

Book review*

Moore, Tony, Mark Gibson, Chris McAuliffe & Maura Edmond (2024). *Fringe to Famous: Cultural Production in Australia After the Creative Industries*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Fringe to Famous is the latest offering from one of Australia’s leading lights of cultural history – Tony Moore – and a team of scholars working on the Australian Research Council Discovery Project of the same name. That \$AUS400,000+ grant commenced in 2014, meaning this key output is somewhat delayed, and perhaps a little bit under-done, but is a welcome contribution, nonetheless. It explores aspects of Australian culture that have hitherto been ‘fringe’ in ‘serious’ analyses.

While dealing also with music (punk and post-punk), design (including fashion), gaming, and Indigenous Australian independent cinema, the key aspect of the book for members of the Australian Humour Studies Network, and the readers of the *European Journal of Humour Research* is Chapter 4 – “From fringe theatre to prime time: The case of comedy” (pp. 111-153). That will be my focus here, although the whole book is of value in a context that understands cultural products as hybrids of genres and forms. The most valuable aspect of the chapter, and the book as a whole, is the wealth of interview-based knowledge that supports the analysis and the conclusions, and which cross generic boundaries and chapter delineations.

The comedy chapter charts the way prime time comedies such as *Fast Forward* (1989-1992) and *Full Frontal* (1993-1997) derived their inspiration from the “small theatre” scene of Melbourne’s inner suburbs in the 1970s and 1980s; themselves established via radical theatre from the 1960s inspired by US precursors. The relatively uncritical celebration of that milieu has always bothered me – as a pretty square, straight, male, pale, and stale individual – but it is nice to see it being treated as the seedbed of something I do feel connected to.

The comedy that emerged was the comedy of my own childhood and teenage years – quick-fire sketches and skits enacted by an ensemble cast playing returning characters – which differed from other Australian television comedies of the preceding era. These had tended to ape British and American precursors (e.g. *The Naked Vicar Show*, 1978), embraced the slightly smutty naughtiness of the counterculture that was liberating for my parents’ generation (but not mine), or played on the “ocker” culture of the “new nationalism” (e.g. *The Paul Hogan Show*, 1973-1984). And while there was plenty of this culture still in the two *FF* productions (see above), the hybridity of their content was what stood out. Hybridity in terms of types of comedy performance, including satire – social and political – as well as a self-reflexivity verging on postmodern inversion.

Most notably, it was the media itself that was subject to satire, with all sorts of genres targeted: music videos, promotional spots for TV stations, infomercials, kung-fu adventure

* This book review was commissioned by the Book Review Editor of the Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN), in collaboration with The European Journal of Humour Research. For additional AHSN book reviews, please visit the Australasian Humour Studies Network webpage at <https://ahsnhumourstudies.org>.

shows, news broadcasts, and Fabio-inspired romance monologues. Not all of these can or should be too romanticised in the nostalgic “you couldn’t get away with that today!” fashion – 1980s Australians’ casual racism, homophobia and sexism is pretty cringe, rather than fringe. But that *Fast Forward* in particular used a quick burst of static to signal the end of one skit and the beginning of another demonstrated just how similar the experience was to “channel surfing”: exploring TV in ways that streaming doesn’t really allow for.

In particular, the kung-fu skits were designed to tap into Australian audiences’ familiarity with American and other international programming, which has always threatened to swamp the relatively under-funded Australian TV landscape. That the major networks were – in the 1980s and 1990s – owned and run by media magnates with international connections meant Australian-made content was usually an afterthought, mandated by media content laws imposed by well-meaning governments (such as via the Broadcasting Services Act 1992). There is an irony in the fact that both *FF* shows were produced and broadcast via the Seven Network, an amalgamation of historical broadcasting companies based out of different metropolitan centers and owned by media conglomerates based in those cities: the Herald and Weekly Times in Melbourne; Fairfax Media and Publishing and Broadcasting Limited in Sydney; Bond Corporation and the Bell Group in Perth. It wasn’t until Rupert Murdoch’s purchase of the whole Seven network in 1986, and its rapid and lucrative selloff to Fairfax, and then its purchase by Qintex Ltd., owned by businessman Christopher Skase, that its content truly became “Australian” in the sense of nation-wide.

It was at that moment that producer Steve Vizard (now one of Tony Moore’s colleagues at Monash University) was successful in having *Fast Forward* made, and none too soon. Within a short few years, Skase and the other media moguls would become ideal fodder for comedy, as their houses of cards collapsed amid debt and financial mismanagement. Vizard’s vision was vindicated, while that of the Seven executives he had to fight, cajole, and convince, could never have delivered the ‘ratings bonanza’ that *Fast Forward* and *Full Frontal* did (pp. 45, 145).

Curiously, although there is plenty of acknowledgement of the role of various networks, and the way they had “led the charge” (p. 129) in various ways, the larger corporate environment is somewhat absent from *Fringe to Famous*. On the one hand, this is logical – after all, this is a story that champions the non-corporate (even the anti-corporate) creativity of larrikin, carnivalesque critics of corporate culture. On the other, though, it tends to create an image of heroic chaos untrammelled by the demands of the market, while still celebrating success in that market, and the need for creatives to work within that market. It’s the fun, without all the paperwork required to get such comedies made. It is admitted that “There is an obvious *business* interest in reaching audiences for commercial media’ (p. 135), but within ten words of the same sentence comes the ‘But’: “it is important to recognise that there can also be a cultural or creative interest” (pp. 135-136).

Fringe to Famous is celebratory. Like *Dancing with Empty Pockets*, it is definitely on the side of the alternative creatives whose undoubted talent has given Australia such iconic shows as the two *FFs*, *The Comedy Company*, *The D-Generation* and *The Late Show*, *The Chaser*, *Summer Heights High*, *Kath and Kim*, *Pizza*, and *Acropolis Now*. It celebrates the creatives who seem to have survived, unscathed and untainted by their corporate success, and who remain faithful to the spirit in which they began their careers. They remain, for all their mainstream appeal, fringe, alternative, and cutting-edge.

Or do they? Or were they ever? After all, so many of the comedic talents involved in this era were products of a still-elite university system: like the Footlights folks of Cambridge in the UK, the Melbourne University Law Revue was the cradle for Tom Gleisner, Magda

Szubanski, Libby Gorr, and many others. Vizard and his partner in Artist Services, Andrew Knight, came to comedy via the legal profession.

This is, in essence, something the book also celebrates, but via a sleight of hand. Moore et al. acknowledge the essentially oppositional nature of how fringe and mainstream are conceived of, and the value judgements that have been attached to both since the 1960s (and do so via a sophisticated integration and discussion of much Marxist, Foucauldian, and other theoretical frameworks). But the essence of *Fringe to Famous* is to deny that conflict and tension is often insurmountable, and point to those crossover geniuses – like Vizard, the Working Dog company, and others being championed – who can move so effectively from one sphere to the other, and who are at home in the board room and the seedy underground comedy club. Australia's comedy successes, Moore and Co. argue, “cannot be attributed solely to the creativity of the fringe or the institutionalised forms of large-scale production through which comic performance has been popularised. Both ingredients are necessary, but neither is sufficient on its own” (p. 152).

That the whole phenomenon takes place in an unproblematic “market-based society” (p. 233) seems oddly unsatisfying. For all the comedy being celebrated, and Marxian and Foucauldian theory being used to help understand it, its subversive, destabilising element – even *purpose* – tends to be overlooked. Very real differences in politics are subsumed as well: Vizard's connections with both the Liberal Party of Australia (centre-right) and the Australian Labor Party (centre-left) is noted in an earlier chapter (p. 45). Neither major party has really been much of a supporter of the industry in recent decades – certainly not in the same way as they were in the era of Whitlam Labor (1972-1975) and Fraser Liberal-National coalition (1975-1983). The neoliberalism of the Hawke-Keating (1983-1991; 1991-1996) and Howard governments (1996-2007) may have fostered those with their larrikin feet already in the corporate door, but their successors now have to rely on appealing to *them*, as patrons, for much of their support. And this, Moore et al. seem to imply, is actually the way things *should be*. Life wasn't meant to be easy, and the febrile, competitive real world of fringe to famous, client to patron, seems to work for them as a means of comedic production.

Sure, the genius of Weimar-era satire didn't stop Hitler (in Peter Cook's famous, ironic observation), but surely there is more to be hoped for in the challenges posed by the Chaser to capitalism than that the two will eventually learn to get along? Surely, Moore et al.'s appeal to consider how “negotiating finance for production deserves to be seen as a creative contribution” (p. 152) isn't the only answer? After all, so many of the incubators of the comedy scenes being celebrated are actually no longer extant or possible, because of the way the “market-based society” has evolved since the recessions of the late 1980s and the early 1990s - even if up-and-comers have the ability to read the (board)room. The Australian Film Commission workshops (pp. 119-120) that nurtured Mark Mitchell, Santo Cilauro, Jane Kennedy, Michael Veitch, Peter Moon, Mary-Anne Fahey, Jane Turner, Gina Riley, Glenn Robbins and Rob Sitch (yes – that's right – basically every brilliant comedian modern Australia has ever produced!!!) probably can't be revisited because of the way successive governments have neutered and narrowed what is now Screen Australia and other bodies (including the ABC).

By appealing to this middle way, and de-radicalising the radical narratives of fringe, there is also a tendency to avoid criticism of many of the outputs being explored, in favour of the celebratory mode (and surely the essence of arts scholarship has always been grounded in taste and critique? “Taste” is not a four-letter-word, after all). *The Librarians* and *Upper Middle Bogan* probably don't rank with the *FFs*, the *D-Generation*, and *Kath and Kim*. Maybe I'm old-fashioned but... they really just... *weren't all that funny*. Chris Lilley and Barry Humphries' transition (a term I use advisedly) from ‘risky’ and ‘cutting edge’ to being ‘out of

touch', racist or sexist (p. 140), could do with some more analysis than the appeal to Bourdieu, and the truism that 'today's establishment is often yesterday's avant-garde'. *Aunty Donna*, mentioned in passing, is UTTERLY BRILLIANT – more of that! The “successes of comedy” have been examined (p. 152); what about the failures? And why merge 'ethnic' comedy, Indigenous comedy, and other minority offerings into a single discussion that becomes rather beige as a result?

Perhaps because, in many ways, *Fringe to Famous* is actually something of an interim, stepping-stone volume, that connects Moore's earlier work on Bohemian cultures to his current project *Comedy Country: Australian Performance Comedy as an Agent of Change* (in partnership with the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia). *Fringe to Famous* was basically about locating the mechanisms by which innovation 'happened', but *Comedy Country* is about something much broader and more ambitious: the power of comedy to enact change. The completion of *that* project – with its quite remarkable early successes in accessible online resources – is something humour researchers can definitely look forward to in 2027. If *Fringe to Famous* is anything to go by, a similar volume may not appear until the 2030s, but it will definitely be worth the wait.

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