



Poses Plastiques: The Art and Style of 'Statuary' in Victorian Visual Theatre

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Sometimes dismissed as practitioners of a humble variant of pornography, specialists of a Victorian performance style known as '*poses plastiques*' mastered the art of manipulating the body into highly stylised and apparently motionless 'attitudes' to resemble so-called 'living statues'. Most favoured adopting 'Classical' stances in the garb of Greek and Roman deities, and a number of its female technicians titillated audiences with costumes giving the appearance of almost complete nudity. *Poses plastiques* were, for a time, a remarkably popular 'sensation' in Australia, as elsewhere, and this article argues two main points: firstly, that the appeal of *poses plastiques* during the Victorian era characterised a broader social 'blurring' of the boundaries between titillating visual theatre and pornographic displays and secondly, that this genre of visual theatre later developed to eroticise and personify a burgeoning sense of early twentieth-century Australian nationalism.

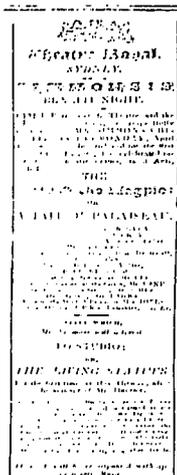
In 1858, a contemporary Londoner recorded his reaction to a performance featuring *poses plastiques*, claiming: '[W]omen, rouged and dressed as much as possible like the nude figures, degrade our conceptions of Venus, and Sappho, and the Syrens, and others of our classic acquaintances, by the exhibition of them in questionable groupings tolerated as *poses plastiques*.'¹ One year later, another contemporary quipped that he had eye-witnessed 'some clumsy caricatures of good pictures and good statues, enacted on a turn-table by brazen men and women, called *Poses Plastiques*'.² Each account illustrates a somewhat ambiguous social aversion to the form within the Victorian period. While the technique typically attracted censure, it did so perhaps despite, or indeed because of, the brazenness of such displays as spectacles of the erotic. Yet such reportage does make a strong case for the argument that the performers of *poses plastiques* challenged many of the restrictive social sensibilities typifying the Victorian era as much as practitioners of this style tested the very limits of Victorian visual theatre during the period. The explosion in commercially produced ephemera focusing on nudity, including theatrical displays such as *tableaux vivants* and *poses plastiques*, 'caused a considerable public controversy in England' claims Margaret Mayhew, 'and led to the passing of the *Obscene Publications Act 1857*. Provision was given for allowing models to appear naked, as long as they remained completely still.'³

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Stuart Thayer suggests that a circus performer named Andrew Ducrow first coined the term '*poses plastiques*' in 1818 to describe his unique style of performance. He was a master of striking poses as classical deities, namely a Trojan-inspired Gladiator, and 'sky' personifications such as Mercury, the Roman messenger of the gods, and Zephyr, the Greek god of the southern winds. Ducrow's performances arguably set the defining precepts of *poses plastiques* as a performance style. Clearly, Classicism determined the primary aesthetic and mimetic objectives of *poses plastiques*, which were to create the appearance of the transformation of human issue into marble, or, he '[reincarnation] in flesh and blood'⁴ of classical deities deploying the theatrical techniques of statuary. Ducrow struck his poses while astride a moving horse and his sister sometimes joined him as Cupid, Roman god of love.⁵ He likely drew in part from the stage style of the great forerunner to French dramatic Realism and Romanticism François-Joseph Talma (1763–1826), who Phyllis Hartnoll claims was 'the first French actor to play Roman parts in a toga, instead of in contemporary dress or the ubiquitous kilt'.⁶

By the mid-nineteenth century, the form still featured in tent shows and circus variety, but grew to become increasingly popular as soloist exhibitions in theatres and dance halls. In Australia, *poses plastiques* – sometimes called 'living statues' or 'motions' – inaugurated a novel movement in visual culture when, in 1836, Joseph Simmons,⁷ the then lessee of Sydney's Theatre Royal, introduced Australian audiences to the form for the first time.⁸

Mr. S., who was clothed from head to foot in a tight dress intended to represent marble, threw himself into the attitudes of several celebrated statues; and from the admirable manner in which Mr. S. maintained his positions, combined with the darkness of the stage, he had a great resemblance to a stone figure.⁹



Sydney Gazette, 9 April 1836. Note that publicity promoting Lo Studio; or, The Living Statues claimed Simmons' debut presentation of 1836 was 'after the manner of Mr. Ducrow'.

Later, after the beginning of the Australian gold rush in 1851, performers appeared in tent shows before 'diggers', as well as on stages in goldfield settlements, and in purpose-built metropolitan theatres in Melbourne and elsewhere.¹⁰ While the style typically showcased the statuary of a solo star, *poses plastiques* did materialise in formal theatre productions: sometimes as interludes, and

occasionally within the narrative of the featured play.

In the early period of semi-professional theatre in the Riverina district of New South Wales, 'Gentleman Amateurs' presented the musical *Hercules, King of Clubs* as the main evening entertainment on 3 June 1859 at J. B. Caldwell's Squatters' Hotel, a public house in the township of Wagga Wagga. The piece included *poses plastiques* in the form of 'Grecian Statues'.¹¹ In the following year, a performance of *poses plastiques* marked the season opening of the Royal Garrick Theatre at the Victorian goldfield township of Lamplough in January 1860.¹² Later, a version of William Mower Akhurst's burlesque extravaganza called *King Arthur! Or Lancelot the Loose, Gin-Ever the Square, and The Knights of the Round Table, and other Furniture* (1868), for instance, featured *poses plastiques* of Arthurian knights of the round table at the end of Scene III.¹³ Later still, a performance of *Cinderella* at Sydney's Theatre Royal included a 'statue ballet' in which 'a large group of female figures, dressed entirely in white, [struck] a number of effective poses under various lights'.¹⁴

Other evidence of the cultural impact of *poses plastiques* also exists. Publications such as the Melbourne *Punch*, for instance, occasionally printed illustrations of political characters somewhat immobilised as statues of *poses plastiques*, perhaps in reference to their shifting political fortunes and variable popularity among the colonial public.



Melbourne Punch Vol. II (1856): 45. This illustration features 'Mr. Fawkner', presumably the tectotalter-cum-publican and sometime expeditioner and newspaper man, John Pascoe Fawkner (1792–1869), adopting the appearance of Ajax, the Greek hero in the Trojan War, before Punch and his dog Toby, dressed in Grecian garb. Fawkner was similarly caricatured several times in Punch in 1855–56.

Illustrations such as that of 'Ajax Defying the Lightning' in the Melbourne *Punch* evidence the heavy emphasis on classical culture that characterised the theatrical form. Mr Fawkner, who appears there, personifies the *Miles*, a stock soldier character of Roman comic theatre.

Poses plastiques presented often very daring and titillating displays of the human body, typically in classical poses inspired by ancient Greek and Roman prototypes. 'Within music-hall culture', writes Andrew Stephenson, 'popular masquerades termed "living pictures" or *poses plastiques* used white or blue powder and the imitation of poses from classical sculpture to aid the impression of the transposition of flesh into marble'.¹⁵ Cosmetic effect remained a key aesthetic of *poses plastiques* throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As a genre of visual theatre, however, Ismene Lada-Richards traces its roots to 'the European legacy of Graeco-Roman pantomime dancing through the prism of statuary'.¹⁶ Lada-Richards' investigation considers examples of statuary in the early modern period as 'ways of coupling theatrical mimesis with the plastic arts'.¹⁷

In her book *Visual Ephemera*, Anita Callaway 'attempts to reinvent the history of Australian visual culture as a richer, more positive and more cogent story than the one we are used to. It is not strictly an art history', writes Callaway. 'It is as much a history of performance and spectacle as of orthodox painting'.¹⁸ And for Callaway, statuary in the form of *poses plastiques* occupies an ephemeral status in Victorian visual theatre precisely because it challenged perceptions of 'high' art.¹⁹ Elements of the form necessarily relied on 'high' art. In fact, performances required audiences to interpret meaning visually, typically by associating the performer's displays of Roman and Grecian deities with their own knowledge of the literature and aesthetic of classical mythology. In this sense, *poses plastiques* were fundamentally intertextual as visual praxis, directing attention to the fact that the visual possibilities for interpreting the meaning of *poses plastiques*, as 'texts', existed only in their relations to other 'texts' – not only classical Roman and Greek imagery and literature but also outdoor settings, since one key context for the presentation of this style was the Victorian pleasure garden. This means that while *poses plastiques* were not a 'text-based' form of theatre in the strictest sense, they nonetheless relied on various visual and written texts, as well as indoor and outdoor contexts, to organise processes of meaning-making.

Showcasing physically impressive bodies remained essential to the spectacle that most Victorians probably expected when attending performances of *poses plastiques*. Actor and critic George Augustus Sala (1828–95) once wrote about a *poses plastiques* performance of 'Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden' featuring a 'real serpent'.²⁰ At one point in the

presentation, two of Her Majesty's Guard arrested the actor playing the role of Adam, for desertion, at which point Sala mused:

... and so [he] was summarily marched off with a great-coat over his fleshings, and a neat pair of handcuffs on his wrists – the which sent me home moralizing on the charming efficiency of the Lord Chamberlain and his licencers, who can strike a harmless joke out of a pantomime, and cannot touch such fellows as these, going vagabondizing about with nothing to cover them.²¹

Toward the turn of the century, exponents such as Clarence Alfred Weber (1882–1930), a sporting enthusiast and 'Professor', established a college in Flinders Street, Melbourne, offering instruction in wrestling, body-building, 'correct breathing and *poses plastiques*'²² to both men and women. Meanwhile, the Estonian-born wrestler and showman George 'Hack' Hackenschmidt (1878–1968) toured Sydney and Melbourne as a strongman in 1904. His publicity promised 'The Greatest and Most Magnificent Exhibition of Physical Development Ever Witnessed in the Southern Hemisphere',²³ and audiences admired the muscular frame and impressive symmetry of his physique through a series of 'Famous and Renowned POSES PLASTIQUES.' A Melbourne *Herald* critic claimed with much enthusiasm that Hackenschmidt's body was 'a human model any sculptor might be proud of'.²⁴

The bodies of women, however, perhaps represented the foremost 'text' upon which Victorians inscribed meaning. In fact, women emerged as popular presenters of *poses plastiques*, particularly in the early twentieth century. The pseudo-nude quality of their costumes probably added to their appeal, but theatre critics often emphasised the wholesome and chaste character of these performances in their reviews. Aesthetically, performance of *poses plastiques* by female technicians, such as 'the Modern Milo' and Mademoiselle Lotty, of course emphasised the beauty and proportions of the female form. Posing in stances replicating ideals of Grecian and Roman symmetry, they took as archetypes female deities such as (Venus de) Milo, Roman goddess of love; Hebe, Greek goddess of youth; and Diana, virginal huntress and the Roman goddess of the moon and chase.

Monika Elbert engages in part with the idea that *tableaux vivants*, and by extension *poses plastiques* of the nineteenth century, largely exploited women, specifically as sexual objects for the gratuitous voyeurism of men.²⁵ According to Elbert, 'Women were sexualized in theatrical tableaux vivants by about 1847, when "model artists," or women "clad only in close-fitting tights or leotards," were instructed to stand "motionless in imitation of classical statuary"'.²⁶ Yet some theatre women of popular reputation, such as the American actress Mary Anderson (1859–1940), succeeded in

incorporating *poses plastiques* into mainstream theatrical performances to great acclaim.



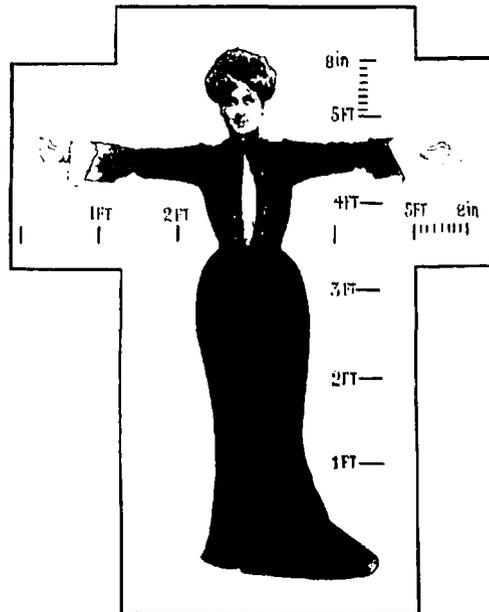
'Melbourne girl' Pansy Montague striking a pose as Hebe, the goddess of youth. Peter Downes, *Shadows of the Stage, Theatre in New Zealand: The First 70 Years* (John McIndoe, Dunedin, 1975) 156, probably from Dunedin's *Evening Star*, 1905, but also published in *Sandow's Magazine*, 3 May 1906.

According to the London Daily Telegraph review of her performance in W. S. Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1871) at the Lyceum Theatre in 1883:

In marble she was a statue motionless; in life she was a statue half warmed. There are those who believe, or who try to persuade themselves, that this is all Galatea has to do – to appear behind a curtain as a '*pose plastique*', to make an excellent '*tableau vivant*,' and to wear Greek drapery, as if she had stepped down from a niche in the Acropolis. All this Miss Mary Anderson does to perfection. She is a living, breathing statue.²⁷

In Australia, women such as Pansy Montague were popular as performers of visual theatre, and their imagery evidences a dual respect of their art, and an appreciation of 'the female form divine'.²⁸

The photograph of Pansy Montague by T. Humphrey and Co. (c. 1898–1905) includes measurements of her physical proportions. State Library of Victoria, Accession Number: H2006.10/5, Call Number: PIC LTA 1451, Image Number: pi004022.



Theatre historian Peter Downes offers a wonderful snapshot of the success of Pansy Montague, aka 'the Modern Milo', among Edwardian audiences and

critics in New Zealand in 1905. According to the reporter for Dunedin's *Evening Star* attending Montague's debut:

The curtain rose slowly, and one saw, set in the midst of a garden scene ... a white marble pedestal ... bathed in pale light and on this pedestal, this Milo, a white figure whose faultless pose and exquisite form dominated the imagination and led it captive away to the fabled time when this same Hebe, Goddess of Youth, now so splendidly reincarnated in flesh and blood, served nectar to the Gods on high Olympus. A pause, and in a softer, dimmer, light there stood revealed the sad Psyche, emblem forever of the human soul, purged and purified by suffering. Sappho followed and gave place to the very latest in statuary, 'The Brown Venus', beautifully contrived. Next, the chaste Diana, protectress of the young; and finally the 'Venus de Milo', that noblest of all representations of love and beauty. In this pose the incomparable beauty of limb and form of the Modern Milo stopped; self-revealed.²⁹

Costumes heavily abbreviated in design and creation characterised the style worn by female performers of *poses plastiques*, such as Montague. These contrasted significantly to those worn by other actresses starring in burlesque, opera and vaudeville. Costumes such as those worn by 'the Modern Milo' created a provocatively novel aesthetic in direct contrast to that created by the heavy fabrics and corseted designs characteristic of theatre styles for women.

Rather, it is likely that Victorians readily accepted their presentation within such a context as entirely fitting, if not perfectly respectable. Victorian pleasure gardens retained significance as prime locations of social activity, usually accommodating diverse pastimes and inspiring cosmopolitan settings. Sophisticates wandered in an environment where 'naturalism in landscape design signified power, wealth and social position, like the latest style in *équipage* or dresses brought back from a European tour'.³⁰

Cultivating lush gardens for pleasure and then furnishing them with, among other things, apparently nude 'living statues' evidences the multiple dimensions and contexts of Victorian visual theatre. *Poses plastiques* represented a performance form equally suited to both interior and exterior settings, particularly as the form's *mise-en-scène* concentrated on outdoor realism – symbolised as nature – but also remained suggestive of culture, an effect commonly achieved with the inclusion of manufactured props. Many of the surviving illustrations, photographs and albumen *carte-de-visite* keepsakes of the era, for example, depict the statuary artist posing with some element of nature – typically flowers – together with some evidence of manufactured ornamentation: typically vases and large marble pillars.



Pansy Montague, 'the Modern Milo', in one of her poses in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. It is almost certain that she powdered her body with white and blue, and the only clothing she wore was the 'draperies of nature ... looped up above the knee' (Henry J. Cole,

Tracks of a Rolling Stone (London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1905) 158. The State Library of Victoria, Accession Number: H39181/49, Call Number:

PCV PCA 89, Image Number: a10949. This was one of a series of postcards published during the period.

Ample evidence in the form of reportage and related ephemera reveals that *poses plastiques* matured alongside a number of influential 'novelistic modes', to cite M. H. Abrams.³¹ Performances of the form emphasised a blatant frankness of human sexuality,

while at the same time aiming to represent life through the human body – though predominantly highly stylised and 'posed' – and to deploy the body as symbol. These concern quintessential elements characterising a variety of literary movements such as Symbolism, Realism and Naturalism. This then suggests that *poses plastiques* spanned many social periods and evolved stylistically alongside a variety of literary movements. In fact, Victorian and Edwardian novelists such as Charles Dickens, Emile Zola and Edith Wharton each included references to *poses plastiques* in their literary works.³² Human flesh as beauty of form and symmetry drew on folkloric traditions representing nudes as iconic of 'nature' personified. Further, the costuming of performers of *poses plastiques* took as inspiration the finely realised drapery that appeared central to defining form and volume in Hellenistic statuary. These were sculptures 'carved to produce a masterly pattern of flowing grace and yet achieve the reality of a covering for solid flesh, as it appears to cling like wet material to a living form'.³³



THE FUROR OF THE
BELGIAN CAPITAL

Here stands Mademoiselle Lotty, 'the Furor of the Belgian Capital', clad only in her tight-fitting bodysuit, stylish shoes, and dainty garters placed provocatively just below each knee.

Notice the combination of nature, realism and symbolism as stylistic elements of both performance and image, as well as the marble plinth as symbolic of culture.

National Archives of Australia, Accession Number: A1723:107.

Strong associations to classical themes and visual culture did not, however, guarantee the credibility and legitimacy of *poses plastiques* as a theatrical form. In fact, *poses plastiques* generally struggled to establish a reputation as 'legitimate' entertainment for various reasons. On the one hand, critics and writers often referred to the form as '*tableaux vivants*', which seems curious considering the two styles were quite different. On the other, the perception of *poses plastiques* as a cruder form of *tableaux vivants* created the impression that the *poses plastiques* was more likely to feature sexual display. 'The origins of the tableau vivant can be traced back at least to the pantomimus of ancient Rome', claim Baker and Trussler, 'but the form achieved its peak of modern popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when poses plastiques sometimes struck an ambiguous balance between art and pornography'.³⁴

Poses plastiques as a tame form of pornography is not the impression that materialises in an account of a performance witnessed by Henry J. Cole, while spending 'a week at Compiègne with their Majesties the Emperor and Empress of the French' in 1862:

One of the evening performances was an exhibition of POSES-PLASTIQUES, the subjects being chosen from celebrated pictures in the Louvre. Theatrical costumiers, under the command of a noted painter, were brought from Paris. The ladies of the court were carefully rehearsed, and the whole thing was very perfectly and very beautifully done.³⁵

But Judith R. Walkowitz writes that, by 1893, London's Palace Theatre 'revived *tableaux vivants*, also known as *poses plastiques* or Living Pictures, as a form of erotic entertainment':

Presented in a colossal gold frame and accompanied by music, female performers attired in flesh-tinted tights, their breasts often encrusted in plaster of Paris, would strike an 'artistic' pose and stand silent and immobile for the delectation of the patrons of the music halls ... A feature of tawdry shows since the 1840s, Living Pictures were notable for their suggestiveness, their passivity of female display, and their ambiguous reference to the nude in art.³⁶

The interchangeability with which Walkowitz, and others,³⁷ use terms such as '*tableaux vivants*' and '*poses plastiques*' seems misleading. In Australia at least, *tableaux vivants* and *poses plastiques* were not often associated as one and the same form. *Tableaux vivants* as typically presented in colonial Australia represented a style of pictorial illustration used to complement the narrative of a song. *Tableaux vivants* in many ways substituted image in the form of paintings and illustrations for action, and balladists regularly deployed the form to great effect by performing often aesthetically theatrical specialist pieces or interludes. A reporter described the *tableau vivant*

performance of one actress, for instance, as 'a grand allegorical picture' blending 'three historical epochs ... and representing the triumph of Plenty and Peace'.³⁸

In fact, evidence supports the claim that, in nineteenth-century Australia, *tableaux vivants* and *poses plastiques* were two distinct genres though they demanded one key characteristic. 'The success of these beautiful groupings ["Tableaux Vivants"]', claimed a reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1894, 'depends upon the proper subordination of the personal element to the pictorial'.³⁹ Skilled *tableau vivant* presentations strove to 'reproduce only the composition and spirit of the original works or art'.⁴⁰ Skilled technicians of *poses plastiques* similarly needed to achieve the 'elimination of the personal element', like the actress performing an impersonation of Hebe at Sydney's Lyceum Theatre, who 'made no personal suggestion of this kind, being, indeed, hardly distinguishable from an antique marble'.⁴¹ Promotion of the women performing in these presentations claimed them 'young ladies ... models who have sat to [sic] the most famous artists in London, and include the Original Model of MacKenna's celebrated statue of Circe, which has created such a profound sensation both in the Paris Salon and the Royal Academy of London'.⁴²

And for one observer, Sarah Annie Frost, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, *tableaux vivants* also commandeered many visual elements, including statuary, within one particular genre of performance:

There is scarcely any way of passing a social evening more delightful and popular than that offered by the performers of *Tableaux Vivantes* [sic] to the audience ... The first thing to be remembered is the fact that the representations are *living statues*, and, therefore, must resemble, as closely as possible, painted pictures. To ensure this appearance, regard [sic] must be paid to artistic effect in grouping, attitude, light and color.⁴³

Frost's theorisation underscores an important distinction between *tableaux vivants* and *poses plastiques*. According to the commentator, the 'living statues' characteristic of *tableaux vivants* represented figures in works of visual art. Performers of *poses plastiques*, on the other hand, while occasionally featuring figures from the art world, seemed more concerned with figures of mythology that exemplify many literary and artistic texts of the Western imagination. This supports the suggestion that Classicism defined the primary aesthetic and mimetic objectives of *poses plastiques*. In fact, the influence of the legitimacy of classical texts perhaps retained for performers of *poses plastiques* some measure of artistic propriety. 'Despite the sensational exploitation of the genre in the music halls', writes Walkowitz, 'female posing would also continue to be a respectable form of amateur entertainment, highlighting dramatic effect, emotional tension, and incipient action'.⁴⁴

Yet throughout the nineteenth century, *poses plastiques* continued to polarise public opinion, at least in Europe. One Londoner of the period claimed: 'Other well-known entertainments of the time were shows known as the *Poses Plastiques* and ... I believe, located in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square; but these were of somewhat evil repute, and I never attempted to see them.'⁴⁵ By the 1880s, *poses plastiques* still featured as popular drawcards for travelling circus troupes such as Astley's. Another writer of the period, Thomas Frost, bears witness to the fact that many of the more noted female technicians of *poses plastiques* influenced trends in nineteenth-century fashion and coiffure:

Enormous posters everywhere met the eye, representing the lady [Adah Isaacs Menken], apparently in a nude state, stretched on the back of a wild horse, and inviting the public to go to Astley's, and see 'the beautiful Menken.' Young men thronged the theatre to witness this combination of *poses plastiques* with dramatic spectacle, and 'girls of the period' dressed their hair *à la Menken*, that is, like the frizzled crop of a negress; but the theatrical critics looked coldly and sadly upon the performance, and accused the management of ministering to a vitiated taste.⁴⁶

Menken's style of *poses plastiques* borrowed from Andrew Ducrow who, Frost writes, 'was the originator of the *poses plastiques*, the performance in which he first attracted attention, and which was at that time a novel feature of circus entertainments, being a series of studies of classical statuary on the back of a horse'.⁴⁷

It is true that noted female technicians in Australia combined the erotic possibilities of the form with a growing social awareness of national identity. That development was perhaps not surprising given art historian William Cohen's argument that statuary in provincial Europe throughout the nineteenth century maintained a political purpose wherein 'erecting statues was a pedagogic device used by the dominant political ideologies to win over the inhabitants, helping to create an imagined community'.⁴⁸ Performances by La Venre Australienne, the Australian Venus, in 1912, emphasised her home-grown origins as not only 'The Sydney Beauty'⁴⁹ but 'An Australian Beauty, exquisitely proportioned ... portraying Ancient and Modern Statuary, Featuring Australian Sculpture, Art'.⁵⁰ This was perhaps the first time in the history of such performances in Australia that displays concentrated on expressly Australian artefacts of visual culture. In fact, promotion of La Venre Australienne's performances consistently emphasised national origin, claiming that hers highlighted 'The most fascinating Act produced in Australia by Australians'.⁵¹

Poses plastiques therefore aimed to tease the viewer as much as to contribute to inventing and personifying an idea of nationalism alongside mobilising 'an imagined community'.⁵² The popularity of *poses plastiques* in

Australia in the two decades flanking Federation sheds new light on notions of nationhood in the wake of the country's fledgling political identity as a Commonwealth. This 'new form of collective identity' appealed, as Neville Meaney notes, perhaps because many Australians were 'disturbed by the insecurities of an urban-centred and modernising democracy' and perceived that they had 'but a fragile hold on a vast land set in an Asian sea'.⁵³ Similarly, Australians absorbed a Western 'attitude of certainty, security, and optimism' and a teleological 'belief in future progress'.⁵⁴ As Gabrielle Wolf claims, 'change involved the community's advancement toward prosperous nationhood'.⁵⁵ It is interesting, too, that attempts to publicly articulate this burgeoning sense of nationalism – itself a highly abstract concept – found inspiration in a mode of Victorian visual theatre characterised as a form 'without words'.

Evidence indicates that silence was the norm rather than the exception, and reviews of the period confirm that the spectacle of *poses plastiques* appealed largely to the visual – what audiences saw and witnessed rather than what they heard or perceived through sound. *Poses plastiques*, as a mimetic form of performance, thus emerges as an important expression of nineteenth-century visual theatre. *Poses plastiques*, whose performers manifest simultaneously as 'a statue both lifeless and animated',⁵⁶ conceptualise this form of visual theatre. Only through deliberately complementing motion with motionlessness could the performer of *poses plastiques* shape-shift from one pose into another, thus representing 'the shape of an idea in motion'⁵⁷ through motion and non-motion. Principles of motion and motionlessness remained as vital to the performance of *poses plastiques*. Both principles remained as constant features of *poses plastiques* performances, even as modern-day practitioners of the artform translate it today. It is not possible for performers of *poses plastiques* to adopt a dramatic role without motionlessness. Kenneth Gross presents an account of 'statuary' by theorising the 'animated statue' in Western art and literature, before attempting to trace 'the often ambiguous sources of such fantasies'.⁵⁸ What Gross's survey reveals is that 'the famous Greek myth, one [that] ... exemplifies the belief in the power of art to *give life* rather than to represent it',⁵⁹ did inspire not only many great artists and writers throughout Western history, but also a great many theatre performers and amateur entertainers.

Atay Citron's theorising of visual theatre as 'an exclusive, imagistic language of performance'⁶⁰ is helpful in relation to contextualising *poses plastiques* as a significant movement in Victorian visual theatre. 'Visual theatre', argues Citron, 'aspires to replace the domination of Word, of literariness', and the preoccupation of practitioners of *poses plastiques* with the hallmark concerns of visual theatre – image, light and *mise-en-scène* – materialised in Citron's argument that 'This language of *stage tableaux*, movement, light, color and sound is the language of the *mise-en-scène* [my emphasis]'.⁶¹ While the 'language' of *poses plastiques*, as visual theatre,

might occasionally have assimilated vocal matter, the form primarily exploited a visual language which, to borrow from Citron, maintained an 'imagistic function'.⁶² As a stage *tableau* with its own 'exclusive, imagistic language of performance', the *poses plastiques* style offers itself as a predecessor of the so-called 'physical' theatre of today which embraces mime, acrobatics and other circus skills, mask, *commedia* and visual theatre.⁶³ Here, the idea of silence as a stylistic trope is significant as a primary performative end. Performances of *poses plastiques* 'need silence, and their silences are an outspoken part of their language'.⁶⁴

This article has aimed to engage the performance and performers of *poses plastiques* in a discourse debating the contemporary definition and limits of visual theatre. Attention has been given to broadening the limits of visual theatre to accommodate practices of Victorian visual theatre forms emerging in the nineteenth century. Theorising the aesthetics and style of *poses plastiques* accommodates a somewhat loose definition of the form as the 'act of bringing inanimate objects to life',⁶⁵ while simultaneously 'the shape of an idea in motion', as suggested by Martin Steven,⁶⁶ typifies the principles and objectives of *poses plastiques*. Artists of the form appeared committed to 'the shape of an idea in motion' within the parameters of limiting movement to appear motionless. Performances coupled a concentration on the body as the primary performance object with a simultaneous demand for both silence and periodic immobility.

The fact that *poses plastiques* emerged as a form around 1818, and that this form retained its popularity throughout the later part of the Georgian age (1714–1830), suggests a reasonably accommodating form compliant to social change. That the technique then remained a reasonably consistent feature of both early (1837–60) and late Victorian visual theatre (1860–1901), including moving into the Edwardian period (beginning c. 1901) and then progressing well into the present day, indicates an enduring if not influential form, the appeal of which resonated within diverse eras straddling consecutive decades. Performers such as Pansy Montague, Mademoiselle Lotty, Andrew Ducrow, Adah Isaacs Menken, La Venre Australienne and many others of the period succeeded in blurring the boundaries of an overarching concept of visual theatre by drawing on other visual media – art, sculpture, the human form, the pleasure garden – in ways that can only enrich our understanding of the movements and trends in Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian visual theatre and culture.

NOTES

- 1 J. Ewing Ritchie, *The Night Side of London* (London: William Tweedie, 1858) 117–18.

- 2 George Augustus Sala, *Gaslight and Daylight with Some London Scenes They Shine Upon* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1859) 177.
- 3 Margaret Mayhew, 'Just Act Natural; Models, Mannequins and Muses' Part II, *Philament* 8: (July 2006): 110. Online: <http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue9_pdfs/MAYHEW_JustActNatural2.pdf>. Accessed 20 August 2007.
- 4 Peter Downes, *Shadows of the Stage, Theatre in New Zealand: The First 70 Years* (John McIndoe, Dunedin, 1975) 156.
- 5 Stuart Thayer, *American Circus Anthology, Essays of the Early Years*, arranged and edited by William L. Slout, 2005. Online: <http://www.circushistory.org/Thayer/Thayer2e.htm>. Accessed 11 October 2006.
- 6 Phyllis Hartnoll, *A Concise History of Theatre* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974) 170.
- 7 For more on Joseph Simmons, see Helen Musa's entry in *Companion to Australian Theatre*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995) 531.
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