

ARTICLES

Briefs: Bending Gender in Australian Contemporary Circus

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This paper is an excerpt from an in-depth body of work that I developed as part of my doctoral thesis, “Bodies, Spatiality and Temporality in Australian Contemporary Circus.” In the thesis, I explore the implications of subversive performances of gender in Australian contemporary circus. What I offer here is a small insight into how Australian contemporary circus artists utilize gender performativity to articulate political and social views within their creative work, with the openly queer¹ male burlesque circus collective Briefs Factory as the example. I focus in particular on its founding member Mark Winmill, a well-respected aerial artist who has worked in the Australian contemporary circus sector since the mid-1990s. In order to identify the nature of Winmill’s performances of gender, it is important first for us to comprehend where and how his performances take place within the context of the Briefs Factory.

In their own words: “*Briefs* is an all-male sharp shootin’ cabaret of burlesque with balls, high-flying circus bandits and savage gender offenders” (briefsfactory.com).² Using circus to explore what masculinity can mean in contemporary society, in any given performance their work explores concepts of the macho, drag, the fluidity of the male form, the quirky, and the queer. Solo acts sit alongside large group acts in a format that sees the chaos of slapstick physical clowning presented alongside dynamic and graceful aerial performance. This may seem like a heavy task for any ensemble to deliver, but the format of the work and their use of chaos and audience interaction enable the artists to delve into multiple concepts within a one-hour show. Reviews of the work acknowledge its impact on the circus sector and its ability to critique contemporary society. Spunde observes, for example, that this is

an all-male troupe but from the opening sequence, which presents a manly take on the classically feminine burlesque feather fan act, the show does away with any sense of conventional gender. The result is not so much androgynous as it is a space where masculinity and femininity are both dialled up to full volume, each equally celebrated and parodied. While *Briefs* sometimes slaps you in the face with its outré sexuality, its overall impact is positively energising. (Spunde 2016)

A *Briefs* show is delivered as a cabaret speakeasy, and the spatiality of this format allows political agendas to flow alongside lighter moments that celebrate pop culture icons such as Grace Jones. *Briefs*’ flexibility and fluidity of delivery reflects the fluidity of gender performance that emerges in every act within the work. Provocations on gender norms are at the forefront: as the ensemble challenges established notions of masculinity and femininity within their work, they are also challenging a heteronormative, patriarchal society. The cast performs both in and out of drag throughout the show, and the blurring of traditional expectations of gender performance is apparent in both the costuming (not only within a drag context) and also the choreography, which ranges in

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its stylization from parodies of overtly masculine movements to more transverse representations of gendered bodies.

What is refreshing about *Briefs* is the collective's ability to subvert and challenge their own masculinity without invoking a binary of oppositional gender roles. The performance of drag in this instance uses displays or tropes of femininity as weapons of social power and diversity, unlike some traditional drag performances which can at times borderline on parody or caricature of an overly sexualized concept of *female*. Rather, *Briefs* marries traits of female and male. An example of this is the closing act where the entire cast of very muscular men sport various styles of the traditionally female sequined Lycra leotard. Some of the artists are in full drag makeup, while others are not. The male body is openly celebrated and not hidden or disguised as female in this scene: it is presented in juxtaposition to the sequins and Lycra.

Briefs Factory challenges its audience in the use of the body as a mechanism for social expression, a political voice, and a means to provoke thought through the physical aesthetic of circus. This allows Winmill to use his body and his artform to express his stance on current pressing issues within Australian society, such as the treatment of refugees and marriage equality. As he holds the audience's attention with a perfect hula hoop four split³ at high pace, or as he is participating in an acrobatic human pyramid, randomly, unexpectedly, Winmill shouts out his views. There is no knowing when this might occur in any performance. This is an interesting artistic choice considering that more often than not, circus artists do not speak on stage. Moreover, not only does he choose to speak, he chooses to shout. Winmill's presence on stage and the brash nature of his performances have become well-known within the Australian sector. His distinctness as an artist brings to mind Judith Butler's observation that "one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries" (Butler 1988, 521).

Winmill *does* his body—or performs his identity, sexuality, and gender—in diverse other ways throughout a *Briefs* show. A trapeze artist and acrobat who was also crowned 2011 King of Burlesque by the Burlesque Hall of Fame in Las Vegas, his aerial performance displays his physical strength and muscle definition, showcasing his traditionally masculine attributes while at the same time emphasizing grace, flexibility, and fluidity—traits usually associated with being feminine. He takes preconceived ideas of gender and repackages them so that the audience is presented with a mix of beauty, strength, and brattish humour. His aerial birdbath trapeze act effectively demonstrates the concept of gender fluidity while teasingly drenching the front row in water. This act sees Winmill present his dynamic and fast-paced static trapeze skills in such a way that although we can see the broadness of his shoulders and the definition of his muscles as he works through his act, we are also taken by his fluidity of movement, graceful extension of the lines of his body, and perfectly pointed toes. Winmill's trapeze act defies a binary of gendered bodies, combining grace, strength, and control in a way that has become his signature style.



Mark Winmill. Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema.

Later in the show, he also performs as an alter ego drag character, Nadiah Comminatcha—a failed Olympic gymnast, and the fictional evil twin sister of the famous Romanian champion Nadia Comaneci. Nadiah is rude, aggressive, and loud, sporting a fabulous lime green sequined bikini and frenetically manipulating hula hoops while teetering on high heels. Winmill’s performance of Nadiah is vastly different from the aerial birdbath in its depiction of the body and gender tropes. Nadiah is anything but ladylike, despite the feminine attire. Butler explains how gender can become unstuck:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 1990, 6)

This aptly describes the affective terrains of gender traversed in a *Briefs* show. Winmill’s performance of gender is whatever it needs to be at any given time. He easily switches from chaotic Nadiah to graceful trapeze artist. His performance of identity is a multiplicity of the characters he embodies on stage, as Deleuze and Guattari argue: “thus each individual is an infinite multiplicity, and the whole

of Nature is a multiplicity of perfectly individuated multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 254). In thinking this way, we can then consider that Winmill’s performance identity is a multiplicity of the characters he presents onstage. Winmill extends this concept to confront stereotypes of gendered bodies, in a tradition of aerial artistry that extends back to the nineteenth century, as Tait notes:

Ambidexterity is extended to gender. Certainly males and females in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century aerial troupes did demonstrate similar muscular actions working as flyers and catcher. Gender identity was functionally ambidextrous in the act’s physicality. (Tait 2005, 30)



Mark Winmill as Nadiah. Image provided by and reproduced with the permission of Hamish McCormick, Carnival Cinema.

Briefs Factory have created a niche signature style that is provocative and political. Their eccentricity is part of their appeal, making them stand out among the more choreographic contemporary circus companies on the international touring circuit. While their politicized and gender-queer content might seem risky from a commercial perspective, they have nonetheless toured their work consistently since 2010. The nature of their approach, however, does appear to minimize if not completely rule out the possibility of government funding.⁴ Their work has polarized critics, but the group has in some cases made negative response work to their advantage, as founding member Natano Fa’anana explains:

We had some pretty dismal reviews in the early days of touring *Briefs*. A review of our first tour to Adelaide said something like “At best it was a progressive high school musical . . . only worth 2 stars.” As a collective, we thought, great, that’s awesome, let’s share that review on our social media and parody it. And we sold out

that season anyway. So the audience is saying something completely different to the high art reviewers! Another review we received in Edinburgh referred to us as “Feckless cock prancers.” Which we thought was hilarious so we went and had bags made with that printed on them and sold them at the shows. We made merchandise out of the bad reviews. (Fa’anana 2014)

The Briefs Factory artists take negative responses from critics and turn them into publicity, more art, and even an alternative funding stream, another example of their playfully subversive tactics.

The freedom of creative expression that Briefs Factory provides its artists makes an important contribution to maintaining a voice for social freedom, challenging the conservative political climate in Australia. In the run-up to the nationwide referendum on marriage equality in November 2017, some of those campaigning for a no vote worked to instil fear around gender fluidity and nonbinary representations of gender. Briefs Factory, on tour in London, UK, responded by holding a peaceful demonstration after one of their performances involving over five hundred people in “a show of support for equal marriage and equal love,” thus raising international awareness about the Australian vote and its implications. “In true *Briefs* style we are going to make noise, even if we’re on the other side of the globe,” said performer Thomas Worrell (underbellyfestival.com 2017). In their performances as well as their offstage activism, the Briefs Factory collective celebrates diversity and the acceptance of gender difference in contemporary society.

Notes

1. The Briefs Factory collective use the term queer to describe their work as openly embracing themes of homosexuality and sexual ambiguity.
2. Briefs Factory is the name of the collective; its shows include *Briefs*, *Briefs: The Second Coming*, *Club Briefs*, and *Briefs: Close Encounters*.
3. A hula hoop split is when the circus artist manipulates several hula hoops (in this instance four) across separate sections of their body, spinning them independently of each other at the same time.
4. The Briefs Factory openly refer in their shows to obstacles they have encountered in their attempts to acquire government funding.

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