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[Performance Review] Species Blindness: Is There a Role For a Quoll?

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Abstract

There is an anomaly in responses to some live performance that features animal identities and the human effort to provide sanctuary and protect endangered species. The animals might be central to its purpose and yet receive a perfunctory acknowledgement in reviews or not be mentioned. Reviews reflect audience responses and I first noticed this effect in reviews of Jenny Kemp's *Kitten* in 2010 which was strongly concerned with issues of animal survival. I have been noting examples since. One recent example is provided by Hannie Rayson's *Extinction*, whereby the tiger quoll seems to be dismissed as a plot device rather than recognized as a character in the human struggle to preserve animal lives. Is there a role for a quoll? This play opens in a wildlife rescue centre and the narrative depicts the ensuing moral compromises of the coal industry funding a quoll preserve, as well as how such a sanctuary has become inseparable from university research.

[Performance Review]

Species Blindness: Is There a Role For a Quoll?

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There seems to be a blind spot with regard to recognition of nonhuman species depicted in theatrical performance about species preservation. That is, a type of human blindness towards the identity of other species in performance – a species blindness. Perhaps such blindness might be attributed to the way that animals are commonly used in figures of speech or how animal species are absent from daily life. Does the living animal need to be on stage to be visible?

Performance that includes living animals, however, is a fraught practice as the exhibition of animals over centuries reveals. My recent work describes the nineteenth-century rise of travelling menageries, which by the end of that century exhibited tens of thousands of exotic animals who had been hunted in what can only be described as a war perpetrated on other species (Tait 2016). The staging of living animals might counter invisibility but it is ethically complicated.

The living duck in Simon Stone's staging of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* in 2012 certainly made the duck recognizable even if the staging was ethically ambiguous as a symbol in human emotional relationships. Theatrical performance might be human-centric but there have been animal characters since Ancient Greek drama. In the twenty-first century some theatrical performance does represent the interests of other animal species using theatrical modes. For example, it was not possible to miss the spectacle of a graphic onstage slaughter of the full-sized

puppet heifer in Eddie Perfect's comic farce, *The Beast*, which dramatizes anti-meat-eating ethics and draws out the parallel of cannibalism.

The animal is easily recognizable if he or she is a domesticated species or surrogate family member like the pet dog in *Legally Blonde: The Musical*. These fit within patterns of human emotional relationships, and how theatrical performance evokes emotions. Therefore could there be a theatre-specific explanation for instances of species blindness? The animal species presented in theatrical ways which fall outside familiar emotional dynamics may be overlooked.

Jenny Kemp's *Kitten* theatrically presented whale species through recorded sound and a polar bear played by a human appeared in a teasing ironic depiction that evoked human fondness for images of white bears. The performance included symbolic animal figures in spoken language, audible presence and visibility through a human playing a bear in species surrogation. In *Kitten*, the central figure was the ex-singer, Kitten, a widow grieving for her partner, Jonah, who had gone missing at sea. Jonah researched whales and other endangered species, and the spoken text of *Kitten* encompasses animal intelligence, environmental destruction and species survival.

Given that this production was titled *Kitten*, it was surprising to encounter minimal comment on these theatricalised animals in responses to the performance. Clearly such an animal-laden text was about animals. Species blindness obscured the larger point of the performance. The performance of trauma and grief by Kitten was assumed to be the primary purpose – this emotion was stereotypically gendered. Emotional dynamics seemed to overshadow the animal species personae. But as it followed the trajectory of the female character's grief for Jonah, *Kitten* unfolded an idea of human mourning more generally for those lost at sea. It became mourning for the loss of other species and habitat.

In Hannie Rayson's *Extinction*, the four characters represent a straightforward battle between big carbon polluting industry, scientific research, veterinary biology and animal activism with the endangered quoll as the symbolic animal. The central character, Piper, works in a koala breeding program developed by a university research institute and this would receive the funding to find the quoll which is thought virtually extinct in the state of Victoria. The

production of Hannie Rayson's *Extinction* directed by Nadia Tass presented the quoll wrapped in a blanket as the focus of ethical dilemmas about roadkill and veterinary practices in the opening scenes and on film as a living animal at the end. But most reviews of *Extinction* did not identify the quoll as a character. The play presents the urgent need for human action for habitat protection of endangered species exemplified by the tiger quoll alongside environmental protection for the koala, given patterns of disappearance in the context of land use and carbon-induced climate change. It received a good production for its Melbourne season.

I felt that the production captured complex ideas vividly in a clever mix of small group relationships between the characters and the production made the play enjoyable. While reviewers might have questioned the need for the argumentative exchanges, these would have seemed all too commonplace for anyone active in environmental or animal issues – in any case, realist theatre commonly presents characters in tiresome arguments about their emotional lives and relationships that often have no larger point. One reviewer seemed to recognize the quoll in role and the full implications of the play and another acknowledged that the play was about endangered species, but other reviews appreciated the production but skipped over the play's purpose. The reception of a play with animals as characters seems to rely on the pre-existing attunement towards other species that the spectator might bring.

The play's message seemed clear. Committed scientists are working against the odds, and ethically-compromised individuals can be provoked or shown how to contribute to habitat and species preservation – all humans are compromised. The play suggests that the contradictions of human complicity in the demise of other species should not continue to induce inertia or avoidance.

The characters categorize animal species with their emotional reactions. Piper's hopeful idealism that animal species can be saved and given sanctuary is juxtaposed with Heather's pragmatism but attachment to the survival of the university research institute and the quoll. Harry's concern about the quoll manifests his vulnerability in a crisis in his life and becomes bound up with his emotional and sexual interest in the women, whereas Andy's despair and acceptance of death is for himself as well as the impending threat to animal species. *Extinction* presents the importance of human emotional lives to animal survival and care. Emotional

anthropomorphism can be a political strategy at this time. This is what theatrical performance can offer.

Animals can be characters or species persona in theatrical performance and are recognized as such in literature or film, but the emotional patterns need to make other animal species visible. Human-animal emotional relations can limit as well as expand perceptions of other species. Even animals that live with us can be familiar bodies but emotional strangers in the midst of the noisy clatter of human soundscapes. The emotional connections and contradictions can be exposed thoughtfully in provocative ways in performance even though they are not necessarily spoken and explained, and can overcome how unquestioned and unexamined emotional patterns induce species blindness.

Works Cited

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