

The Black Swan State Theatre Company, *A Perfect Specimen*

July 14th 2016, Studio Underground, Perth

The Black Swan State Theatre Company's (hereafter, BSSTC) production *A Perfect Specimen*, from playwright Nathaniel Moncrieff, is a powerful visual and oratory representation of the life of Julia Pastrana, nineteenth century American Freak Show performer. The show ran from June 30th to July 17th 2016 at Studio Underground at the State Theatre Centre of Western Australia, Perth. As a PhD candidate whose research focuses on the history of the American Freak Show, I decided to attend the July 14th show in order to see how my topic is understood in popular culture today.

The show purports to be an accurate representation of Victorian-era 'Freak Show' display. The true story of Julia Pastrana's short-lived career of exhibition is explored, concluding with her death shortly after childbirth and subsequent embalmment (along with her child), in order to be put on display once more. When Julia Pastrana, played by the talented Adriane Daff, is first presented to the audience, her face is covered in a darkly coloured shawl/scarf as her 'ape-like' and 'monstrous' appearance is narrated by the showman Theodore Lent (played by Luke Hewitt). The scene is distinctly dark, grimy and theatrical - consistent with popular understandings of the Victorian period. We have been transported to a past site of exploitation, suddenly witness to something usually mediated by the authority of a medical documentary, but, as onlookers who, in Mr Lent's words 'have already paid' to see what lies before us, we are guiltily implicated in the show, temporarily denied our present and supposedly progressive ideals.

Representations of the American Freak Show have specific cultural political genealogies in both academic and popular culture circles. Similarly to other parts of history that are rejected by our current society, these are politically contested. Since the mid-1990s scholars of history and cultural studies have increasingly portrayed the American Freak Show as a contested performance and social practice, one which recognises the central role of marginalised or rejected Others in the creation of normative hierarchies, but at the same time emphasises the participation of people with 'extraordinary bodies' in their exhibition as a potential source of empowerment.

A Perfect Specimen takes a very definite stance against the Freak Show, characterised in plain colours as exploitation for the profit of others, a practice associated with filthy morals, habits and greed. The impresario Theodore Lent, husband and exploitative manager of Julia Pastrana, is presented as a figure of near complete power and control over her, despite emotional pleas to cease the endless touring, medical inspections by curious doctors, and penetrating gazes of strangers which are ultimately outweighed by her husband's lust for money. Lent's moral bankruptcy is further emphasised by his adulterous liaisons with the acrobat Marian Trumbull, devilishly played by Rebecca Davis. Julia Pastrana, however, is portrayed as dependent upon an exploitative husband due to a misguided faith in Lent's feelings for her, and as having fully accepted society's designation of ugliness upon her.

Indigenous Mexican American religious and cultural practices provide her only solace from a horrifying reality, but remain largely unexplored.

The major problem is that by placing Julia Pastrana as subordinate to Theodore Lent both emotionally and in terms of their economic arrangement, she is largely denied a voice in her own story. Yet any potential show featuring a major 'freak' attraction such as Pastrana would have relied upon their convincing performances for a vast proportion of ticket sales and ultimate financial success. Instead Luke Hewitt's truly incredible performance as the impresario, and especially his booming oratory, commands attention throughout and his position remains almost entirely unchallenged. There is little sense that Pastrana was an active participant in her own exhibition, rather than suffering at the hands of an abusive relationship and an exploitative practice. This is despite the fact that for much of the Freak Show's popular lifespan (roughly 1840-1940), most 'freaks' were willing participants with limited alternative economic opportunities. The most famous of these performers held long and potentially lucrative careers, including those who had very similar bodily conditions of excessive hair growth to Pastrana.

Despite trading in misleading popular conceptualisation of freak show exploitation and its disempowered victims, *A Perfect Specimen* does offer a strong critique of the biological conceptualisation of human difference. The same darkly theatrical scene in which we are first introduced to Pastrana also denies the audience the voyeuristic affirmation of 'freakish' as *biologically* evident upon a simple glance. Adriane Daff plays the role without any sign of overt hairiness or grotesque appearance, despite being constantly framed by both Lent's oratory and the everyday exchanges of those in the show (herself included) as being hideously ugly. The effect is to highlight the power of discourse in framing and literally creating the subject it describes, a crucial feature in the performance of 'freakishness'.

A Perfect Specimen is a captivating presentation of an oppressed individual's purity and goodness in opposition to the 'filth' of the characters who surround her. This juxtaposition of innocence and corruption is skilfully enhanced by clever costuming, a masterful use of stage lighting techniques, and excellent performances from a talented cast. Regardless of whether one accepts the BSSTC's depiction of the nineteenth century Freak Show, by contrasting the narrative framing of Julia Pastrana as the 'Ugliest Woman in the World' with an absence of grotesque stage-make up and costuming, *A Perfect Specimen* wonderfully exposes the rhetorical construction of difference and skilfully denies its audience the biological curiosity they paid to see.

Guy Kirkwood

The University of Western Australia