When attending a show at *Perth’s Fringe World Festival*, it is not uncommon to witness a room full of strangers, audience members and performers alike, acting strangely. I can recall one such incident during the opening minutes of Le Gateau Chocolat’s *I Heart Chocolat*. A conservatively dressed woman was sitting in the front row, completely nonplussed when the show’s titular drag queen ambled toward her and asked that she suck on his “big, black, salty, chocolate balls”. Everyone laughed and applauded (including the confronted woman).

It was the sort of moment Mikhail Bakhtin anticipated when he theorised the ‘carnivalesque’.¹ Certain collective events and rituals, he argued, seem to license a temporary release from conventional codes of conduct; they grant us fleeting opportunities to explore desires normally forbidden by the mores of dominant culture.

This spirit of transient transgression sets the stage for *I Heart Chocolat*’s production of camp and drag. After all, the setting is not one of Perth’s gay nightclubs, where such forms are known staples. The venue is instead the world-famous Spiegeltent, propped up in the CBD only for the duration of the festival, drawing in an audience you might not usually see in line at Connections or The Court.

In some ways, *I Heart Chocolat* mobilizes around traditional hallmarks of drag. There is the Judy Garland cover (“The Boy That Got Away”), the subversion of gender binaries (Chocolat is a bearded man who first appears in an extravagant, sequined dress), and the irreverent commentary on sexuality (an audience member is informed by Chocolat that he couldn’t “catch” gayness by touching the performer). The latter two tropes figure prominently in Esther Newton’s seminal 1972 anthropological study on drag, *Mother Camp*, and even audiences with the most rudimentary knowledge of the form are likely to expect them.² However, to approach Chocolat by emphasizing gender and sexuality alone would overlook a great deal of its accomplishments. The most compelling aspect of *I Heart Chocolat* is the way in which it draws upon drag’s playful sense of parody to examine a whole host of other categories, including race, class and globalisation. It is these dimensions that lend the show its modern sensibility, its sense of freshness and innovation.

During and in between songs, Chocolat sends up all the distinctions that render him ‘other’: not just his homosexuality, but also his race, size, and status as a visiting foreigner (Chocolat was born in Nigeria and lives in London, England).

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changing into a Dalmatian patterned lycra body suit, he makes the improbable announcement: “I have a law degree!”

While marking out these differences and lampooning the assumptions that accompany them, Chocolat is also interested in what keeps things tethered together, the unlikely connections that challenge cultural, geographical, sexual, temporal and formal separations. He shares anecdotes about himself as a globetrotting entertainer negotiating customs inspectors’ bemused queries about the drag outfits overstuffing his luggage. His repertoire includes songs lifted from many corners of the world, and vastly different genres and eras. He rarely finishes a tune in its entirety before transitioning into a new one, often forging an unexpected through-line between the two pieces. His stage banter acknowledges his identity as an outsider, but he also wants you to engage with his presence (sometimes literally when he reaches out to touch you).

The drag that Chocolat executes is a nimble interplay between identification and distance, celebration and critique. Take, for example, the show’s parody of the 2012 cinematic rendering of Les Misérables, which is both affectionate and cutting in equal measure. The musical numbers serve as an exquisite showcase for the singer’s breathtaking, baritone voice. At the same time, the aplomb with which he is able to command the material effects a stark contrast with some of the lacklustre vocal performances which were committed in the latest screen adaptation. This is why Russell Crowe’s profound miscasting as “Javert” provides such rich fodder for Chocolat’s teasing imitations.

He also pokes fun at some cast members’ employment of the cockney accent, which bears absolutely no relation to the French locale in which the action of the piece is set. This incongruity is surely one of the more bizarre consequences of attempting to remodel Les Misérables (originally a French novel) for an English-speaking audience. By honing in on the absurdity of this arrangement, Chocolat both enacts intertextuality and foregrounds the glaring lapses that intertextuality can produce, particularly when it involves a trans-cultural reconfiguration that goes wholly unacknowledged. The world’s cultures and art forms may be more interconnected than ever, but some voices are still privileged more than others, even when it is to the detriment of narrative coherence.

As commandeered by Chocolat, drag’s inherent fascination for masquerade and duality becomes a powerful platform from which to magnify a diverse array of the bewildering contradictions and co-operations he has noticed about our contemporary, international landscape. This emphasis on plurality manifests most demonstrably when the performer periodically dives into the audience and chooses someone at random to take a blind sample of chocolate and identify its taste, thus explicitly marking ‘variety’ as both the thematic and formal thread of the entire piece.

At times, the speed and density of the spectacle can become dizzying. When Chocolat donned a giant afro wig for his closing number, “Vogue”, it struck me as ironic that the ‘Voguing’ dance style (invented by black and latino drag queens in Harlem during the 1980’s) would be appropriated by white, mainstream artists like Madonna, and that so many drag queens would in turn restage the very song that resulted from that co-option. I then briefly reflected upon the enormous stretch of time and space that the Voguing phenomenon has travelled; initiated by a
marginalized subculture in Manhattan about 30 years ago, now performed by a Londoner born in Nigeria for what appeared to be an overwhelmingly white, middle-class audience in Western Australia.

As the evening came to its end, I tried to harness these half-formed ideas into a developed narrative, to wrest some intelligible ‘conclusion’ that was being expressed about the current state of drag. But at this point, I was distracted by the fact that the whole audience was now dancing along to the music. Many had migrated to the stage, and the performer himself was wildly frolicking around every corner of the tent. It quickly became implausible that I would be able to take in the totality of the activity in front of me. Then the show was over, the audience rushed outside, and the dazzling, subversive world we had just experienced in all of its abundance disappeared as suddenly as it had materialized.

Sebastian Sharp