Discourse which trades in notions of ‘real’ versions of any Shakespeare character ignores the conditions of specific and ephemeral embodiment—being there—which make meaning possible in dramatic performance. Yet theatre reviews of As You Like It evince a pattern of measuring all performances of Rosalind by the same yardstick—the ‘real’ Rosalind. While there is no ‘real’ Hamlet and no ‘real’ Macbeth enshrined in the collective imagination—these characters thrive on being re-interpreted by their times and contexts—the myth of a ‘real’ Rosalind, is particularly tenacious and, particularly problematic. Performances of Rosalind are evaluated as participating in (good) or diverging from (bad) a legacy that stretches back to Shakespeare’s own time and by extension to the authority of ‘Shakespeare’s imagination’. The problem with this mode of discourse is that As You Like It is a play for which there is scant evidence of performance before 1723. Even at this date it was brought back to the stage—or rather brought to the vastly different stage of Drury Lane—in a jumbled appropriation called Love in a Forest that included excerpts from many of Shakespeare’s plays.1 There is no continuity from Shakespeare’s period to the present when it comes to Rosalind. Rather, the sensibilities which unwittingly inflect reviews of the role in performance, even in twenty-first-century Australia, can be traced to those of the period of the play’s first known theatre outing.

This article discusses the relationship between theatre critics’ expectations of the character Rosalind, and the stage lives given Rosalind by actors who play her. While the yardstick of the ‘real’ Rosalind can be seen to be an international phenomenon, the present study aims to investigate at close range its Australian manifestation. In Australia the issue of ‘measuring up’ to the ‘real’ Rosalind is particularly pertinent because the authoritative template for Rosalind is by default construed as belonging to seventeenth-century London. In this paper, I will use a set of case studies of Australian Rosalinds spanning more than a century to explore both the critical narratives which seek to confine the scope of the role, and the performances by individual actors which resist such measures. While the temporal relation of performance to review is usually conceived as sequential—the review comes after the performance—with a character performed as often as Rosalind is, it becomes possible and important to challenge this chronology. Ultimately, I suggest that Rosalind in performance ‘talks back’ to the assumptions continuously circulated in public discourse via theatre reviews.

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Being There: After

Proceedings of the 2006 Conference of the
Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies
One of the best documented Australian Rosalinds of the nineteenth century is Essie Jenyns who played the role in 1887. In reviews of Jenyns’ performance and journalistic comments upon her life we notice the emergence of some of the prejudices and preoccupations which have dogged Australian Rosalinds ever since. First, there is a marked emphasis upon the actor’s stature and the credibility of her gender disguise:

Miss Essie Jenyns was simply charming as Rosalind. She had all the necessary tallness of figure of which we are reminded by Shakespeare in his reference to “Cleopatra’s majesty,” and she was thus enabled the more easily and the more satisfactorily to assume the male disguise.

Second, there is the affirmation of her conventional ‘feminine’ appeal:

[s]he had much of the grace and the sweetness attributed to the rose from which her name is compounded . . .

And finally, there is the annoyingly hesitant commendation of the actor as an ‘approximation’ of the real Rosalind—‘Shakespeare’s’ Rosalind:

[Jenyns] was in every respect, if not actually, at any rate approximately, the personification of Shakespeare’s imaginary princess (Anon. 1887).

These comments are unremarkable for their period and are easily decoded as the result of nineteenth-century prejudices—Anglo-centricity and patriarchy. What is surprising is the abiding prevalence of these preoccupations in reviews of more recent date. Peter Cochrane’s conversation with Simon Phillips who directed Anita Hegh as Rosalind for Sydney Theatre Company (S.T.C.) in 1995 offers an example. In an age when sartorial habits of men and women are far less distinguishable and definitions of gender are generally supposed to be less rigid, it reflects a persisting concern with the credulity of the gender disguise:

[ t]he fact that Hegh was tall and blessed with classical beauty also appealed to Phillips. “She’s not elfin and impossibly pretty—the audience will accept her in drag without too much straining of credulity” (Cochrane 1995).

In short, these temporally distant comments upon performance of the role of Rosalind share a pre-occupation with normalising its chameleon scope and with reducing it to quotidian forms of credulity. While performers of other of Shakespeare’s chief roles are routinely commended for re-inventing their characters in the light of the times, ‘Rosalind’ appears to be set in stone.

Before proceeding to examine the relationship between Australian Rosalinds and their critics it is worth taking into account what has already been observed about the ‘real’ Rosalind. In “Shakespeare’s Rosalind and her Public Image”, Mary Hamer traces the accretion of some distinct expectations around the character over time. In judging performances of the role, Hamer notes the tendency of commentators to assent to certain unarticulated axioms. Hamer analyses the persistence of terms such as ‘charm’ and ‘enchantment’ in descriptions of Rosalind from the late eighteenth century onwards in the following way:

[i]nterpretation does not seem to be an issue, there is no drive to rediscover or redefine. Rather the question is one of approximating to an ideal whose outlines are in principle agreed (1986, 111).

Hamer also points out that it is only from the point of the play’s rediscovery in the eighteenth century...
that we can date prevalent perceptions and assumptions about Rosalind. These assumptions Hamer articulates incisively:

[w]hat can be observed is the development of a myth. It is a myth of femininity, in which weakness and potency are reconciled, feminine allure and mystery reassuringly garbed in masculine attire. This involves the metamorphosis of traditionally female vices. Talking too much and being a bit bossy are with Rosalind transformed into signs of capacity and power (1986, 109).

As a mode of analysis, Hamer’s identification of patterns of expectation is informative. It comments not only upon the performance of the role but decodes discourses of reception. This decoding offers an insight into what we as a post-Victorian, English-speaking culture need from Rosalind and consequently offers an insight into our own culture. I extend and focus this manner of investigation by applying it to four Australian Rosalinds: Essie Jenyns (1887), Anita Hegh (1995), Deborah Mailman (1999), and Alice McConnell (2003).

Essie Jenyns

Despite her high-profile success, nineteenth-century Australian Shakespeare star Essie Jenyns was virtually owned by her stepfather, William Holloway. As a member of the actor-manager’s family troupe, Jenyns had no fiscal independence and no scope to advance her prospects by performing for other companies. Her apprenticeship throughout her teenage years was arduous by her own account and after three years of unparalleled public popularity between the beginning of 1886 and 1888 she secretly quit the company, ran away to Sydney, married a wealthy man, and retired from public performance altogether (Gordon-Clark 2002, 85).

In her work on Jenyns, Janette Gordon-Clark differentiates the actor from her female predecessors by emphasising the special quality of her popular celebrity. According to one source, 15,000 photographs of Jenyns dressed as various characters had been purchased in the three years from 1885-1888. The writer of a nineteenth-century feature article on Jenyns for the *Centennial Magazine* comments that "no other resident artist, whether Australian born or otherwise, has ever come within half this number" (Thompson 1888-9, 88). This form of popular celebrity suggests that Jenyns wielded unprecedented power of appeal. Paradoxically, it also implies that Jenyns was not only owned fiscally by her stepfather’s company but was also owned imaginatively by the Australian public. Further evincing this ownership are Thompson’s opening comments:

Miss Essie Jenyns claims special attention in these pages as a representative Australian actress. She has achieved fame where most she prizes it—in her native land; and whatever fortune may have in store for her elsewhere, here she will always be welcome (1888-9, 83).

Jenyns, as is still often the case with Australian ‘stars’, is spoken of as if she were the mascot for a small provincial town. She seems to have activated the articulation of a number of normalising narratives that persist in close relation to players of Rosalind in Australia today. These include an affirmation of ‘feminine’ sensual appeal, and a confirmation of Australian authenticity expressed with paternalistic and proprietorial affection.

Thompson mentions a picture taken in 1884 in the following way:

Miss Jenyns’ own unflattering description of herself as comparatively “plumpy and stumpy up to the age of 16 or 17,” is here in some measure borne out. There is little sign of the tall and lissome figure and the commanding intelligence which distinguished her beauty a
Being There: After

few years later (1888-9, 84).

Next, he confers the sanctioning stamp of Jenyns’ Australianness by a fanciful description of her background:

[long, lonely walks through the fragrant bush before the sun was fairly up, dreamy days over a book half-read in the drowsy heat, and early to rest in preparation for the morrow’s gallop. . . . Essie gave promise at this time of a stouter growth than she realised at maturity. “In those days I could eat anything, from bread and butter to dough-nuts,” is her explanation of the phenomenon. I daresay most of us would prefer to think of our heroine gracefully bending from the saddle to stain her lip with the scarlet quondong . . .

(1888-9, 83 & 84).

In a manner that prefigures the twenty-first-century feature article, Thompson also cultivates a sense of intimacy with the celebrity by packaging her imagined childhood in a marketable narrative. He blatantly effects a replacement of the girl with an erotic fantasy: “gracefully bending from the saddle to stain her lip with the scarlet quondong”. The opening phrase of this coda: “I daresay most of us would prefer to think of her . . .” emphasises the degree to which the ‘real’ Jenyns is made a ‘heroine’—captive to the dictates of the dominant sensibility.

Another noticeable characteristic of Thompson’s account is the way in which Jenyn’s sojourn to Europe is described as providing the necessary sophistication for a respected artist in Australia:

Mr. and Mrs. Holloway now felt they had done all that was possible in Australia towards the advancement of their daughter’s education, and that to promote it still further a visit to the art centres of the world would be necessary (1888-9, 84).

Arguably, the ‘real’ Essie Jenyns as constructed by Thompson bears strong resemblance to the ‘real’ Rosalind identified by Hamer: they are both appropriated to reinforce public hegemonic discourses of gender identity, national identity, power, and ownership. The construction of the ‘real’ Jenyns seems culturally unexceptional given the vintage of Thompson’s article. What is more striking is evidence of similar mythologising impulses in discourse attending the performance of the role in modern Australia. In the following paragraphs I offer accounts of three such performances and analyse the press-releases, feature articles, and reviews which they inspired.

Anita Hegh

Anita Hegh, who played Rosalind for the S.T.C. production in 1995/1996, was described by director Simon Phillips as having “sufficient reserves of melancholy to make the discovery of joy a great experience” (in Cochrane 1995). Her performance was characterised by a quality of gravity and internalised struggle. The connection between Rosalind and Celia (Lucy Bell) seemed, as is often the case, far more profound and robust than any of the play’s romantic bonds. Reviewers evinced a marked interest in the love between the women:

[at the play’s] centre is the relationship between Rosalind and Celia, played through to the end with passion, energy and intelligence by Anita Hegh and Lucy Bell. This is no mere girlhood friendship. Their love and closeness becomes the moral core of this play about the alarming suddenness and inevitable failure of romantic love (McCallum 1996 n.p).

Director Simon Phillips was even more explicit about the relationship’s breadth of possibility, claiming that Rosalind’s male dress offered a kind of liberation that allowed Rosalind and Celia to “explore
their mutual sexual attraction” (Phillips 2004).

Surprisingly however, Hegh herself rejected the notion of consciously expressed ‘romantic’ love between Rosalind and Celia:

I can see how some people might find it erotic, especially with me in my braces and pants, it could provide some fantasy element. Certainly they love each other but it’s not in a romantic way. It’s more in the way of an extremely close friendship (Busby 1996, n.p.).

Rosalind and Celia’s first appearance was made as they broke away from a group of dancers moving in an eerily stylised routine. Their solidarity was expressed efficiently in this shared shaking-off of the stifling encumbrance of court formality and heterosexual pairing. Theirs was a dance in which neither wanted to participate. Hegh as Rosalind sat on the floor in her long black dress giving a sense of quiet grief and pent-up strength. When promising to render back in affection what Duke Frederick had robbed from Rosalind, Celia slid her hands down Rosalind’s bare arms—a strikingly intimate and creative gesture which contrasted with the cold, fixed hold of the dancers.

Having rid themselves of formal constraints, Rosalind and Celia threw off their shoes and sat together on the floor. Their conversation was accompanied by a playful and physically rough mode of interaction. At one point Hegh straddled Bell, pinning her arms to the floor. Even in her dress, Hegh’s Rosalind evinced stereotypically masculine characteristics of action: physical strength and roughness. The physical energy and agility of both actors from their first appearance was all the more striking for the fact of their ‘female’ garments. The sense emerged that Rosalind need not ‘put on’ Ganymede but that a physical strength and energy integral to her particular femininity had been suppressed by codes of social and sartorial propriety and was allowed fuller expression when she changed her clothes. This liberating shift was also registered in Hegh’s voice. While wearing a dress, in both the early scenes and in the epilogue, Hegh delivered her lines in what appeared to be a more self-consciously formal, forced, and stagey manner. As Ganymede, however, her voice seemed more flexible and her manner more relaxed and confident. Ironically, for this particular actor, the frock was the disguise—‘Rosalind’ was the adopted persona and ‘Ganymede’ the organic identity.

Hegh as Ganymede evinced a crisp, almost choreographed form of physicality. In this she recalled Juliet Stevenson’s Rosalind for the 1985 Royal Shakespeare Company production. Stevenson’s dance-like movement gave a sensuous fluidity to her performance. In neither instance did the stylisation preclude a beguiling self-revelation. Rather, it emphasised the sense that Rosalind is self-consciously a performer. Rosalind, with her changes of costume and her successive naming, her posturing as a ‘saucy lackey’ and her adoption of rhetorical conceits, evinces an almost illicitly insatiable appetite for other characters’ attention and the audience’s gaze. Herein exists Rosalind’s metatheatricality: she constantly draws attention to the junction between playing and being. Her many roles bring a paradoxical transparency to the act of performance and consequently to the actor playing the role. Hegh as Rosalind used a range of stock performance gestures with the result of parodying both masculine and feminine stereotypes. When exclaiming to Celia “Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak” (Act III; scene ii; line 227), rather than investing the line with honest exasperation, Hegh adopted a mock femininity. She collapsed primly to her knees and spoke while fluttering her eyelids. Shortly after this, on first sighting Orlando (Paul Bishop), she struck a stereotypically masculine pose—one foot up on a log and her hands in her pockets.

Likewise the romance between Orlando and ‘Rosalind’ was played out as a very self-conscious spectacle by both of the actors. The ground of their interaction kept shifting between an evolving sense of attraction and intimacy and a taking refuge in adopted roles. This was instanced most clearly as the
Being There: After

Kate Flaherty

scene drew to its close. Rosalind warned Orlando of how she would regard him if he failed to come at two o’clock. She punctuated each of her adjectives—“pathetical break-promise,” “hollow lover,” and “unworthy”—by prodding Orlando backwards by the shoulders; a gesture guaranteed to provoke aggression. Orlando’s response to this bullying was surprising. He gently raised a hand to her face, saying that he would keep his promise: “With no less religion than if thou wert indeed my Rosalind” (Act IV; scene iv; lines 168-9). Momentarily it seemed as if he saw Rosalind. Rosalind gave ground visibly, made vulnerable and expectant by his tenderness. Having caught her off-guard and just at the moment when she clearly anticipated a kiss he said “adieu”, and gave her strong retaliatory shove backwards by the shoulders before running off. This provoked surprised laughter from the audience. It revealed an Orlando and not just a Rosalind who was prepared to play with assumed attributes of his gender role. This accords well with what director Simon Phillips said of the relationship between Rosalind and Orlando:

it was really about opening up the avenues in the rehearsal room for every permutation of the potential of sexuality to be employed. The play just offers up a chance for everyone to explore an element of their sexuality that they might not have otherwise explore . . . They can role-play (Phillips 2004).

Despite the lively intelligence and popularity of Hegh’s performance, she was not accorded status as the star feature of the production. Astonishingly, apart from the Cec Busby interview for the free street publication Beat, there were no articles featuring Hegh alone. Lucy Bell was interviewed about her career and identity as daughter of John Bell and Anna Volska of Nimrod and Bell Shakespeare Company fame (Banks 1996). Paul Livingstone, known in Australia for his comic character Flacco, was interviewed about his new experience playing a number of roles in a play by Shakespeare (Tom 1996). Penny Biggin and Bruce Spence were interviewed as actors with recognised profiles outside of the Shakespeare and theatre context (Hawkins 1996; Morgan 1996). Australian jazz singer Kerrie Biddell’s appearance also drew notice for its novelty. In each case, actors were singled out for their recognised and established status in the entertainment industry in Australia. This fitted Phillips’ vision of the play as “a show that could be done with cabaret performers” with the clowns in the forest as “a series of star-turns by comedians” (Phillips 2004).

The discourse attending Hegh’s appearance as Rosalind differed markedly. While reviews emphasised Rosalind’s centrality to the play, the commentary’s emphasis was upon Hegh’s almost unexpected competence in the role as a young performer and recent drama school graduate: “[t]hough fresh out of N.I.D.A. [the National Institute for Dramatic Art] (1994), Hegh gives a performance fit for any stage” (Morrison 1996). The previously identified theme of ‘home-grown’ and in fact ‘home-owned’ talent also pervaded the reception of Hegh’s Rosalind: “Sydney theatre has a fine new talent in Anita Hegh” (McCallum 1996). Other instances of reporting on Hegh as Rosalind bore uncanny parallels with reception of the earlier work of Essie Jenyns. Narratives used for both ‘actresses’ are characterised by a deserved growth to fame accompanied by the necessary blessing of innate physical beauty:

Anita Hegh appears from amongst the clatter of the cafeteria dressed in earth colours. She has the typically flawless skin and elegant poise of an actor. This is Anita’s first Shakespearean role outside of N.I.D.A. and lo and behold she has won Rosalind, one of the strongest female leads Shakespeare has ever written (Stone 1996, n.p).

This cafeteria narrative packages the actor’s body, talent and body of work for easy consumption. It makes the real Hegh and the ‘real’ Rosalind into contained and recognisable, albeit fabricated, entities.

Proceedings of the 2006 Annual Conference of the Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies
Deborah Mailman

Deborah Mailman was praised unanimously for her energy and audience appeal in the role of Rosalind for Company B Belvoir in 1999. Her characterisation attracted the following epithets: “a delight of verve and spontaneity” (Anderson 1999), “feisty and cheeky” (Kablean 1999), “a splendidly lumpish country boy” (McCallum 1999) and, perhaps more conventionally, “irresistibly charming” (Rose 1999). Unlike many Rosalinds, Mailman was in fact “more than common tall”—much taller than Kirstie Hutton’s Celia and noticeably taller than Aaron Blabey’s Orlando. Mailman’s height, her rambunctious energy, and her Aboriginality defied smooth, symmetrical pairings and were registered in media discourse as anomalous for Rosalind. According to Joyce Morgan, even director Neil Armfield registered the fortuitous unusualness of casting Mailman as Rosalind:

Director Neil Armfield acknowledges that his decision to cast Mailman as Rosalind—“the Gwyneth Paltrow role”—rather than her comic sidekick Celia was unusual. He sees Mailman’s ability to move from physical comedy into tender, lyrical sadness as a way of opening up the play.

“Deb has the ability to make you glad you’re alive . . . it’s such a bracing and generous energy,” says Armfield (Morgan 1999, 3).

While the S.T.C. production relied on a sophisticated and crisply stylised repertoire of self-revelations, Company B’s production was characterised by casual intimacy with the audience and more organic and spontaneous kinds of clowning. Mailman was at the very forefront of this dynamic, evincing a beguiling mixture of self-assurance and generous spirited self-irony. In contrast to the humour of Hegh’s plucky self-defensive strategies and postures, Mailman’s Rosalind seemed a natural and relaxed comedian.

While it is a traditional feature of characterisation for Rosalind to ‘betray herself’, and reveal her love “despite herself,” Mailman walked no such tightrope of propriety. Mailman’s Rosalind relished unashamed opportunities for physical contact with Orlando. Early during their first encounter in the Forest, Rosalind revealed her physical desire for Orlando when enumerating the markers of a true lover. Adding “a lean cheek, which you have not” (Act III; scene ii; line 338), she touched his face and then stopped speaking altogether—taking the time to touch his face again as if arrested by the sensation. Shortly after this, while sitting side by side on a bench with him, Rosalind claimed she could wash Orlando’s “liver as clean as a sound sheep’s heart” (Act III; scene ii; line 378) and reached sideways to gesture to his liver. Inadvertently, her hand slipped into his lap where she left it for some time—fixing her gaze ahead, with a gasp and momentary pause. This frankness of desire and the way it unsettled Orlando caused much audience mirth. The humour of Mailman’s Rosalind’s desire inhered more in its artlessness than in the more common kinds of coquetry and self-denial associated with the character.

Like Hegh, Mailman seemed liberated rather than disguised by her Ganymede identity. Unlike Hegh’s and Stevenson’s dapper and tailored appearance in crisp white shirt, linen trousers and braces, however, Mailman wore shabby clothes. Her face was smeared with dirt and for most of her performance she wore an oversized shirt, knee length breeches with braces dangling from the waistband, bare feet, and a battered felt hat. The simplicity of this and other costumes suited the ‘backyard’ aesthetic of the production—the turf stage floor and blue cloth canopy of stars. The flat and evenly lit plain of the grass seemed to establish equality between the characters—both proscribing and suggesting particular possibilities of movement. This combination of Mailman’s playful physicality and the backyard setting has been thoughtfully remarked upon by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo:
by transforming the Forest of Arden into a suburban backyard rather than a more iconically ‘indigenous’ (outback) setting, the production avoided suturing Aboriginality to landscape, even while drawing on the body cultures of the indigenous actors to suggest their characters’ connection with the land and to link the Duke and his daughter’s exile to the historical dispossession of Aboriginal Australians (Gilbert and Lo 2007, 136).

The notion of ‘body-cultures’ as a more subtle and flexible expression of identity is pertinent. Mailman’s style of physical ease in the space affected the meaning of the space. For example, in the scene where Jaques and Rosalind meet and talk (Act IV; scene i; lines 1-33), they lay at a perpendicular angle on the grass taking alternate bites of a carrot. This gave the interaction and the setting an air of leisurely musing rather than the usual competitive wit. On a conventionally glossy stage surface there is an obvious contrivance in having characters lie down or sit on the ‘ground’. On the inviting grassy plot of Company B’s Arden, sitting, lying, chasing, and playful skirmishes had a fresh dramatic viability.

Mailman’s physically relaxed and playful mode of performance as Ganymede often veered towards crowd-pleasing slap-stick. Her clowning Rosalind was much commended in reception of the play, one reviewer going as far as to say she is the play’s “key clown” (Hampson 1999). Mailman’s Rosalind won the audience’s sympathy and laughter throughout the performance and the robust simplicity of this bond between audience and performer was attested at a climactic moment of the play’s dramatic development. In Act Five, scene two Rosalind reports to the forlorn and wounded Orlando news of Celia and Oliver’s match. Aaron Blabeys’s Orlando, poignant in his dejection, would not be urged from his sad humour. Preoccupied, and with his eyes downcast he told Rosalind: “I can live no longer by thinking” (Act V; scene ii; line 45). At this point Rosalind, saddened by his sadness stepped over to the audience and whispered “Shall I tell him?” to which the audience responded in an urgent whisper “Yes!” Rosalind with a glance back at Orlando then inquired of the audience “Now?”—to which they gave an even more emphatic “Yes!”

Mailman was a popular Rosalind and more than that—a star—seen to carry representative functions in popular discourse far beyond her role in the play. In continuing to observe expectations, narratives, and myths that attend Rosalind in performance, it is pertinent to note the iconic status accorded Mailman. Somewhat akin to Essie Jenyns in her popular identity, Mailman was treated as an Australian ‘character’ in her own right. Prior to As You Like It, Mailman played a number of Shakespeare roles including Cordelia for the Bell Shakespeare Company’s famously controversial King Lear, directed by Barrie Kosky. In Sue Rider’s 1994 production of The Taming of the Shrew for La Boîte in Brisbane Mailman played Katherina—a performance whose political implications bore parallels with her performance as Rosalind. As Elizabeth Schafer has pointed out,

> [m]aking Katherina the unfavoured and Aboriginal daughter coloured the undervaluing and indeed demonising of Katherina, and evoked the troubling histories of the taming/abuse of Aboriginal women in Australia (Schafer 2003, 67).

Mailman’s iconic status also owed much to her prior achievements and publicity. She was the first Indigenous Australian to gain the Australian Film Institute’s award for best actress—for her performance as Nora in the film Radience. In 1999 she was the subject of the painting that won People’s Choice Award in the Archibald Prize, Australia’s premier award for portraiture. The piece, painted by Evert Ploeg, was described somewhat salaciously as “a portrait of an award winning actress, dressed in a flimsy calico nightie” (Dennis 1999, 5).

Drawing on Mailman’s popular appeal for a very different effect, promotional material for Belvoir’s production also featured her picture. The postcard and program present a head-shot: Mailman’s
face chalked white with a penciled black moustache and eyebrows, topped by a clown’s mop of curly black hair. This image references both the vaudevillian roots of Australian theatre and performs a witty inversion of the black and white minstrel stereotype. Offset by the scrawled line “What think you of falling in love?” and Mailman’s enticing smile, the photograph issues a playful and multi-layered challenge to fixed definitions of both gender and ethnic identity.

In reviews of the production, Mailman was designated a representative function in relation to her Indigenous Australian identity. Her prominence as an assertively outspoken and orchestrating female figure in the play, combined with the presence of a number of other Indigenous Australians in the cast, made the play a conduit for questioning and revising beliefs about both cultural and gender identity. Mailman registered keen awareness of the political statement made simply by walking on stage:

[m]y choices have to be quite smart in the respect that it’s not just me on stage but it’s the rest of my people, too. At the moment, when we walk on stage it’s a political statement because of where we are as a country in terms of race relations and reconciliation. So it can’t only be Deb Mailman. It’s Deb Mailman and a lot of history (Hampson 1999).

However, she also articulated a resistance to having her individuality engulfed by political and ideological rhetoric:

[i]t places a lot of weight on us as indigenous artists . . . (but) first and foremost it’s about me. I love what I do and I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t love it (Hampson 1999).

By unapologetically asserting herself with her specific Australian cultural legacy and her own particular talents and idiosyncrasies, Mailman uncovered new possibilities for Rosalind in the Australian context. The unpretentious manner in which she describes her involvement in the production and her innate sense of fun belie the stature—the ‘more than common tallness’—of her achievement.

Alice McConnell

Alice McConnell’s performance as Rosalind for the Bell Shakespeare Company resembled Anita Hegh’s performance in its sense of depth and edgy intensity. In rehearsal and in performance McConnell evinced an extraordinary level of commitment to avoiding stale routine by making new discoveries and keeping fresh the impulses that shaped her performance. McConnell’s investment in the moment to moment authenticity of her work often lent her acting an intensely compelling quick-silver quality. Watching the actor, it became evident that she never resorted to easy solutions to define Rosalind. Rather she wrestled to forge an organic connection with each word, phrase, and action of the character. When confidently in command of the flow of this process, McConnell as Rosalind was agile and energised, mercurial in her transformations and mesmerising to behold. Conversely, when McConnell encountered obstacles to fluency—as all actors do on occasion—she seemed overburdened, physically and mentally fatigued.

The aspect of the role about which McConnell articulated a distinct sense of difficulty was “finding Ganymede” (McConnell 2003). McConnell was cognisant of the multi-layered quality of the role, pointing out that “Rosalind is herself playing out the role of a man for much of the play” (Usher 2003, 11). Unlike Anita Hegh and Deborah Mailman, who seemed immediately more at ease once ‘disguised’ as Ganymede, McConnell seemed to struggle with the secondary identity. Rather than seeking fixed answer to her riddle of ‘finding Ganymede’, however, McConnell allowed that flexibility would be crucial to the growth of the role:

You have to be prepared to let the role develop, so that it evolves into something quite
different at the end of the season from where we’re starting (in Usher 2003, 11).

Although most actors would report development of their role through a long season, McConnell’s point bore special emphasis. It exemplified in practice director Lindy Davies’ core principle for the actor: the possibility of genuine transformation through “active receptivity” to environment, and to personal impulse (in Strube 1994).

In keeping with Davies’s emphasis on transformation McConnell made some significant alterations to her performance throughout the season. One of the more radical decisions McConnell made early in the run was to remove the hat that was part of her Ganymede disguise, allowing her blonde hair to fall about her shoulders. This iconoclastic move was typical of the ways in which McConnell’s performance disrupted the category of “male disguise” and apparently disturbed a number of reviewers. Ken Longworth for the *Newcastle Herald* asserts that “[n]o attempt seems to have been made to make Rosalind a convincing boy” (Longworth 2003, 68). Bill Perret makes a similar observation in a more circumspect manner:

> [McConnell’s] Rosalind-as-Ganymede is less than convincing, but nor is it meant to be. Orlando and the Duke claim rather lamely, when she is revealed as herself, that they’d noticed a resemblance (Perret 2003, n.p.).

Perret points out that the play itself draws attention to its own contrivance, raising the question of what might actually be gained by an unconvincing Ganymede.

These instances of criticism echo an insistent and popular preoccupation with the veracity of Rosalind’s disguise. This preoccupation is also revealed in the hackneyed archaisms deployed by reviewers to describe the plot: Rosalind “dons breeches” (Thomson 2003, 12) or even more simplistically Rosalind “dresses as a man” (Usher 2003, 11). When referring to productions which evoke the Elizabethan social context, or which took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—periods when gender identity was reliably denoted by clothing—such phrases would retain sense. In a twenty-first century setting, where women in Anglo-European cultures have been wearing trousers for over half a century, it seems more dubious to suggest that “donning breeches” or “dressing as a man” has any automatic implications for the way in which gender identity is decoded. Rosalind’s attempt to suit herself “in all points like a man” must necessarily take on a new complexity in performance. What the persistent use of such phrases by commentators does signal is a rigidity in the definition of gender traits that far exceeds that of contemporary sartorial practice.

As remarked upon earlier, discourses of reception reflect a deeply vested interest in binding Rosalind into acceptable compliance with cultural expectations. Alice McConnell’s Rosalind evidently transgressed the requirement for a plausible and clearly determined version of masculine disguise. McConnell’s shortcomings were derided with predictable resort to the putative authority of the ‘real’ Rosalind. “This play” wrote Helen Thomson,

> has always been loved for its heroine, the brave, original Rosalind, who dons breeches and woos her man with wonderful wit and passion. Alice McConnell certainly looks the part: tall and fair and charming. But she lacks the dash and brio to make her the mistress of her fate. Her body language is irritatingly obsequious and fussy and, as the lover, Ganymede, she carries, for no obvious reason, a cloth wrapped staff, that she constantly thrusts at the other characters like a weapon (Thomson 2003, 12).

Thomson’s dissatisfaction relates to the obviousness of McConnell’s devices, her clumsy apparatus of masculinity. However, there is no reason why Rosalind should be fluently adept in her disguise.
McConnell, like many a Rosalind, struck poses. Playing consciously with the idiom of acting, she prepared herself for her first public encounter as Ganymede by placing one foot up on a block and thumping her staff to the floor. The gestural hyperbole of 'bracing herself for a performance of masculinity was deliberately silly and provoked audience laughter. Elizabeth Grosz has identified this deployment of stereotypical traits in order to subvert the gender stereotype. With respect to femininity Grosz states that

> the practices of femininity can readily function, in certain contexts . . . as modes of guerilla subversion of patriarchal codes, although the line between compliance and subversion is always a fine one (Grosz 1994, 114).

McConnell’s clumsy masculinity could likewise be seen as a mode of “guerilla subversion of patriarchal codes” because it highlighted how unsophisticated a façade of masculinity was required to convince Orlando.

McConnell seemed in her self-conscious performativity to harness her own uncertainty—constantly trying out expressions and mannerisms in her assay of masculine disguise. Her experimental approach to gender disguise, as at least one reviewer suggested, continued to be great source of fun:

> Manning’s Orlando is a square jawed, physically effective man of action in the usual mode, while McConnell’s Rosalind has more has more subtlety and range, with some nicely acted fun in the cross-dressing (Dunne 2003, 16).

Stephen Dunne’s critique in effect suggests a complementarity between Manning’s conventional and McConnell’s less stable representation of gender identity. McConnell’s expressed lack of self-assurance became, by turn, Rosalind’s amusingly strange fits and starts. Arguably McConnell’s struggle to ‘find Ganymede’ made her no less Rosalind than Hegh’s and Mailman’s discovery of Rosalind in Ganymede. McConnell kept the role alive through a certain tension between identities, Hegh and Mailman through the freedom they found in disguise.

Despite this major difference, the publicity and rhetoric that attended McConnell’s appearance as Rosalind bore striking resemblance to that of each of the previously described Rosalinds. Among the identified tropes were those of a simple Australian childhood, promise of talent, overseas experience, and a popular identity outside the Shakespeare role. Perhaps most notable of all is the degree to which McConnell herself is complicit in the mythologising:

> She grew up in Ourimbah, which sounds like the Arden of the Central Coast.

> “It was a huge farm, a beautiful old homestead in a valley surrounded by citrus,” she said.

> “A very simple country family: Dad worked the land and Mum worked the home” (Rose 2003, 27).

Colin Rose’s article, titled “Man enough for the Role”, goes on to give a potted profile of McConnell’s life experience. Having begun by reminding his readers of McConnell’s television celebrity status in the A.B.C. drama MDA (Medical Defence Australia), Rose goes on to trace her winning of a scholarship to study in England at age nineteen, her training at the Victorian College of the Arts in Australia, and her having “skipped straight into the leading role” of Bell’s As You Like It. In this way Rose, like Jenyns’ commentators, procures all McConnell’s credentials for a popular, Australian-wrought and down-to-earth Rosalind.
Measuring Up
It is evident from the foregoing survey that Rosalind has the potential both to reinforce and to dispel essentialist notions of gender. Moreover, her ineluctable and multi-layered performativity disturbs assumptions about the sources of authority in theatrical performance. Rosalind therefore baffles the complacent modes of understanding through which theatre, particularly Shakespearean theatre, is often approached by reviewers. Examining the legacy of critical reception that has attended Australian performances of Rosalind alerts us to the ways in which popular discourse given voice through theatre reviews exerts a force to contain Rosalind’s perplexing proclivities. While the modern Rosalinds discussed in this chapter demonstrate far more contrasts than continuities, a common yardstick seems to be applied to them all. This measure, although conceived as the ‘real’ Rosalind, is rather a set of normalising narratives and preoccupations used to contain the anarchic potentialities of the role. The earliest case in point is the first Australian female star, Essie Jenyns and many tropes fixed by commentary around her identity can be seen to recur with more recent Rosalinds. I have conceptualised individual performances of the role however, as offering resistance or ‘talking back’ to these straitening and straightening narratives. For Rosalind is more than a hypothetical site on which popular and theoretical discourse is inscribed—Rosalind is also Rosalind’s embodiment by the living actor. In being so the concept ‘Rosalind’ is ever enlivened by meaningful particularity, idiosyncrasy, and made newly rich by the living, if ephemeral, contingencies amongst which it is situated. As much as attendant modes of discourse strive to construe ‘Rosalind’ in terms of continuities and fixed conceptions of gender and theatre, Rosalinds—as these Australian Rosalinds demonstrate—retain the capacity to resist.

Notes
1. Alan Brissenden writes that
[[the first recorded performance of As You Like It was at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane on 20 December 1740. The first concrete allusion to it in the theatre is its presence in a list now in the Public Records Office, made in January 1669, of 108 plays, 21 of them by Shakespeare, formerly acted at the Blackfriars Theatre by the King’s Men, and ‘now allowed of’ to Thomas Killigrew, Master of the Theatre Royal in Bridges Street; inclusion in such a list however, is no guarantee of performance. It is a tantalizing thought, but one which must be seriously considered, that this play, immensely popular since 1740, may not have been performed at the time it was written (1993, 50).


3. The source of this comment is my observation of the Royal Shakespeare Company archival video of the 1985 Royal Shakespeare Company production held at the Shakespeare Centre Library.

4. The source of my comments on rehearsals of the Bell Shakespeare Company’s As You Like It are my own recordings and notes taken as a rehearsal observer throughout July 2003. For this unique opportunity I am deeply indebted to the Bell Shakespeare Company, Lindy Davies, and the As You Like It cast and crew.
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