fair dinkum Aussie bloke' is a theatrically produced effect, posturing and posing as the real. Ockers and bushmen cannot be considered more manly than Tick or Adam. The imitation of masculinity models by Frank is simply more panicked; his flight from the feminine and the homosexual, always already there as prior possibilities, is more frenetic.

QUEERING THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN LEGEND

One of the camp climaxes in *Priscilla* takes place at the Alice Springs night-club when Miss Felicia Jollygoodfellow, Miss Mitzi Del Bra and Miss Bernadette Bassinger (to give them their full stage names), appear decked out as Australian flora and fauna. After

appearing as flowers, the performers then become emus, followed by frill-necked lizards. Such a colourful display of Australiana invites us to consider the exaggerated importance given to what is a camp collection of rather silly icons anyway, forever cropping up on stamps and coins. Not content with queering national emblems, the drag queens surprise the audience with an extravagant *coup de théâtre*: the Marie Antoinette costumes are re-arranged to form the shape of one of the most (if not *the* most), recognizable single images to represent Australia, the Sydney Opera House, which collapses. At this moment of humorous high camp, the whole country is symbolically queered, not only by the finale of the drag act, but by all complicit audiences who applaud such a transgressive feat. Like Dame Edna Everage's appropriation of gladioli as Australia's national flower, the Dancing Queens show how much camp there already is in Australian cultural icons.

The Lawsonian mateship tradition is brought out of a century-old closet when the mob of mates in the Coober Pedy car park is shown to be a violent pack of sex-hungry queer-bashers, not the inoffensive comfort-bringers of legend. Male mateship proves to be a fraud when Mr Spencer refuses to help the cross-dressed Tick and Adam in the desert. Mateship does not extend to gender blenders, it appears, although Bob is the exception to the rule. His constant efforts to help the drag queens demonstrate a queer sort of mateship, especially in the case of the solicitous attention he pays to Ralph-Bernadette. The homoerotic potential of (nude) bathing between mates to be found in *Gallipoli* is foregrounded here, especially in the lake scene when two queens, a transsexual and bushman Bob go for a happy splash together. The real mates in *Priscilla* are the three queens, who may bicker and bitch, but do come to each other's aid, as demonstrated by Bernadette's feisty protection of Felicia at Coober Pedy. Even the bushman-dog duo is parodied when Bernadette finds out that the dog accompanying the rustic in Broken Hill is called 'Herpes'.

A group of adventurous Australians leaving the urban periphery and slowly moving to the centre of the country, despite setbacks and hardship, recalls similar, yet very different journeys of exploration which have attained mythic status in Australia. One is tempted to compare this excursion to that of famous nineteenth-century, historic parallels: Eyre who sought an overland route from Adelaide to Perth in 1840-41, Leichhardt in northern Australia 1842-48, Sturt in central Australia 1844-46 and the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition of 1860-61. By having a pinkish bus called Priscilla penetrate the Australian interior, we are able to look back at the

legends of masculinist explorers and their single-sex attempts to penetrate the Outback and see how queer it all is.

There are indications in the film pointing to the epic and mock-heroic nature of the drag queens' re-enactment of what has become a myth Down Under, reaching the centre and surviving, or dying. Adam informs Bernadette at the beginning of the film that he has always had a dream to travel to the centre of Australia, thereby revealing and copying every boy's secret yearning. Early on, the bus is described in the script as 'tear[ing] across the plain on her epic journey west'.²⁰ American expansion into the West is also referenced by filmic parallels with spaghetti Westerns such as Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). During the encounter with the Aborigines, Tick is dressed in a manner resembling T.E. Lawrence.²¹ *Priscilla* provides a parody of the masculine, imperialist desire to conquer space and leave man's imprint on the imagined virgin wild, whether it be in Australia, America or Arabia.

Instead of three manly explorers setting off to test their endurance and skill, *Priscilla* gives us a parody of such mythologizing conquests by choosing as its climax three queens who climb Kings Canyon (the ultimate in feats of masculine showing-off), dressed in full-length Gaultier sequins, heels and tiara. The irony of a cock in a frock on a rock (to quote Bernadette), is outrageously camp. Here we have the triumph of transgendered queer, reaching the centre, temporarily replacing the 'heroes' of legend and thereby subverting the Lawson-Paterson masculinist appropriation of Australia. Kings Canyon is reappropriated by three 'girls' who transform it, to the sounds of seraphic choirs and swelling music, into Queens Canyon. Unlike Leichhardt, Burke and Wills, these late twentieth-century twisted Sisters of the Simpson Desert can all sing out 'I Will Survive'. And they do. Bernadette refuses to be that 'transsexual, last seen heading south'.²² The repressed and silenced feminine returns to the Outback, as Dame Edna Everage warned, 'with a vengeance.' Camp, it has been said, is historicism viewed histrionically.

Part of the reappropriation of the masculinist explorer myth concerns outing the (horse) rider myth. This is achieved by queering a film genre, the road movie, a new trend popularized in the United States in the 1990s. Before *Priscilla*, Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992) inaugurated this non-Hollywood, independently produced departure into the queering of a classic movie genre. Following the Australian contribution, a rip-off Americanized version appeared, Beeban Kidron's *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995). The horses of bushrangers and explorers, as well as the cars of road

movies are queered by means of camp. Now we have a transvestite bus which begins as a grey-coloured vehicle, but quickly gender benders into a gay-coloured bus dragging singing queens to the red centre. It is both appropriately and inappropriately henceforth referred to in the feminine. Camp, as Cocteau once said about himself, is a lie that tells the truth.

Corresponding to a pro-gay politics behind some queer road movies, there is an attempt in *Priscilla* to break with a Hollywood convention which declares that queers cannot be included in a happy ending. The blond wuss is killed off at the end of *Gallipoli*, as are all those leather-queens in the Mad Max movies. *Priscilla*, in contrast, shows a triumphant return to a more secure environment, where, dressed as Agnetha and Frida, the two queens celebrate in song the reintegration typical of comedy. Ex-Ralph and Bob, the couple of lovers soon to be married, remain behind thus keeping the Outback a queer(ed) space. Their story will probably appear in the pulp Outback series in a matter of time.

CAMPING DOWN UNDER

Insult, abuse and bawdy innuendo accumulate in *Priscilla* along with wit, witticism and wisecracks, all bent on keeping a camp atmosphere, celebrating what one solemn camp critic, Moe Meyer, refers to as an 'oppositional' or 'ontological critique'.²³ (Un)fortunately, such pomposity risks itself being *un tant soit peu* camp. Perhaps Meyer is right in taking up arms against the apolitical and almost de-homosexualization of camp inaugurated by Sontag in 1964. Queer theory is at pains to foreground camp as a specifically queer praxis, as is shown in this comment by Meyer: 'Camp [is] the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility'.²⁴ In *Priscilla*, there is plenty of queer 'social visibility' to shock or delight both queer and straight audiences.

The decision of the three drag queens to take their act or show to the centre of Australia is not only motivated by urban *ennui*, but can be interpreted as a political affirmation of their identity. By giving a queer performance at the centre, the protagonists are inviting the country to recognize their existence and their difference. This is why it was originally planned to stage the climactic drag act on Uluru (Ayers Rock), a national emblem and fetish, rivalling the Sydney Opera House, for status as arch-symbol of Australianness. Uluru would have been the ideal raised stage

turning the whole continent into a gigantic theatre in which the entire population become spectators, forced to see and listen to a potentially subversive performance. Faced with the gender-bound beliefs of Aboriginal custom, the drag act had to be restaged at the aptly named Kings Canyon, occupied by three queens in full-feathered drag, in a crescendo of camp appropriation and queer identity politics.

It is possible to interpret all the outing in *Priscilla* as opposition to a gender script which dictates how males and females should act. The queens refuse to be subject to the limited roles prescribed by the heterosexual comedy; they constantly mock its conventions and flout its rules in the attempt to find a more liberating and pleasurable expression of their multiple and complex personalities. They take delight in a queer discourse that reverses and neutralizes heteronormative opposition, thus affirming their particular identity and sanctioning their sexual legitimacy.

What we always suspected about the Outback—that it is a bit of a queer place—turns out to be true in *Priscilla*. Most of those matey bushmen are a bunch of boozing, homophobic and insecure dickheads, prisoners of an 'Aussie bloke' fantasy they believe is real and worthy of imitating. The mateship myth is shown to have a gang-bang, misogynist dimension obfuscated by legend. The idea of a dinky-die unfailingly heterosexual 'man' proves to be difficult to put into practice. Even those legendary groups of mates (bushmen, bushrangers and diggers), could not all live up to the heterosexist myth that has been constructed around them, so what hope is there for their epigones? *Priscilla* shows that behind each Bushman Bill there hides a Bushman Bob ready to break from the mould and extend friendship to the 'real' mates who in this case happen to be gender benders, queens, transvestites and a transsexual who has chosen to go on the 'straight' and narrow.

SPORTING A FROCK

It has become fashionable in Australia, especially since 1994, the year of *Priscilla*, to see or read about popular personalities, especially high-profile sportsmen, who cross-dress in public. At a major library in Sydney, a stir was caused in the late 1990s when the male staff demanded the right to come to work in a dress. Given the masculine-looking attire of the female personnel, they felt discriminated against. They lost their case. It is worth noting that far from being the domain of a few cross-dressing queens or queer performers, male transgenderism is for the most part the activity of

males who subscribe to the major requirements of the masculine gender script, except that they fall short in one important area—they sometimes put on frocks. An increasing number of happily heterosexual butch blokes identify with the other sex and/or gender to the point of regularly stepping into high heels or slipping into panty girdles and frilly dresses. This has become newsworthy since the uninitiated usually associate cross-dressing with queers and queens, naively believing that it is a 'perversion' reserved to 'poofers'. When truck-drivers, miners or sports icons, that is, those perceived to be the 'hyper-hets' admit to transvestic trouble or non-normative sexuality, preconceptions about sex, gender and national identities become confused and need redefining.

The ambivalence of Australian society when faced with sport and the queer became obvious in the mid-1990s when the nationally-known rugby player, Ian Roberts, announced he was gay. The case of Roberts is of interest since he convincingly enacts two principle masculine gender rituals: he is incontestably hypermasculine-looking and obviously homosocial. Some fans naïvely believed that given Roberts' proficiency in hypermasculinity and homosociality, he must be equally adept as a heterosexual and a homophobe. 'People say, yeah, but you don't look gay,' the sportsman is reported as saying, 'Well, fuck, I'm as gay as you get. You don't get any queerer than Ian Roberts'.²⁵ Paul Freeman's biography, *Ian Roberts: Finding Out*, prints some of the hate-letters from disappointed and angry Australians when they learned that this was not the case.²⁶ It also prints some of the fan-mail from those who admired the sportsman's courage in coming out. These people were willing to accept a hero who happens to be homosexual. The fact that Roberts' career continued after public knowledge of his sexuality suggests that despite the desire of Australians to keep their heroes and mates heterosexual, one exception can be allowed to exist.

In 1997, the year Roberts' biography appeared, the car-racing enthusiast and television sport personality, Peter Wherrett, co-authored *Desirelines*, a family memoir in which he revealed not only his own cross-dressing habits, but those of his father as well. Wherrett attempts to explain his transvestism in terms of a sex and gender cross-identification: 'There is this need in cross-dressers to be able to pass as a woman, to be seen and identified as female. [...] I desperately wanted to be seen and identified as a girl, woman, female, feminine—whatever'.²⁷

A 1998 newspaper article entitled 'Frill Seekers' in the Melbourne Sunday press attempted to make banal an activity that has a particularly long history in Victoria, a state where there are five clubs catering for cross-dressers (the greatest number for any

Australian state or territory). A truck-driver named Peter was interviewed whose wardrobe holds two hundred dresses, skirts and blouses, forty-five pairs of shoes and thirteen wigs, an excess not matched by most women. Like his fellow countrymen, Peter performs the masculine by ritualized repetition of masculine gender norms; he follows motorcycle racing and football and he plays golf or squash. At other times, though, he performs the feminine by putting on an armoury of female attire (bra, bustier, hip pads, panty girdle, pantyhose, skirt, top, jacket, shoes and a wig), before going to a social club for cross-dressers. His explanation is simple: 'I also like feeling feminine'.²⁸ Readers are invited to reassess their sex/gender grids by dissociating transgenderism from homosexuality, as well as separating sex from gender in order to reconcile hypermasculinity with hyperfemininity in the one sex.

Since 1994 Australians have had the possibility of watching a weekly worship of football on television, *The Footy Show*. This crass and childish stud-started programme often features the nation's footy idols in drag comedy sketches. Sam Newman, one of the show's specimens of honest-to-God Aussie manhood, once turned up in a pink tutu on the Melbourne Cricket Ground after losing a bet. When these boys parade their beefy bodies in drag, male transgenderism is of a different kind to that practised by cross-dressers such as Peter Wherrett and the Victorian truck-driver. Drag in *The Footy Show* is inspired by an annual fund-raising event common to rugby league, the 'role-reversal' night when footballers cross-dress to make money for their team. This pecuniary motive acts as an excuse in order to legitimate an otherwise potentially shameful activity. It has been argued by Heather Brook that these 'big, boofy blokes', as she calls them, base their television travesty on a ritual which is both homophobic and misogynist:

Footballers use comical drag to construct their own masculinity through a kind of elaborate performance of denial—to show what they are not, what they 'cannot' be. Not-women, not-objectifiables, not-'poofters' [...] Is it possible, then, to 'read' rugby league's affection for drag as anything other than woman-hating and gay-fearing?²⁹

Brook identifies a problem of 'blokes in frocks' which does not apply to men who attend cross-dressing clubs. What these 'bimboys' are doing in drag is using television to comically defy the coach by performing a masquerade of femininity and effeminacy in order to transgress a fundamental football and national taboo by feminizing and queering *homo australis*. But it is more than that. When Sam Newman dresses up as a hairy fairy in tulle, ribbons and a wand,

he is mocking what coaches teach footballers to despise, women and queers. After being repeatedly told 'don't act like a woman or a poofier', Sam and his mates deride what they naively think is always un-masculine with the intention of reasserting their virility. Given the frequency of their TV transvestism, it is also more than likely that consciously or unconsciously, they enjoy the dressing up for its erotic potential.

A mediated example of a sportsman in a frock is the larrikin football player, Adam Heuskes, who played for Sydney, Port Adelaide and Brisbane between 1994 and 2000. This twenty-four-year-old ex-petrol pump piston, 1m90cm tall and weighing 93k, who drew media attention in 2000 for allegations of sexual assault said to have taken place in London, as well as a rape charge in South Australia, appeared in drag in a Sydney newspaper during 1996. Heuskes spoke of his penchant for cross-dressing (he was photographed wearing a pink netball skirt, a feather boa and fishnet stockings), or what he called 'vamping like Marilyn Monroe',³⁰ the camp icon featured on a poster in the footballer's bedroom. The case of Heuskes is becoming the rule, not the exception. In August 2000, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported a western suburb football team who carried out their final training session for the season in drag to the delight of five hundred schoolchildren watching from an adjacent oval:

Field wore a one-piece swimming suit provided by his wife, Ellen; winger John Hopoate slipped into his mother's floral nightdress; hooker Cherry Mascia stepped into a short skirt; second-rower Luke O'Donnell pulled on a fetching tank top and five-eighth Steve Georgallis celebrated the final training session of his career by running around in full drag, including a wig.³¹

Most of the team simply turned up in bras and skirts. Two explanations for football transvestism mentioned by the journalist are the influence of American basketballer Dennis Rodman and the antics of *The Footy Show*. Heuskes clearly designated Rodman as a role model in his *Sydney Morning Herald* interview. More to the point is the quoted claim of a retired international football player: 'Today's players are all trying to get in touch with their feminine side',³² a remark reflected in Adam Heuskes' explanation for a tattoo on his back featuring a fairy sitting in a sunset: 'It brings out my feminine side'.³³

The increasing publicity given to male-to-female cross-dressing in the 1990s and the relative absence of interest in female-to-male transvestism suggest that there are serious problems with the *masculine* gender script. The vast majority of males are willing to exercise self-discipline and conform to and recite various

requirements of the script (heterosexuality, toughness, sport fanaticism), but others wish to occasionally perform components of an alternative script, naively seen by society as rivalling the script given to them at birth. Accounts of cross-dressing are made public to try and prove that a male can put on the odd pair of high heels (our truck-driver, it is true, does seem to have nearly as many shoes as a famous Filipina fetishist), and still remain a 'man', or more importantly, an 'Aussie bloke'.

The significant change that has taken place in the nineties concerns not only the voluntary outing of transvestite or homosexual men, but a new *Zeigeist* has brought something else with it: the generalized queering of male heterosexuals. Camping and queerness, traditionally the reserve of queens and occupying a marginal cultural space, is increasingly turning mainstream and becoming heterosexualized. If there has been an increased public exposure of male-to-female cross-dressing in Australia over the last decade, it is a sign that the hypermasculine and 'ockerizing' nature of the Australian masculine gender 'straight'-jacket is excessively inhibiting, prescriptive and unnatural. A greater number of Aussie males desire to perform feminine gender rituals, in public or in private, because vast amounts of human experience, emotions and feelings have been traditionally repressed, occulted or ignored by Australian masculinity myths.

¹ The queer city theme is treated by Michael Hurley, 'Sydney', in *Queer City: Gay and Lesbian Politics in Sydney*, ed. Craig Johnston and Paul van Reyk (Sydney: Pluto, 2001) 241–57.

² Garry Wotherspoon, ed., *Being Different: Nine Gay Men Remember* (1986; Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1989) 16.

³ Elizabeth Salter, *Helfmann: The Authorised Biography* (Brighton, Sussex: Angus & Robertson, 1978) 35.

⁴ Wotherspoon, *Being Different* 17.

⁵ The rise of a gay subculture in Australia in the twentieth century is examined by Garry Wotherspoon in *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Sub-Culture* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1991).

⁶ For accounts of political activism in Australia over the last thirty years, see Craig Johnston, *A Sydney Gaze: The Making of Gay Liberation* (Sydney: Schilttron, 1999) and Graham Willett, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000).

⁷ Graham Carbery, *A History of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras* (Parkville, Vic.: Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, 1995) 5.

⁸ Bill Hornadge, *The Ugly Australian* (1975; Sydney: Bacchus, 1977) 11.

⁹ Al Clark, *Making Priscilla* (1994; New York: Plume/Penguin, 1995) 92.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ Stephan Elliott, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994; Sydney: Currency, 1995) 5.

¹² Ibid., 17.

¹³ Ibid., 1.

7 DOUBLE TROUBLE

- ¹⁴ Ibid., 68.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 20.
- ¹⁶ Clark, *Making Priscilla* 83.
- ¹⁷ John Champagne, 'Dancing Queen? Feminist and Gay Male Spectatorship in Three Recent Films from Australia,' *Film Criticism* 21.3 (1997): 82-83.
- ¹⁸ Susan Barber, 'The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert,' *Film Quarterly* 50.2 (Winter 1996-97): 44.
- ¹⁹ Elliott, *The Adventures of Priscilla* 47.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 17.
- ²¹ For a queer reading of T.E. Lawrence, see Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests* (1992) Chapter 12: 'The Chic of Arab: Transvestism and the Erotics of Cultural Appropriation,' and Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992) Chapter 7; 'White Skins, Brown Masks: The Double Mimesis, or With Lawrence in Arabia.'
- ²² Elliott, *The Adventures of Priscilla* 31.
- ²³ See Moe Meyer's Introduction, 'Reclaiming the discourse of Camp,' in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 1-22.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 5.
- ²⁵ Steve Dow, *Gay* (Altona, Vic.: Common Ground, 2001) 78.
- ²⁶ Paul Freeman, *Ian Roberts: Finding Out* (Sydney: Random House Australia, 1997).
- ²⁷ Peter Wherrett and Richard Wherrett, *Desirelines: An Unusual Family Memoir* (Sydney: Sceptre, 1997) 119.
- ²⁸ Paula Withington, 'Frill Seekers,' *The Age* (Sunday Life Magazine) 15 Nov. 1998, 14.
- ²⁹ Heather Brook, 'Big Boofy Blokes in Frocks: Feminism, Football & Sexuality,' *Social Alternatives* 16.1 (1997): 8.
- ³⁰ Lisa Olson, 'Adam's special cross-over drill,' *Sydney Morning Herald* 21 Sept. 1996, 51.
- ³¹ Roy Masters, 'A fetish for frocks is an aspect of the modern game that needs addressing,' *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 Aug. 2000, 28.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Olson, 'Adam's special cross-over drill' 48.

QUEERING THE INDIGENOUS/NON-ANGLO-CELTIC

The Sydney Gay Mardi Gras parade for 1988 included the first Aboriginal float headed by dancer Malcolm Cole. He was camped up as the English explorer, Captain James Cook, who had taken possession of the eastern coast of Australia for the English Crown in 1770. Cole was flanked by a swarthy Sir Joseph Banks (the botanist on Cook's expedition) and two black sailors - the 'boat' was pulled by white men. With this exhibition against colonialist heterosexism, specifically Australian masculinity, black and queer, came out of two hundred-year-old closet. A spectator upon seeing the black queered Cook was reported in the press to have exclaimed: 'Oh look there's an Aboriginal! I didn't know there were any gay Aborigines!' The 1990s tried to set the record straight.

An innovative step in this direction was the screening in England by Channel 4 in 1991, and subsequently by SBS in Australia early in 1992, of Tony Ayres' television documentary *Double Trouble*, programme which included interviews with both lesbian and gay Aborigines. This was followed in 1993 by the publication of Dinge Hodge's *Did You Meet Any Malagas?*²² Interviews conducted by Hodge with gay Aborigines from the Northern Territory modified the stereotypical image of Darwin as a haven of happy heterosexual public recognition of how queer Darwin had become by the 1990s shown by the existence of annual awards for Gay Black Apprentice and Miss Black Gay.

Gay and lesbian historiography has been influential in beginning to investigate Australia's queer black present and past. In 1994 fifty-page article appeared, 'Peopling the Empty Mirror', written by the Gays and Lesbians Aboriginal Alliance made up of five Aboriginal and two non-Aboriginal Australians. The first part of the paper examines the double trouble faced by many gay Aborigines which exists in two forms of discrimination: homophobia from within Aboriginal communities coupled with racism from white males. In the words of one of the participants of the Alliance: 'soon became apparent that, while some white guys would not hesitate to fuck with you, that didn't mean they had to say g'day to