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Animals and Humans on Stage: Live Performances at Sea World on the Gold Coast

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Abstract

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Keywords: *Sea World, live performance, animals, humans, relations, anthropomorphism, audience.*

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate animal and human relations as constructed, and as demonstrated, through live performances at Sea World on the Gold Coast, Australia. Particular attention is placed upon the meanings generated by the intersection of the starring animals and humans in two narrative-driven productions. The study employs participant observation at three performances of *Fish Detectives* and *Affinity*. Comparison of the two productions determines that the overt anthropomorphism employed in *Fish Detectives* lessens the opportunities to generate understanding of the animals on display. The storyline, combined with the routines employed and the characterisation presented, focuses on the human experience so that little insight into the lives of the sea lions and the pelican is gained. Meanwhile, *Affinity*, as a demonstration with storytelling, sees the animals performing ‘themselves’ within an overarching narrative about dolphin and human relations. It uses anthropomorphism too, but in a subtler way, which encourages human empathy and interest in the dolphins on display. Both productions showcase animals performing routines designed by humans for the entertainment of other humans. The two productions also see animals interacting directly with human performers as they play their roles within the narratives put forward. However, the productions differ when it comes to how they present the animals in performance and how the animals feature in the stories told.

Over the last decade or so, there has been an increase of academic enquiry into animals in live performance and the performance of animality (Desmond; Castellucci; Rosenthal; Ridout, ‘Stage Fright’; Chaudhuri, ‘(De)Facing the Animals’; Peterson; Puchner; Tait, ‘Wild and Dangerous Performances’ and ‘Fighting Nature’; Nance; Boyde; Aloï; Chaudhuri and Hughes; Orozco; Orozco and Parker-Starbuck; Raber and Mattfeld). With the exception of Desmond, these studies interrogate the content of performances presented in circus and theatre environs, or in performance art. This paper contributes to the field with a particular focus upon staged live animal performances in a public aquarium setting. In Sea World’s *Fish Detectives*, the sea lions and pelican ‘stand in’ for human actors performing actions that are framed by human objectives and made humorous as a result. The sea lions and pelican are seen in performance but are not ‘known’ because the emphasis is directed elsewhere. There is little information about sea lions or pelicans, and there is almost no direct reference to the fact that they *are* sea lions or

pelicans by the human performers during the show. In contrast the dolphins in *Affinity* represent dolphins, and their actions are framed by positive stories about human and dolphin encounters. *Affinity*'s human performers, clothed in dark wetsuits, join the dolphins in the water sharing a liminal space, which serves to highlight the similarities between the species and the bonds the two share. Comparison of the two productions explores the intersection of humans and animals as indicators of how animals are presented in performance, and our questionable relationships with them.

Animals and Representation in Performance

[A]nimals in theatre and performance contexts... have been primarily an object for human entertainment. From wild caged animals to tame trained ones, they have been utilised by humans to perform spectacular tricks...to mimic human behaviours or to participate in human-centred activities. (Orozco 19)

Performing animals have either represented humanity's cruelty or dominance, or they have been anthropomorphized embodying human weaknesses (Rosenthal 5). *Fish Detectives* and *Affinity* are guilty of both forms of representation. Yet, by interrogating the content and context of the productions it is possible to consider how such approaches may be used to open up dialogue about human relations with animals for those audiences in attendance. Peterson argues that by analysing performed animal acts, along with taking note of the very presence of animals in performance, we can better understand how humans relate to them, and what this says about us. Cadman agrees that fictional representations of animals 'offer insights into broader sociocultural forces and systems relevant to human-animal relations' (162).

The ways in which we choose to represent animals are direct reflections of our own notions of who they are and how they measure up against us. There is far less opportunity for the positions to be reversed. Animals are unable to speak to us to ensure our representations of them are fair and accurate ' [T]he silence of the animals dooms them to a paradoxically vociferous fate: since they will not speak, they are ceaselessly spoken, cast into a variety of discursive registers, endlessly troped' (Chaudhuri, 'Animal Rites' 511). However, socially

engaged performance can attempt to voice the concerns and desires of those normally excluded, and in doing so make them visible (Carlson 144). Originally focused upon issues of race, class and gender, and later disability and sexual preference, socially engaged performance now potentially provides a space ‘to give voice’ to other species (Rosenthal; Rohman). As such, live performance can be ‘a direct, effective and wide-reaching way to engage in animal rights activism’ (Orozco 54). Particularly when ‘human-animal performances deliver and invite emotional responses in reception’ (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous Performances* 183) and through our experience of emotions we can ‘understand how we remake the world around us’ (7).

Before even entering the performance venues, it is evident that the animals in the productions at Sea World are the drawcards for attendance. The visual representation of the sea lions and dolphins dominates the signage outside. Arguably, neither production would be as attractive to attend, nor as enjoyable to watch, if animals were not performing in them. Certainly, it is not common in Australia to attract 600 or more audience members twice a day, seven days per week, for years on end, to a live theatre event only starring human performers. Through live performance visitors are given *guaranteed* opportunities to see *active* animals who display a variety of physical movements and emit audible sounds; albeit not all necessarily naturally occurring in the wild but all delivered on cue. As Peterson argues, this is what ‘animal performance is selling – simply, the presence of the animal’ (43). This is important because visitors to zoos and aquaria are primarily there to view animals (Wearing and Jobberns 50) – preferably active animals (Carr 40) – and to be entertained (Ballantyne and Packer 194). Live animal performance in such settings enables visitors to experience the ‘intense interaction between the animals and their environments, other animals and humans’ (Desmond 151) in a way that other traditional forms of display cannot achieve. The scripted, choreographed, well-rehearsed spectacles place the animals into the role of performers (Desmond 151) within an entertaining fictional frame instead of ‘subjects under surveillance’ (Boyde 3) in their enclosures.

Audiences snap to attention with audible ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ when a large sea lion waving a flipper arrives on the scene or when six synchronised dolphins fly into the air from the depths of the pool. The rare chance to see beautiful animals, who are normally hidden from humans in

everyday life, is exhilarating. Performance has become an avenue for animals to be made visible and to enable humans to interact with them (Orozco 19). Desmond confirms 'people are willing to pay a lot of money to see bodies which are different from their own, to purchase the right to look, and to believe that through that visual consumption they have come to know something they didn't before' (xiii). Rather than simply watching animals run through a rehearsed series of movements designed by their human trainers (as was the approach taken in the not-too-distant past), audiences are now invited to view the actions through a fictional lens. By wrapping a storyline around the routines, the animals' actions and their interactions with the human performers are given additional layers of meaning. The actions and interactions are now interpreted beyond the physical and understood as cultural cues the audience is familiar with. This can make Sea World's intention to promote an environmental message through performance simpler as audiences can engage more readily with what they are presented with. People prefer to receive information in the form of stories (Parkinson 7) and are drawn to stories that stimulate the imagination and emotion (Hogan; Herman; Haven). By experiencing the performing animals in this way, there is greater potential for the human audiences to look beyond just their physical capacities and to invest in their plights and achievements as portrayed in performance. In turn, they may be more open to engaging with the conservation messages put forward by the stories because they have 'come to know' the animals in a way that they can relate to, and be entertained and inspired by. The medium of performance and the process of storytelling places audiences in an 'imaginative state' (Parkinson 168) and feeds the 'free space of play in their minds' (Svich xv-xvi) opening them up to ideas and opportunities.

The Productions at Sea World

Fish Detectives and *Affinity* each present daily with performances once in the morning and once in the afternoon. To take note of the content of each production and the reactions of the audiences to them, participant observation (Jorgensen) was employed from a seated position in the auditoriums. Three performances of each production were included in the study, with attendance on different days and times. This was to enable triangulation of observation data to check for patterns and anomalies. At the three performances of *Fish Detectives*, approximately 800 people comprised the audience on each occasion. There appeared to be fewer in the audience at each of the *Affinity* performances: approximately 600 people.

Fish Detectives

Fish Detectives is a twenty-minute live performance containing many of the tropes of the well-known detective stories of the 1940s. It is a light-hearted rendering with plenty of puns and slapstick, and the obligatory chase scene. There are nine actors in the show: five humans, three sea lions and one pelican. The show's message stresses that the current practice of overfishing the world's oceans is unsustainable and will have a detrimental effect on all marine life, and humans, if it is not stopped. *Fish Detectives* tells the story of businessman, Baloney and fish-seller, Flounder who are making a lot of money by overfishing the oceans. A Detective with four police officers, including Buddy and Clawde (performed by two sea lions), arrives on the scene and after a brief investigation chases down the villains and arrests them. The Detective gives them the option of avoiding jail if they create a fish sanctuary. Baloney agrees to do this and states 'It is the right thing to do. Now the fish will be safe'.

Ironically, the only fish that appear in this production are those that are fed to the sea lions and the pelican as rewards for successfully performing routines. More ironic is the inclusion of sea lions and a pelican who play human-like characters rather than representing their own species. Apart from the fact that sea lions and pelicans, like other marine animals, are affected by the impact of humans overfishing the oceans, there is little obvious reason for them to be performing in *Fish Detectives*. Little is told about the animals in this production. In fact the

sole reference to the pelican is via the pun ‘If anyone can, Officer Peli-can’. There are some brief facts about the sea lions provided in the pre-show pre-recorded narration, but other than a visual gag and another pun ‘Seal the hatch!’, the performance itself offers little insight into sea lions as a species or their connection to the narrative.

The animals seem to be there to stand-in for human actors. In some ways, it can be considered empowering to see non-humans performing alongside humans as actors in a drama. The animals are not just on stage ‘being themselves’ but are carrying out a series of rehearsed actions at specific times just as the humans are (Ridout, ‘Animal Labour’ 58). As humans we observe the animals doing this and are reminded that they are capable living beings who can learn, follow instruction, and adapt to ‘unnatural surroundings’ by performing in a domestic setting to crowds of onlookers. In this way, they seem quite similar to the human performers on display (Ridout, ‘Animal Labour’ 65). However, in other ways the species-blindness (Tait, ‘Species Blindness’) in performance makes the animals ‘invisible’ to us because the story they inhabit and the characters they represent are human – not only human constructions but reflections of human perspectives and of the human condition. There has been no attempt to discuss the dangers of overfishing from the animals’ perspectives or to employ them to represent sea lions and pelicans in the story.

Right from the outset, the sea lions are viewed as ‘one of the humans’ in the production of *Fish Detectives*. In the opening scene, the audience is introduced to the key characters when Police Officer Buddy (played by a sea lion) enters the performance space sitting in a boat with two human performers (playing police officers) who are also seated in the moving vessel. From then on, the sea lion spends much of his time out of the water, seated or standing upright, and performing other actions that are read as human gestures. This depiction is in keeping with Borrell’s explanation of physically anthropomorphic animals commonly appearing in children’s stories (150-151). These actions are standard routines but given further meaning due to the narrative frame. For example: when he holds his flipper up over his eye and moves his head from side to side this indicates he is looking for the suspects; when he leans his head over and touches his nose on the cheek of a participating audience member this is understood to be a kiss. Where once sea lions in aquariums were watched balancing a beach ball on their noses, here we

see evidence of Buddy's successful police search as he enters the stage 'carrying' on his nose a round bag of money from Baloney's premises.

At other times, we see the sea lions directly engaging in anthropomorphic activities with the human performers, such as when one stands upright leaning against the set alongside a human performer who takes on a similar stance. The two are then 'frisked' by another human performer who, in the role of police officer, checks to see neither is in possession of illegal fish. Here where the sea lion and human physically behave in the same way standing side by side, it seems as if they are of the same species: human. It is the anthropomorphism of the narrative and characterisation that instantly leads us to this conclusion. If presented in a different way, the audience could have better understood this moment as one to illustrate the similarities and differences of the two species to better appreciate what we have in common (Burns 16), rather than seeing a 'clever' animal copying what we humans do.

Many of the routines generate laughter in the audience. However, it is not so much that the audience is encouraged to laugh *at* the animals on show, but to laugh at moments when their actions are recognised as human traits. Laughter is the product of humans enjoying seeing non-humans behaving like us and performing actions that we find funny. For Orozco, this 'contributes to the naturalisation of performance as a human-only activity in which animals are shaped for human entertainment' (49). It is an example of humans forcing other animals 'to perform *us*, to ceaselessly serenade us with our own fantasies' (Chaudhuri, 'Animal Rites' 511). For others it is a method to aid human understanding of non-human animals because 'We process more deeply when we receive ... in a form that resembles individual experience' (Tooby and Cosmides 24). By demonstrating that humans and other animals (in this case sea lions and a pelican) share similarities the actions can help humans to identify with the animals. As Burns argues, 'If such identification translates to a desire to learn about, and act ethically towards them, then anthropomorphism can have benefits for both humans and nonhumans' (8). Judging by the enthusiastic audience response to these moments, it is possible that this approach has helped to open minds and hearts to the prospect of positive human-animal relations. However, when the humorous scenes are examined alongside all of the other examples of anthropomorphic representation in the performance, the learning opportunities are dubious.

By way of an example, we see the character of Police Officer Buddy take a large pen from one of the police officers (performed by a human) so that he can do an identity sketch. One of the human performers holds a large piece of paper vertically in front of the sea lion, and the animal moves his head around with the pen held in his mouth pointed toward the paper as if he was drawing on the page. This is funny because we can personally relate to drawing a picture and we are aware of police officers using identikits to help find suspects, and here this scenario is performed by a sea lion, an animal that would normally not be connected with police work. This scene is milked for additional humour when the paper is turned around to face the audience and reveals a painting of the *Mona Lisa*. Familiarity with the famous image combined with the absurdity of its replication via a quick pen sketch ensures this scene is amusing. The humour is enhanced by the fact that the joke has been delivered by a performing sea lion who is now positively regarded by the audience as a comedian. It is a further example of an animal standing in for a human because this scene is a recognised old joke normally performed by a human comic. Therefore, the ‘sealness’ of the sea lion is understated in this and many others examples from *Fish Detectives*.

Affinity

Affinity is a twenty-minute live performance in the form of demonstration with narration. A narrator speaks directly to the audience about the history of dolphin and human interaction over the ages, while six Pacific bottle-nosed dolphins and four human trainers/performers undertake a variety of stunts together in the pool. Again, the frame narratives provide a further layer of meaning to the spectacular acts. At a point in each show, one of the trainers talks to the audience about one of the dolphins. Personal information is given about the dolphin’s age, personality, how long s/he has lived at Sea World, and the friendship the two share. At another point in *Affinity*, an audience member is chosen to interact with the dolphins by following the instructions of a trainer to instigate further routines in the pool. The overarching theme of the production is to encourage humans to save the environment to protect wild dolphins. This in turn, will ensure human relations with dolphins will continue. The narrator says, ‘6000 year old

cave paintings in Norway feature dolphins. If we wish to enable future generations to experience these animals we need to protect the oceans’.

Thus, *Affinity* showcases the dolphins as dolphins, and tells stories directly about wild dolphins as represented by those captive at Sea World. This approach differs from the ‘human stand-ins’ of the *Fish Detectives* example. Here the dolphins are understood to be performing themselves, or at least ‘performing a fiction of themselves as wild’ (Desmond 151). With the aid of facts about dolphins, provided by pre-show audio-recorded announcements, along with live narration during the stunts, the audiences observe the dolphins’ movements and interactions to better understand the animals. Further to this, they see the four humans engaging directly with the animals in the pool to produce impressive collaborative displays. ‘Such performance offers a pleasurable distanced fantasy of a cross-species encounter ... [o see] a magical human transcending the species barrier’ (Peterson 44). *Affinity* highlights the shared experience of human and animal in the liminal space of the water, with the humans dressed in dark wetsuits looking a little like the dolphins rather than the other way around. However, the stunts are ultimately designed by humans for human entertainment and some of the actions undertaken by the dolphins might not necessarily be naturally performed in their daily lives or when living in the wild.

Likewise, the stories told about the dolphins are all positive and they focus on the cleverness and friendliness of the animals, yet, they are all told from the human perspective, and primarily centre on the relationships between dolphins and humans, rather than on the dolphins themselves. The key message from the production is if humans wish to continue relations with wild dolphins then we need to protect the environment. This is instead of, say, promoting through the narrative the need to protect the environment for its own sake and for the sake of dolphins living on Earth independent of human contact. The narrator shares with the audience tales of human and dolphin relationships to encourage us to feel positively toward the animals, and to almost perceive them as ‘one of us’. He speaks of many friendly encounters between dolphins and sailors and surfers. To demonstrate this via performing a routine, one of the trainers glides along the pool’s surface on a stand-up paddleboard while the dolphins swim under the water and then launch themselves up and over him. The routine is spectacular but is given

further meaning by the story, which frames the trainer as ‘an average joe’ out on the bay who encounters wild dolphins. The scene suggests that moments like these do not occur solely at Sea World, but can be wonderful opportunities for anyone who happens to be in the right place at the right time. The narrative not only frames the animals’ actions as non-threatening to humans, it goes further to suggest their display is an open acknowledgement of human presence in their waters and a willingness to initiate friendly contact.

In another example, the narrator draws the audience’s attention to a particular dolphin in history, Pelorus Jack, who we are told was the first dolphin to be protected by law in 1904. From 1888 to 1912, this dolphin voluntarily guided ships through a dangerous passage between the North and South Islands of New Zealand (Hutching). Whether the dolphin genuinely attempted to assist (which was the popular thinking of the time), or whether he simply enjoyed swimming at the bow of the ships, his actions apparently saved human lives and so garnered great respect, and wonder, by humans around the world. By ‘interpreting (his) behaviour in the same terms as we use for our own behaviour’ (Burns 8) humans could feel empathy for Pelorus Jack and so a social bond was created between the species. His story is replicated on a small scale in the pool, where the performing dolphins swim at the bow of a rigid inflatable boat powered by an outboard motor and driven by a trainer. By providing a context for the display, audiences are prompted to ponder dolphin motivations and to consider that their interactions with humans are perhaps more meaningful and thoughtful than they had realised.

However, it is important to note what is missing from the story as presented in *Affinity*. The narrator omits from the tale that Pelorus Jack was later shot and killed by persons unknown, who were left unpunished. To share this aspect of the story with the audience would undermine *Affinity*’s goal to focus Sea World visitors on the positive relationships humans have had with dolphins over the ages. It would sully the notion of ourselves as respectful, grateful, law-abiding people as told through the story. As such, it makes sense that *Affinity* avoids telling Pelorus Jack’s downfall because through stories, we ‘present ourselves to others and to ourselves’ (Bruner, ‘Self-Making and World-Making’ 29) and in doing so we construct the self which constructs our culture (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 16). Sea World hopes to promote the more positive aspects of human relations with dolphins and so through storytelling helps to

‘shape our conception of the past’ (Bruner, ‘Narrative, Culture, and Mind’ 45) through the omission.

Another form of storytelling in *Affinity* that personalises the dolphins and helps to demonstrate human and animal rapport, is the moment in the performance when a trainer talks to the audience about one of the dolphins in the show. Different trainers and dolphins are featured at different performances but at each occasion, points are made to give the audience insight into the dolphins’ lives and their relationships. The trainer and dolphin come to the shallow end of the pool by the auditorium where they can be clearly seen. As the trainer speaks to the audience, s/he strokes the animal, smiles when regularly looking at the animal, and squats down in close proximity to the animal throughout. All of these actions communicate to the audience that the trainer likes the dolphin and feels comfortable in his/her presence. The dolphin’s response to the trainer’s actions is passive, quietly lying alongside the human during the speech. As such, it appears that the dolphin is content to interact with the trainer in this way and trusts that the human will not hurt or startle. Watching the body language between the dolphin and human while listening to information about their bond helps to reinforce the theme of affinity between the species.

In one performance, twenty-year-old Cohen is featured with his similarly-aged human male trainer. The trainer explains that Cohen is the only male dolphin in the show and has eleven girlfriends and one daughter at Sea World. The fact that the trainer telling the story is a young man helps the audience to align him with the dolphin and to see them as mates. His talk of many girlfriends is reminiscent of mates bragging and of youthful obsession with sex. It could be argued that this anthropomorphic discourse helps to build an emotional connection with the dolphin and can lead the audience to better understand and respect him (Burns 8). The trainer goes on to say that each dolphin has a unique personality, and that Cohen is happy-go-lucky and friendly. He is always a joy for the trainer to come to work with and spend time with each day. The trainer states, ‘You can’t lie to a dolphin and they can’t lie to you. You have a relationship based on trust’. Again, the notion of lying or telling untruths is a human construct placed upon human encounters with a captive animal. To further reinforce their strong friendship, the trainer gets out of the pool and walks along in front of the auditorium. Cohen swims alongside him in

the pool and splashes him by repeatedly hitting the water with his tail. The audience and the trainer laugh at this, and this rehearsed ‘playful and cheeky moment’ works to emphasise the dolphin’s happy nature and to show the camaraderie between the two of them. Certainly, this narrative imbues a sense of companionship between the two species and in particular, makes it quite simple to perceive the dolphins as similar to pet dogs (Sickler et al 375).

Power Relations

Human and animal performers

In *Fish Detectives* and *Affinity* the animals and humans perform alongside each other. Each has a role to play in the productions and relies on the others to play their part. Like all performers onstage, they need to trust that the other will act as rehearsed so that the scenes will be presented as planned. This is particularly important when performing routines that require exact timing and placement so to avoid possible injury. It could be that their shared status as performers presents them as equals in the audience’s eyes. However, it is impossible to miss the humans onstage giving fish as rewards to the animals after they perform a routine. They are rewarded for ‘follow[ing] the commands of the human and [are] praised for having acquired human-like skills (the most important of which is acting on cue)’ (Orozco 26). The rewards, and the giving of the rewards, are not framed by the narratives. Instead, they jolt the audience momentarily from the fiction and remind us that the humans onstage hold power over the animals. The rewards indicate that the actions by the animals are not really the outcome of characters’ motivations nor are they voluntary and spontaneous, but are a set of rehearsed routines as required by the human trainers. As Ridout argues, ‘there is an uneasy sense that the animal on stage, unless very firmly tethered to a human being who looks like he or she owns it, is there against its will, or if not its will, at least its best interests’ (‘Animal Labour’ 58). Yet, as indicated earlier it is the animals in performance that are the drawcard for audiences. If the animals were not in the shows, the attendance levels would be much lower. The animals are the star performers so can be seen to be more powerful than the humans on stage. As well as being more popular, they are also more impressive due to their physical prowess, strength and beauty.

With the help of a storyline and anthropomorphic characterisation, they are also funnier and more heroic than the humans. So arguably the original assessment of seeing the animals and humans as equals in performance could hold true as the rewards given (human power) and the greater popular appeal (animal power) cancel each other out.

Performers and Audience

In *Fish Detectives*, a member of the audience is ‘selected’ to participate in the drama when a sea lion moves along in front of the first row and bellows at a person seated in the auditorium. This person then makes her way to the stage where she is encouraged to stand close to the sea lion who is significantly larger.¹ When she is prompted by a human performer to place her hand on the sea lion, he turns his head and ‘kisses’ the audience member on the cheek. This interaction enables the individual to be in close proximity to the sea lion, to touch the animal and to have the animal touch her. The audience member is playing out the audience collective’s fantasy of animal contact – wishing to touch animals and wishing to be touched by them (Peterson 44). However, there is an element of danger in this encounter because if the sea lion chooses to change his ‘trained behaviour’ in this scene, he could easily injure the audience member by biting, or propelling himself on her, or pushing her into the pool close by. Yet it is the ever-present risk of things possibly going wrong that adds to the excitement and to the visitors’ attraction to the performance (Orozco 57). The fact the heavy sea lion chooses not to injure the audience member or deviate from the rehearsed behaviour during the encounter on any of the three occasions observed, implies he is not threatened by the human stranger and may perceive her as just another human performer partnering with him in the show. His willingness to interact with her furthers a sense of genuine animal and human geniality in the audience. Overall, the sea lion as performer is more powerful in this exchange because it is the audience member who is the outsider entering into the performance space.

In two of the three *Affinity* performances a child from the audience is chosen to command the dolphins to perform routines, thus demonstrating the animals are able to read the signs made by the audience member and behave accordingly. The dolphins have learnt to

associate certain human gestures with a request for particular physical action from them, regardless of who makes the gesture. The scene empowers a young child with the ability to instruct a group of dolphins to perform and to reward them with fish for their cooperation. This aligns the child with the role and power of the trainer and in doing so, aligns the audience with this same role as we live vicariously through the participating child. This scenario places the human audience in a dominant position over the dolphins, which could be seen as ‘a public demonstration of humans’ dominance over the natural world’ (Orozco 57). Yet, by placing the child at the rear of the performance space the action of this scene is physically removed quite a distance from the audience seated in the auditorium. This lessens the sense of power over the dolphins and it is not as engaging as the action that occurs close-by in the direct audience animal interaction presented in the other performance.

In this scenario, the dolphin and the child are directly in front of the audience at the base of the auditorium. The child squats down at dolphin level and is invited to reach out and gently touch the dolphin. During this encounter, the dolphin is prompted by the trainer to ‘speak’ to the child. Due to the proximity of the child to the audience it is possible to observe his facial expressions and so we can witness the delight and the awe of this participating audience member. We can hear the ‘cute’ sounds the dolphin makes and we can see the dolphin looking at the child. Living vicariously through this audience member is a far more engaging and emotional experience than the other encounter because we can sense a direct and personal connection between one human and one animal. This ‘connection’ is likely because the ‘humanoid qualities’ (Desmond 166) of the dolphin, such as the facial structure complete with wide smile, and his/her communicative and interactive abilities (Desmond 168) invite us to identify with the animal and to perceive a meaningful shared experience. A feeling of personal connection is also generated by the way animal performances induce human emotional responses (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous Performances* 2). Within the frame of the performance, and as read by humans, animals can perform emotions through their bodies and actions (Tait, *Wild and Dangerous Performances* 3). The physical closeness of the dolphin and child, the stillness of the dolphin’s body combined with his/her responsive and direct eye contact with the child, signals to the audience that the dolphin has entered into a genuine exchange with this audience

member. The power relations have changed in this exchange as the child is now positioned at water level and at dolphin level, and is now 'the outsider' welcomed in to an environment that is home to the captive dolphin. Although the human trainer is present and is responsible for shaping the dolphin's actions and interactions with the child, the dolphin is seen as more powerful in this exchange with the audience member due to his/her comparative age, size, and strength.

The audiences' high attention levels and regular applause indicates *Fish Detectives* and *Affinity* are effective in entertaining Sea World visitors. However, it is unclear whether the audiences grasped the conservation messages and developed a deeper respect for the animals (and those they represent in the wild) by encountering them through performance. Some audience reactions were troubling because they seemed to indicate a gulf of separation between human and animal, rather than stronger connections between them. At the conclusion of *Fish Detectives*, one of the sea lions enters from behind the set to the stage at the rear of the pool. The sea lion is wearing a large sign around his neck that says 'The End'. He sits stationary on the stage bellowing out to the audience. In all three of the performances attended, the majority of audience members were observed to ignore the sea lion and walk out of the venue without any acknowledgement or appreciation of the animal performing onstage. Would they have done this if he had been human?

A similar disregard for the dolphins before, and after, the performances of *Affinity* was noted. As audience members make their way in to, and out of, the performance venue some of the dolphins slowly swim around in the pool at the front of the stage. Very few people in the audience appear to notice this as they are too absorbed in their own activity. Some walk right by dolphins that are floating on their sides looking directly at them. There is no physical barrier between the audience members and the dolphins who float along only a metre or two away. There does seem to be a non-visible barrier though. It is not clear whether the audience members of *Fish Detectives* and *Affinity* are disrespectful or just unobservant. Either way, it seems that for some people the animals only exist during the performances. It is as if they are simply a prop or tool for the performances, solely designed to please and to entertain. Once outside of this frame they become invisible, just a part of the background in a themed tourist park. This is

reminiscent of Chaudhuri's explanation that 'the fundamental fact about animals, is that *they do not speak*. All other 'others' have capitulated to the discursive imperative of modernity' ('Animal Rites' 511). As such those 'others' (such as children, people with a mental illness, and Indigenous persons) are arguably now heard and given consideration. However, the sea lion calling out to the audience and looking out at the crowd remains silent in the minds of those who ignore him. So too, the dolphins are silenced by the disregard of those who walk right by them.

Conclusion

Fish Detectives and *Affinity* provide the chance to explore the intersection of humans and animals in performance as indicators of how animals, and our relationships with them, are presented to us. A comparison of the two narrative-driven live productions at Sea World on the Gold Coast finds that different approaches are employed to entertain and inform the human audiences, and showcase the animals on display. The overt anthropomorphism employed in *Fish Detectives* lessens the opportunities to generate understanding of, and emotional engagement with, the sea lions and pelican. Audiences are likely to feel positively about the animals because they perform on cue, they play the role of good characters, they display some amazing physical feats, and their actions are understood to be funny. However, the human emphasis means that the audience learns little about the real animals. Meanwhile, the demonstration with storytelling in *Affinity* sees the animals performing 'themselves' within an overarching narrative about dolphin and human relations. There is a greater sense of knowing the dolphins due to the facts and stories told about them, and by seeing these played out in the pool in the form of impressive stunts. Their direct interaction with the human performers in the water appears to reflect a simpatico relationship, which encourages human empathy and interest in the dolphins on display.

There is an interesting dichotomy present in both productions, which on the one hand, sees the animals as powerless pawns performing for humans in a human entertainment. Audiences may be reminded of the dominance of humans and of our exerted control over other animals and the natural environment. Yet on the other hand, the productions highlight the very

real capacity for performing animals to stand as equals alongside human actors and to collaborate with them to help communicate stories. To observe this collaboration and to engage in the stories told may also remind audiences that we, as multiple species, are all in this together. We all reside on the one Earth and our lives continually intersect and impact upon the other. How much all of this is considered and retained beyond performance is unknown. To discover audience attitudes and awareness before and after attendance an audience reception study is required. The next stage of this research aims to survey audiences at Sea World performances to better understand: what they already know about the featured animals and associated environmental issues before encountering the performances; how they engage with the content and respond to the depictions of the animals and humans on display; and whether their knowledge, interest and empathy for the animals has increased as a result of attending the productions.

Note

¹ At each of the three performances I attended, a woman was selected from the audience. This is most likely because the creators of *Fish Detectives* would think it more appropriate for a male seal to 'kiss' a female human.

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