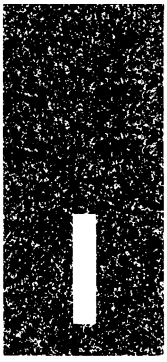

Sport and Drama: the Uneasy Playmates

Sport *versus* drama: twentieth-century perspectives

The late twentieth-century reader, faced with phrases such as 'sport and the arts' or 'sport and drama', is likely to interpret them according to a dominant system of codes and oppositions very different from that which obtained in Western society until the First World War. The superior importance of sport in the structure of modern culture has led to a system of preferred values that venerates sport as an activity which is spontaneous, expresses ideas and ideals through action, conceals effort and pain, is structured but unpredictable, and which has unplanned resolutions but with results that can be objectively, empirically measured. In contrast, theatre is supposed to be artificial, verbal rather than active, given to exaggerating effort and suffering, predictable, and with contrived, pre-planned conclusions, and judged by non-empirical (and therefore rather dubious) standards of 'taste' and 'technique'.

Sporting writers and commentators offer endless examples of this dominant ideology. 'There's a bit of acting going on out there' is a favourite phrase for non-essential sporting behaviour designed to waste time, psychologically disadvantage the opponent or otherwise draw attention to behaviour other than that appropriate to 'pure' sporting achievement. The 'mere theatrics' of a 'prima donna' have wide currency in non-sporting discussions, but are particularly savagely attacked on the playing field. 'He's a bloody actor' growled the former Australian cricketer Jeff Thomson of a younger, flamboyant player with a punk hairdo called Greg Matthews, who hopefully would 'grow up' and settle down to playing the game.[1] 'Ice dancing not Olympic' declared a headline in an Australian newspaper after Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean had become the sensation of the 1984 Winter Olympics, with the commentator going on to declare:

> There is no doubt that Torvill and Dean turned on a brilliant piece of theatre . . . But was it an Olympic sport? If it was, the next step has to be Olympic ballroom

dancing, then ballet, and on to opera . . . 'Gold for Australia! Gold! Gold! Gold!' Norman May could screech as Joan Sutherland hit high C in the main stadium. . . . dancing on ice is good to watch, but sport it is not. Theatre it is.[2]

Nevertheless, sports analysts are also inclined to see exciting or memorable incidents in a sporting event as like theatre (in the most obvious cliche, 'high drama'), provided there is no question of these moments being artificially manufactured or 'stage-managed'. (In the late 1970s this was one of the criticisms levelled at the 'contrived' exciting endings in one-day cricket.) 'I wanna know who wrote the script for this', the American commentator on Channel 10 kept demanding as the yacht *Australia II* came from behind on the second last leg to take the America's cup from the United States for the first time in 132 years. Journalist, Adrian McGregor, in a long re-creation of the John Landy/Roger Bannister confrontation in the 'Mile of the Century' at the 1954 British Empire Games in Vancouver, wrote that the race was 'Beautiful for its drama. And in truth Vancouver became a moving tableau in which Landy had been cast in a role of Shakespearean complexity, tragic for the athlete, though not for the man.'[3] 'You might say it was great theatre, the height of drama' declared another commentator, more mundanely, after a cricket test match in which a West Indian fast bowler had aimed short-pitched deliveries at the body of an Australian batsman who, already injured, had hobbled out to try to avert a seemingly inevitable defeat.[4] In more sober vein the distressing sight of Gabriela Andersen-Schiess, a Swiss competitor in the first Olympic women's marathon who limped in agony to the finish line while officials stood uncertainly nearby, unwilling to intervene, moved one reporter to write:

'What remains in the mind . . . is an unfading imprint of the distillation of courage, and the thought that the Greek tragedians of the first Olympic period regarded as the essence of their task and the heart of tragedy: the creation in the spectator of catharsis—a purging of the heart and mind by pity and terror.'[5]

This apparently strange mixture of dependence and contempt is reversed in the value systems of supporters of the performing arts. They tend to see sport as an obsession which diverts society away from more intellectual, 'cultured', and 'enduring' activities. In Australia this counter-construct stretches back to the colonial period. In 1892 an amateur versifier, H. C. J. Lingham, offered a clear expression of what was already a common literary-intellectual attitude (the Frank Slavin referred to was a prominent heavyweight boxer):

Australian Natives are too much inclined
To honour muscle at the expense of mind.
They hold a Slavin is a greater hero,
Who with the shoulders, neck, and head of Nero,
Pounds his opponents to a senseless jelly,
Than Tadema, Leighton, Keats, or Shelley.[6]

G. A. Wilkes in *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn* has chronicled the attitudes to sport of a large number of Australian authors, ranging from the enthusiasm of the early male jockey-poets Adam Lindsay Gordon and 'Banjo' Paterson to the trenchant criticism of many colonial women writers and of most twentieth-century authors of both sexes.[7]

Current discourse assumes an irreconcilable opposition between the two leisure activities. 'Thomas Keneally on Sport versus the Arts' headlined the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s 'Good Weekend' magazine on 5 March 1988, while an earlier, more controversial, example occurred in November 1986 when Donald Horne, the Director of the government arts-funding body, the Australia Council, used the occasion of the then approaching defence of the America's Cup to question the emphasis Australians placed on sport. According to a hostile newspaper report from Perth, Horne had suggested that 'Art was eternal whereas sporting achievements are ephemeral'. The commentator then went on to chronicle the strong rebuttal offered by the Western Australian Governor at a popular celebration held for the unveiling of the cup.[8] Following Horne's lead, the Australia Council's General Manager, Max Bourke, declared (implausibly) in 1989 that while thirty years ago cricketers and tennis players were the role models for young Australians, they had been replaced by creative artists; later he used the name of the former Australian Rules footballer Ron Barassi as an example of sporting philistinism, unaware that Barassi had in fact recently appeared in television advertising for the Victoria State Opera.[9]

Nevertheless just as sporting commentators have freely used the concepts and terminology of theatre for expressive effect, writers on the performing arts have been keen to argue the similarities between sport and the kinds of dramatic entertainments they support. John Cargher, for example, began his book on *Opera and Ballet in Australia* (1977) by pointing out the aesthetic similarities between ballet and football;[10] Roger Covell in *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (1967) described the soprano Joan Sutherland as 'in the first place . . . a vocal athlete':

> . . . the tenor's high C or the soprano's stratospheric trill can induce an emotion in a large audience not essentially different from that provided by a perfectly executed football goal or a brilliant clinching shot in tennis . . .[11]

Given this background of extensive cultural interpenetration and awareness between these two leisure industries it is not surprising that two of the twentieth century's most significant dramatic theorists, Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, both offered essays on the relationship between sport and theatre. Interestingly, both used sport as a model which theatre should look to if it was to revitalise itself as an art form, and both dramatic theories hint at their authors' awareness of the success and social importance of sport, and at their unease at the inability of theatre to compete emotionally and (in Brecht's

iconoclastic view) intellectually. In 1926 Brecht wrote 'Emphasis on sport', in which he suggested that sportsgoers were 'the fairest and shrewdest audience in the world', while the professional theatre of his day had lost contact with the public.[12] Brecht's translator, John Willett, has pointed out that in other fragmentary writings at this time Brecht was already exploring the idea of an audience which was detached from the performance and maintained a critical attitude to it. Based on his research for a projected biography of the German middleweight champion (and screen actor) Samson-Köhrner, Brecht's experience of boxing stadiums where spectators sat back and smoked during the events led ultimately to his famous *verfremdungseffekt* or 'alienation' effect, where the techniques of stage presentation were to be manipulated to induce a more analytical and objective attitude in theatre audiences.[13]

Artaud's essay 'An Affective Athleticism', written during the 1930s, argued that actors ought to become 'athletes of the heart', finding in their emotional response to the world a quality which would touch an audience as profoundly as does the athlete's physical response:

> An actor is like a physical athlete . . . The actor relies on the same pressure points an athlete relies on to run, in order to hurl a convulsive curse whose course is driven inwards. Similar anatomical bases can be found in all the feints in boxing, all-in-wrestling, the hundred metres, the high jump and the movement of the emotions, since they all have the same physical support points.[14]

Again parallel analyses may be found in the world of sports criticism. In his classic study of cricket in the West Indies, *Beyond a Boundary* (1969), C. L. R. James went to the art historian, Bernhard Berenson, for the concept of 'significant movement'. Like Brecht, James suggested that through the action of the game spectators learn the technique of watching critically and, like Artaud, he saw a link between physical and emotional 'pressure points', with each stroke or ball bowled being 'received in the tactile consciousness of thousands who have themselves for years practised the same motion and know each muscle that is involved in each stroke'.[15]

A detailed analysis of this kind of cross-referencing can be found in Benjamin Lowe's book *The Beauty of Sport: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* (1977), where he surveys attitudes to sport as art and examines the links between sport and various art forms, including drama, although he remains equivocal about the extent to which their similarities should be emphasised over their differences.[16] But from the point of view of the present work the essential difficulty with all these observations and approaches is that they fail to historicise their findings, and so fail to realise that their oxymoronic rhetoric—the 'surprising' juxtaposition of seeming opposites—is itself a product of minority discursive strategies based on the mind/body split of Western intellectual culture. The alternative *mens sana in corpore sano* ('a sound mind in a sound body') of ancient Greek and Roman society, while

it is occasionally alluded to in general terms, is considered irrelevant. It is part of the intent of the chapters which follow to suggest that such discourse needs to be historicised, particularly in relation to the study of popular culture where, liberated from the need to defer to 'high' culture with its appropriation of formal intellectuality (and therefore its classification of sport as 'other'), storytellers and story receivers seem to be far less concerned with such assumptions. The historical record suggests not that sport and theatre were different entities with surprising similarities and interpenetrations, but a single concept of leisure behaviour which gradually bifurcated into separate but nevertheless linked and associated forms.

Sport *and* drama: the historical background to 1788

Only in the last twenty years has it been widely recognised that sport and theatre, the two forms of organised leisure activity which share the use of the words 'play' and 'players', have done so since at least Roman times and in the English language since the early Middle Ages. Theatre was then seen as a kind of imitative game. V. A. Kolve, in his influential work on medieval religious drama *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, pointed out in 1966 that as the medieval world struggled to define and locate the emerging proto-dramatic forms of imitative behaviour, the words most frequently used to describe this activity were the Latin *ludus* and the English 'play' and 'game'.[17] By the late-fifteenth century short plays were called 'interludes', indicating both a dramatic 'ludus' between courses of the feast in a great hall, and a 'game' between 'players'. In these plays the vices—those entertaining villains who gave life and colour to the narrative—had two favourite words for their antics: 'sport' and 'game':

Mercy: Hie you forth on foot, brother! in God's name!
Mischief: I say, sir! I am come hither to make you game. . . .
Nought: Shall I break my neck to show you sport?

(*Mankind*, ll.68-69, 77)

This *bricolage*—the understanding and incorporation of the new through the use of pre-existing terms and concepts—has been retained to the present time. Most people, if asked to gloss 'play' as used in sport and in drama, would presumably distinguish 'taking part in a game' from 'a theatrical performance', but there remains a core of shared meaning within the generic term. Glynne Wickham, while noting that the distinction between gladiatorial games and mimetic ('imitative') games was already important to the ancient Romans and led them to attach specifying adjectives to *ludus*, has argued that there remained a significant common factor:

however different the characteristics of the *ludus* athletic or mimetic, the game or recreational element is paramount. . . . Thus a tournament, to take an extreme case, though it could result in injury or death for one or more of the contestants, was conceived of as a violent game to test skill and endurance, never as war. However nearly it approaches the reality of battle, rules exist to prevent the imitation extending to the actual, just as the tragic heroes of mimetic games, however realistically their deaths may be portrayed, arise to repeat their performances on other occasions. Both are imitations 'in game' and not 'in earnest'.[18]

There was another early link between sport and theatre for which there is fragmentary but growing evidence. During the period from the sixth-century AD onwards when theatre was violently suppressed or officially repressed throughout Europe, the itinerant athletic performer went side by side with the strolling actor and other professional entertainers.[19] The unofficial (and often illegal) world of popular entertainment—mountebanks, jesters, jugglers, animal trainers, fighters, wrestlers, swordsmen, magicians, mimes, minstrels, dancers, rope-walkers, hoop-jumpers—freely used both quasi-sporting behaviour (tests and demonstrations of strength, skill, speed and endurance) and quasi-theatrical practices (characterisation, costumes, masks and story-telling). This combining of the athletic with the histrionic is noticeable in sanctioned entertainments from the fifteenth century onwards, and ranges from the licencing of such itinerant groups and individuals by civic authorities, to the appearance of sporting displays in plays. Mary McElroy has documented the rise of organised professional sporting contests in the Elizabethan period and points out that it was directly attributable to theatrical entrepreneurs. Early 'player-athletes' like the clown Richard Tarleton were trained swordsmen as well as comedians; later the manager Philip Henslowe presented fencing matches at the Rose playhouse, and fencing, bear-baiting and wrestling also kept the Swan and the Red Bull open for many years after actors ceased to play there, a contemporary commentator noting 'these small things were as profitable and as great get pennies to the Actors, as any of our late famed playes'.[20]

It is not surprising therefore that athletic contests found their way into English renaissance theatre—the wrestling match between Orlando and Charles in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is one—and of course swordfights are endemic in plays of the period. The use of live animals on stage can be found as well: Launce's dog is the essential prop for his stand-up comic routines in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and 'Exit, pursued by a bear' in *The Winter's Tale* (III,iii,57) a later echo of bearpit sports. As David Wiles has convincingly argued in *Shakespeare's Clown* (1987), Elizabethan audiences did not experience the Bard's tragedies as fundamentally different from bear-baiting. Both used the same descriptive language, and audiences read both sign systems according to codes of game, ritual and symbolic action. Rather than polarising sport against theatre from a humanist perspective, 'people used animal combat in order to give meaning to human activities', just as they

constructed the meaning of the figure of the Earl of Warwick in *2 Henry VI* from the bear crest on his helmet, metaphoric references to him as a bear, and his 'roaring' when goaded.[21]

References to sport and to sporting characters, behaviour and equipment are widespread in plays written between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. These give us a rich picture of the leisure pursuits of young and old across half a milennium, and such emblems and actions have already been transformed into a system of theatrical codes which came to have conventional (and, to some extent, transhistorical and cross-cultural) meaning determined principally by its narrative and rhetorical context. Sport could suggest innocent fun, as in the ball which the third shepherd gives to the Christ child in the fifteenth century *Secunda Pastorum* before suggesting he 'go to the tenys' [tennis] (l.736). Alternatively it could indicate idleness and un-Godly mischief, as in New Guise's cry 'Lend us a football' in *Mankind* (l.737) after Mankind has abandoned his work and righteous living for sloth. In *As You Like It* Orlando's victory over Charles is proof to the Duke that he is 'a gallant youth' (I,ii,219) and makes him sexually and romantically interesting to Rosalind: 'It is young Orlando, that tripped up the wrestler's heels and your heart both in a instant', (III,ii,210-11).

But sport could also be associated with gambling and violent bad-temper as in Cloten's entrance in *Cymbeline* (II,i,1) after he has lost at lawn bowls and split his opponent's head with the ball. Shakespeare's images of hunting, fishing, archery, billiards, bowls, tennis, and football have been shown to be widespread, with one entire play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, arguably constructed around a central image drawn from training and hunting with falcons.[22] For Gloucester in *King Lear* there was 'good sport' at the begetting of his bastard son Edmund (I,i,23), and 'sport' and 'play' had connotations of sexual activity which go back to their earliest usages in English.[23] But at least since Susannah Centlivre's *The Gamester* in 1705 (based on a French original) sport and gambling have also been represented as a woman-rejecting and woman-excluding world: in that play the heroine is obliged to disguise herself as a man in order to enter the 'sporting' (i.e. gambling) world and win her errant lover back from the card table. 'Sport' is also a common term for war (another woman-marginalising activity); Marlowe's Tamburlaine, having first helped Cosroe to become King of Persia and then decided to become King himself, declares 'bid him turn back to war with us/that only made him king to make us sport'. (*Pt 1* II,vi,101). There is 'good sport' on the battlefields outside Troy in *Troilus and Cressida* (I,i,117,119), which, for Hector at least, is conducted according to the rules of 'fair play' (V,iii,43). Financial speculation is also covered by the same terms; when Sir Walter Whorehound in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* leaves the stage for the last time, his exit line: 'Gamesters, farewell, I have nothing left to play'. (V,i,150) brings together in a single image his financial ruin, his defeat in the game of sexual intrigue, and the ending of the actor's contribution to the theatrical 'game'.

Between his own time and the nineteenth century the centrality of Shakespeare to English literary culture helped to conventionalise this system of sporting indices and symbols, and his influence over subsequent authors led them to appropriate and perpetuate such usages. But the shift of theatre as an art form from low to high culture in the early seventeenth century, when the new monarch James I began to commission theatrical pageants rather than sporting contests for court entertainments and when Shakespeare's company began to prefer the more exclusive indoors Blackfriars to the popular outdoor Globe, ought not to conceal the fact that the world of popular entertainment continued to allow the free interpenetration of professional sport and commercial theatre. The idea of theatre as 'a game' was lost from the increasingly elitist and neo-classical recording and analysis of performance, though not from less well-regarded popular theatrical practices, as the pastimes of the people at the time of the white invasion of the Australian continent shows.

The hippodrama in Australia

It was at this time that the hippodrama appeared in English and French popular theatre. In 1768 the trick-riding artist Philip Astley is supposed to have introduced into his season at Halfpenny Hatch a trained-horse act with a narrative basis 'The Taylor Riding to Brentford'.[24] From that time what subsequently came to be known as the hippodrama began to explore the possibilities of staging stories which combined actors, exhibitions of physical skill, and trained animals, particularly horses. The acting and dialogue were often minimal, as evidenced by the famous comment of the hippodrama star and stage director Andrew Ducrow, after watching a rehearsal of *Hamlet*: 'Cut the dialect and come to the 'osses'.[25] Nevertheless two fundamental ideas were introduced: that of the athlete as actor, and of physical displays and sporting contests having some kind of basic narrative sequencing. Over the next century medieval chivalry (e.g. *The Blood Red Knight*), Eurasia (*The Brave Cossack*, *Timour the Tartar*, *Mazeppa*), highwaymen (*Jack Sheppard*, *Turpin's Ride to York*), war (*The Battle of Waterloo*, *The Siege of Sebastopol*), and sport, particularly hunting, racing, and boxing (*The High Mettled Racer*, *The Steeplechase*, *Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London*), all provided material for 'horse drama'.[26] From 1782 Charles Hughes, Charles Dibdin, Astley and others in London and Paris began to add a peripheral theatre stage to their circus rings, and they transferred to this platform those acts which could benefit from proscenium presentation and stage machinery.[27] In the 1820s Ducrow worked both at Astley's and at the two patent houses—Covent Garden and Drury Lane—as the legitimate theatre began to absorb hippodramatic techniques into its repertoire.[28]

The changes this wrought in English drama were profound, as the character of an English playwright in Edward Geoghegan's 1844 comedy *The Currency Lass* explains in expressing his delight with Sydney:

> Positively, the sun of Australia seems to possess wonderful powers in fertilising genius! What a fortunate idea was mine to abandon a country where envy blights merit, where authors sink into insignificance before scene-painters, mechanists, tailors and property men, and actors play second business to goats, monkeys, horses, dogs and elephants![29]

His optimism was misplaced: in the same decade circuses, hippodramas and trained animal acts arrived in Australia. Even earlier Barnett Levey and his successors had staged a number of hippodramatic plays at the Sydney Theatre Royal,[30] although it is unlikely that they were able to make more than a token gesture towards the kind of staging which had been used in London for these works. However, by 1837 in Hobart *Timour the Tartar* was given at the new Theatre Royal with a white pony on the stage,[31] and in 1845 Mrs Coppin rode 'a real live horse' as Joan of Arc.[32] By 1847 a hotel-owner in Launceston, Robert Radford, had established a circus/hippodrama; by 1849 his horses were being acclaimed for their 'astonishing sagacity' in narrative adventures.[33] In the next few years several other touring circuses arrived in the colonies, and hippodramatic plays such as *Mazeppa*, *The Steeplechase*, and the perennial *Billy Button; or, The Tailor's Ride to Brentford* began appearing regularly at these venues.[34]

Although the hippodrama was an overtly popular form of entertainment, its appearance in Australia coincided with, and was influenced by, the emerging middle-class ideology of sport as a weapon in the struggle against carnal desires, as the Victorian doctor, William Acton, observed in his book *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*:

> At a very early age the pastimes of the boy and girl diverge. The boy takes to more boisterous amusements, and affects the society of boys older than himself, simply because they make him rougher, or, in his opinion, manlier playfellows. The girls' quieter games are despised, and their society, to a considerable extent, deserted. This . . . may almost be regarded as a provision of nature against possible dangers. (p.1)[35]

This concern with inhibiting pre-marital sexuality was to be particularly prominent in the school sports and physical fitness curriculum, as Acton's book urges:

> it is of the most vital importance that the mind be directed into a different channel, and that every means be taken to check the secretion of semen. Experience has proved that to effect this, there is nothing so good as gymnastic exercises regularly employed . . . A taste should be encouraged for cricket, rowing, walking, swimming, and other athletic amusements. (p.14)

One of Acton's sources for his assertions was the writings of Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby between 1828 and 1842, and in the same year (1857) that Acton's often reprinted book first appeared, one of Arnold's pupils, Thomas Hughes, published *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, celebrating his Rugby education and starting the movement known as 'muscular Christianity'.[36]

In the eugenics, fitness, and Empire-obsessed nineteenth century this educational pedagogy became linked to the myth that sexual intercourse saps male energy, and became a reason for promoting sexual repression in adult men as well as youths.[37] It was not simply a matter of controlling sexual impulses in the young male, but of establishing a lifetime habit of sexual restraint combined with intense indoctrination in both the moral and physical virtues of sporting activity. Keeping men out of the boudoir and the brothel late at night by getting them on to the playing field early in the morning ensured that they would be fit and ready for the ultimate test of manhood on the playing field of war; it also meant when they did breed that the semen which sired their sons would not be weakened by 'excess' (p.102) or worse, be accompanied by the venereal consequences of immoral dalliance. (In 1864 Acton served on a committee established to 'report on the best means of protecting the army and the navy from the ravages occasioned by venereal disease'.)[38] Both purposes were achieved by arguing that manliness, physical fitness, sporting success, and military prowess were linked to sexual abstinence, and frequent references were made to the supposed practices of ancient gladiators (Acton believed that unused semen was reabsorbed into the circulation 'giving buoyancy to the feelings, and the manly vigour which characterises the male' (p.170). By the 1860s such ideas had triggered a vast popular movement, with speakers throughout the Empire emphasising the need to separate the sexes and insisting on the military value of sport:

> should a day unhappily arrive when the youth of this country shall be led to . . . exchange the manly games of the recreation-ground and the healthy and animating field-sports of their forefathers for the refined, the gentle, the delicate amusements of the drawing room and the croquet lawn—then, I can tell you, what will assuredly and rapidly pass away—the freedom—the long cherished freedom, and with it the power, the influence, the prosperity, and the happiness of this great Empire.

This speech, given at a gymnastic festival in London in 1867, was approvingly reprinted in a Hobart magazine which attacked the 'gawky, ill-timed stride' and 'lazy lounge' of Tasmanian youths, who were failing 'to train themselves as soldiers to protect us and all our "gains".'[39] As the modern social historian, Wayland Young, wittily observes in *Eros Denied*:

> If every value and every force surrounding an adolescent tells him that his bodily affections must at all costs be transformed and sublimated into physical effort, intellectual prowess, competitive zeal, and manly friendship, how can he not found empires?[40]