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Briefs and Hot Brown Honey: Alternative bodies in contemporary circus

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Abstract

Briefs and Hot Brown Honey are two Brisbane based companies producing genre-bending work combining different mixes of circus, burlesque, hip-hop, dance, boylesque, performance art, rap and drag. The two companies produce provocative performance that is entertaining and draws critical acclaim.

However, what is particularly distinctive about these two companies is that they are both founded and directed by performers from Samoan cultural backgrounds who have leap-frogged over the normative whiteness of much contemporary Australian performance. Both companies have a radical political agenda. This essay argues that through the presentation of diverse alternative bodies, not only through the performing bodies presented on stage but also in the corporate bodies of the companies they have set up, they profoundly challenge the structure of the Australian performance industry and contribute a radical re-envisioning of the potential of circus to act as a vital political force.

Briefs was co-founded by Creative Director, Samoan, Fez Fa'anana with his brother Natano Fa'anana in 2008. An experienced dancer and physical theatre performer, Fa'anana describes the company's performances as the "dysfunctional marriage of theatre, circus, dance, drag and burlesque with the simplicity of a variety show format" ("On the Couch"). As Fa'anana's alter ego, "the beautiful bearded Samoan ringmistress Shivannah says, describing *The Second Coming*, the Briefs show at the Sydney Festival 2017, the show is 'A little bit butch with a f*** load of camp'" (Lavers). The show involves "extreme costume changes, extravagant birdbath burlesque, too close for comfort yo-yo tricks and more than one highly inappropriate banana" ("Briefs: The Second Coming").



Briefs is an all-male company with gender-bending forming an integral part of the ethos. In *The Second Coming* the accepted sinuous image of the female performer entwining herself around the aerial hoop or lyra is subverted with the act featuring instead a male contortionist performing the same seductive moves with silky smooth sensuousness. Another example of gender bending in the show is the Dita Von Teese number performed by a male performer in a birdbath filled with water with a trapeze suspended over the top of it. Perhaps the most sensational example of alternative bodies in the show is "the moment when performer Dallas Dellaforce, wearing a nude body stocking with a female body drawn onto it, and an enormously long, curly white-blond wig blown by a wind machine, stands like a high camp Botticelli Venus rising up out of the stage" (Lavers).

The highly visible body of Fez Fa'anana as the gender-bending Samoan ringmistress challenges the pervasive whiteness in contemporary circus. Although there has been some discourse on the issue of whiteness within the context of Australian theatre, for example Lee Lewis arguing for an aggressive approach to cross-racial casting to combat the whiteness of Australian theatre and TV (Lewis), there has however been very little discussion of this issue within Australian contemporary circus. Mark St Leon's discussion of historical attitudes to Aboriginal performers in Australian circus is a notable exception (St Leon). This issue remains widely unacknowledged, an aspect of whiteness that social geographers Audrey Kobashi and Linda Peake identify in their writing,

whiteness is indicated less by its explicit racism than by the fact that it ignores, or even denies, racist indications. It occupies central ground by deracializing and normalizing common events and beliefs, giving them legitimacy as part of a moral system depicted as natural and universal. (Kobayashi and Peake 394)

As film studies scholar, Richard Dyer writes,

the invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity ... In fact for most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general. Research – into books, museums, the press, advertising, films, television,

software – repeatedly shows that in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all, are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard. Whites are everywhere in representation ... At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race. (3)

Dyer writes in conclusion that "white people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words whiteness needs to be made strange" (541). This applies in particular to contemporary circus. In a recent interview with the authors, ex-Circus Oz Artistic Director and CEO, Mike Finch, commented, "You could make an all-round entertaining family circus show with [racial] diversity represented and I believe that would be a deeply subversive act in a way in contemporary Australia" (Finch).

Today in contemporary Australian circus very few racially diverse bodies can be seen and almost no Indigenous performers and this fact goes largely unremarked upon. In spite of there being Indigenous cultures within Australia that celebrate physical achievement, clowning and performance, there seem to be few pathways into professional circus for Indigenous athletes or artists. Although a considerable spread of social circus programs exists across Australia working with Indigenous youth at risk, there seem to be few structures in place to facilitate the transitioning between these social circus classes and entry into circus training programs or professional companies. Since 2012 Circus Oz has set up the program Blakflip to mentor and support young Indigenous performers to try and redress this problem. This has led to two graduates of the program moving on to perform with the company, namely Dale Woodbridge Brown and Ghenoa Gella, and also led to the mentorship and support of several students in gaining entry into the National Institute of Circus Arts in Melbourne. Circus Oz has also now appointed an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program Officer, Davey Thomson, who is working to develop networks between past and present participants in the Blakflip program and to strengthen links with Indigenous Communities. However, it could be argued that Fez Fa'anana with Briefs has in fact leapfrogged over these programs aimed at addressing the whiteness in contemporary circus. As a Samoan Australian performer he has not only co-founded his own contemporary performance company in which he takes the central performing role, but has now also established another company called Briefs Factory, which is a creative production house that develops, presents, produces and manages artists and productions, and now at any one time employs around 20 people.

In terms of his performative physical presence on stage, in an interview in 2015, Fa'anana described his performance alter ego, Shivannah, as the "love child of the bearded lady and ring master." In the same interview he also described himself tellingly as "a Samoan (who is not a security guard, football player nor a KFC cashier)," and as "an Australian ... a legal immigrant" ("On the Couch").

The radical racial difference that the alternative body of Shivannah the ringmistress presents in performance is also constantly reinforced by Fa'anana's repartee. At the beginning of the show he urges the audience "to put their feet flat on the floor and acknowledge the earth and how lucky we are to be in this beautiful country that for 200 years now has been called Australia" (Fa'anana). Comments about his Samoan ancestry are sprinkled throughout the show and are delivered with a light touch, constantly making the audience laugh. At one point in the show resplendent in a sequined costume, Fa'anana stands downstage in front of two performers on their knees cleaning up the mess left on the stage from the act before, and he says, "Finally, I've made it! I've got a couple of white boys cleaning up after me" (Fa'anana). In another part of the show, alluding to white stereotypes of Indigenous performers, Fa'anana thanks the drag artist who taught him how to put his drag make-up on, saying "I used to put my make-up on with a burnt stick before he showed me how to do it" (Fa'anana).

In his book on critical pedagogy, political activist and scholar Peter McLaren writes on approaches to developing the means to resist and subvert pervasive whiteness, saying, "To resist whiteness means developing a politics of difference [...] we need to re-think difference and identity outside a set of binary oppositions. We need to view identity as coalitional, as collective, as processual, as grounded in the struggle for social justice" (213). One example of how identity outside binary oppositions was explored in *The Second Coming* was in an act by drag artist Dallas Dellaforce, who dressed

in a sumptuous fifties evening dress with pink balloon breasts rising out of the top of his low cut evening dress and wearing a Marilyn Monroe blonde wig, camped it up as a fifties coquette, flipping from sultry into a totally scary horror tantrum, before returning to coquette mode with the husky phrase, 'I love you.' When at the end of the song, stripped naked, sporting a shaved bald head and wearing only a suggestive long thin pink balloon, the full potential of camp to reveal different layers of artifice and constructed identity was revealed. (Lavers)

Fez Fa'anana comments at the end of the show that *The Second Coming* was not aimed at any particular group of people, but instead aimed to "celebrate being human." However, if this is the case, Fa'anana is demanding an extended definition of being human that through the inclusion of diverse alternative bodies pushes for a new understandings of what constitutes being human and how human identity can be construed. His work demands an understanding that is not oppositional nor grounded in binary opposition to normative whiteness but instead forms part of a re-thinking of human identity through alternative bodies that are presented as processual, and deeply grounded in the struggle for the social justice issue of acceptance of difference and alternatives.

Hot Brown Honey is another Brisbane based company working with circus in conjunction with other forms such as burlesque, hip hop, and cabaret. The all-female company was recently awarded the UK 2016 *Total Theatre Award for Innovation, Experimentation and Playing with Form*. The company was co-founded by dancer and choreographer Lisa Fa'alafi, who is from the same Samoan family as Fez and Natano Fa'anana, with sound designer Kim "Busty Beatz" Bowers, a successful hip hop artist, poet and record producer.

From the beginning Hot Brown Honey was envisaged as providing a performance space for women of colour. Lisa Fa'alafi says the company was formed to address the lack of performance opportunities available, "It's plain knowledge that there are limited roles for people of colour, let alone women of colour" (quoted in Northover).



Lyn Gardner, arts critic for *The Guardian* in the UK, describing Hot Brown Honey's performance, writes that the company fights "gender and racial stereotypes with a raucous glee, while giving a feminist makeover to circus, hip-hop and burlesque" (Gardner). The company includes women mainly "of Indigenous, Pacific Islander and

Indonesian heritage taking on colonialism, sexism, gender stereotypes and racism through often confronting performance and humour; their tagline is 'fighting the power never tasted so sweet'" (Northover).

In their show *Hot Brown Honey* present a straps act. Straps is a physically demanding aerial circus act that requires great upper body strength and is usually performed by male aerialists. However, in the *Hot Brown Honey* show gender expectations are subverted with the straps act performed by a female aerialist. Gardner writes of the performance of this straps act at the 2016 Edinburgh Festival Fringe as a "sequence that conjures the twisted moves of a woman trying to escape domestic violence," and "One of the best circus sequences I've seen at this festival" (Gardner). Hula hoops, a traditionally female act, is also subverted and used to explore the stereotypes of the "exotic notion of Pacific culture" (Northover). Gardner writes of this act that the hoola hoops "are called into service to explore western tourists' culture of entitlement". Company co-founder Kim "Busty Beatz" Bowers, talks about the group's approach to flipping perceptions of women of colour through investigating the power dynamics in gender relations, "We have a lot of flips around sexuality," says Bowers. "Especially around the way people expect a black woman to be. We like to shift the exploitation and the power" (quoted in Northover).

Another pressing issue that *Hot Brown Honey* address is a strange phenomenon apparent in much contemporary circus. In addition to the pervasive whiteness in contemporary circus, relatively few women are visible in many contemporary circus companies. Suzie Williams from *Acrobatic Conundrum*, the Seattle-based circus company, writes in her blog, "there are a lot of shows that feature many young, fit, exuberant guys and one flexible girl who performs a sensual/sentimental/romantic solo act" (Williams). Writing about *Complètement Cirque*, Montreal's international circus festival which took place in July 2016, Williams says, "this year at the festival, my least favorite trend was ... out of the 9 ticketed productions only **one** had more than one woman in it" (Williams, emphasis in original).

Circus scholars have started to research this trend of lack of female representation both in contemporary circus schools and performance companies. "Gender in Circus Education: the institutionalization of stereotypes" was the title of a paper presented at the *Circus and Its Others Conference* in Montreal in July 2016 by Alisan Funk, a circus choreographer, teacher and director and an MA candidate at Concordia University in Montreal. Funk cited research from France showing that the educational programs and the industry are 70% male dominated. Although recreational programs in France have majority female populations, there appears to be a bottleneck at the level of entrance exams to superior schools. The few female students accepted to those schools are then frequently pushed towards solo aerial work (Funk). This push to solo aerial work means that the group floor work and acrobatics are often performed by men who create acrobatic groups that often then go on to form the basis for companies. (In this context the work of Circus Oz in this area needs to be acknowledged with the company having had a consistent policy over its 39 year existence of employing 50% female performers, however in the context of international contemporary circus this is increasingly rare).

Williams writes in her blog about contemporary circus performance, "I want to see more women. I want to see women who look different from each other. I want to see so many women that no single woman has to stand as a symbol of what all women can be" (Williams).

Hot Brown Honey tackle the issue Williams raises head on, and they do it in the form of internationally award winning circus/cabaret that is all-female, where the bodies of the performers offer a radical alternative to the norms of contemporary circus and performance generally. The work shows women, a range of women performing circus-women of colour, with a wide range of bodies of varying shapes and sizes on stage. In *Hot Brown Honey* no single woman in the show has to stand as a symbol of what all women can be.

Briefs and *Hot Brown Honey*, through accessible yet political circus/cabaret, subvert the norms and institutionalized racial and gender-based biases inherent in contemporary circus both in Australia and internationally. By doing so these two companies have leap-frogged the normative presentation of performers in contemporary circus by speaking directly to a celebration of difference and diversity through the presentation of radical alternative bodies.

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