(Foot)Ball Gowns: Masculinities, Sexualities and the Politics of Performance

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In 1994 rugby league star Ian Roberts and the gay-themed film The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert both came out. In a period of Australian filmmaking where kitsch was king — à la Strictly Ballroom and Muriel’s Wedding — Priscilla, with its colourful language and costumes rocketed to national and international success, earning itself an American Academy Award and a degree of critical acclaim along the way. For Ian Roberts, the road was not so smooth and following his outing there were not just family and friends to deal with but the rugby league fraternity and its public. Reactions of this public to Roberts’ declaration of his sexual identity ranged from admiration for his courage to accusations that ‘[y]ou are not even an animal. Your parents will disown you and you will die alone soon. AIDS will finish you in hell. There is no such word to hide behind as gay ... You are pure filth and will die SOON!’

What kinds of discourses of gender and sexuality are at work in the trajectories of these two incidents in Australian culture, one from sport and the other from film?

Sport and film have been crucial to the construction of Australian national identity. Within these contexts, the performance of the male body is central; however, not just theatrical or sporting performance, but the performance of masculinity itself. Judith Butler suggests that the body ‘is not a “being”, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality’. I examine how bodies that potentially complicate this ‘compulsory’ heterosexual regime enter into dialogue with hegemonic masculinity. I first offer a reading of the corporeal inscriptions of gender and sexuality on the body of Ian Roberts as represented in Paul Freeman’s 1997 biography, Ian Roberts: Finding Out and examine to what degree Roberts’ outing can be considered a disruption of hegemonic (heterosexual) masculinity. I then argue that if Roberts’ body can be scrutinised in such a way then the heterosexual bodies of the actors in Priscilla must also undergo analysis for their (mis)appropriations of queer performance. While it may seem incongruous to juxtapose a reading of a fictional filmic text with a biographical account, my focus is not simply the narrative of Priscilla but the way both director Stephan Elliott’s casting decisions and the extradiegetic constructions of the actors’ masculinities compromise what might appear to be the film’s queer politics.

Where Freeman’s biography of Roberts is concerned, critical readings of autobiography and biography are problematic, as ‘the line between reviewing someone’s book and someone’s life can seem closer than is comfortable’. Damien Millar writes that Ian Roberts: Finding Out is ‘both frustrating and rewarding: the former when author Freeman speaks over and for the subject, footy legend Ian Roberts, and the latter when he allows Roberts (and others) to speak for themselves without his often awkward though occasionally contextually necessary commentary’.
I am primarily concerned with the representation of the male bodies in both *Finding Out* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and I ask how these bodies are articulated by the often contradictory sexual inscriptions upon their surfaces. I highlight the difficulty of reconciling a queer subjectivity with hegemonic heterosexual performance (as exemplified by Roberts) and, conversely, the ease with which heterosexuality can co-opt queer (with *Priscilla* as an example) and contain it within the broader concerns of the maintenance of national identity.

It is important to make it clear at this point that I am aware that the term ‘queer’ is not an unproblematic one and that it is, itself, a site of heated political contestation and debate. However, the scope of this article dictates a somewhat limited and admittedly reductionist use and will signify a position that challenges or resists the hegemony of heterosexuality. Or, as Alexander Doty puts it, one that is ‘contra-, non-, or anti-straight’.

Out of their League: ‘Queering’ Football?

In men’s sport there is often a marked overlap between the performance of sport and the performance of masculinity. Bob Connell has noted the importance of the ‘bodily sense of masculinity’ to men, the way physical performance is crucial to masculine identities. Connell argues that in order ‘to say that a particular form of masculinity is hegemonic means that it is culturally exalted and that its exaltation stabilises a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole. To be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes’. Sport thus provides the heroes that hegemonic masculinity needs for survival; the body of the sporting hero exhibits the physical signs of strength, speed and agility. In a context such as rugby league, where players are known for their size, skill and strength, the body is constructed as a weapon for the physical domination of other men. However, where the rugby league body may be seen as one that can ‘pass itself off as a kind of armour’, a body that ‘is seen as existing for itself and against others’, the self-consciously muscular gay body is constructed not to repel other men, but to attract them. It is this disjunction between the cultural meanings of the homosexual and heterosexual body that makes Ian Roberts’ declaration of his sexuality such an important moment in the history of Australian masculinity. When Roberts posed naked for the gay magazine *Blue* in 1994, he collapsed this division between heterosexual and homosexual performance in a flash of naked flesh.

In an article that investigates the possibility of ‘queering’ football, Heather Brook explores the sexist, homophobic nature of rugby league but she also identifies its homoeroticism. Brook points out that ‘although football is a violent sport, it also brings men’s bodies into contact with each other in intimate, somewhat erotic and at times, surprisingly tender ways’. The sporting field is, indeed, one of — if not the sole — social context in which heterosexual men are allowed to show affection for one another. This affection is, however, spatially contingent: the field and the post-game locker-room are the only social spaces where such behaviour is sanctioned. Anywhere beyond the arena and as soon as the jerseys come off, the taboos on male physical affection reign supreme.

While Brook is correct in calling attention to the homoerotics of football, the fact that the sporting arena is a site that is always already marked as heterosexual cannot be forgotten. The excesses of heterosexual male performance that are borne by
the bodies of rugby league players means that the degree to which the ‘homoerotics’ of the football encounter can be considered disruptive or subversive is, to my mind, limited. However, when one of these bodies—a player famous for his toughness, aggression and physical domination of other men reveals that he is gay, it is not only the taken-for-granted heterosexuality of the football encounter that is under threat. With the change in sexual coding of just one of its bodies, this seemingly impenetrable fortress of the masculinist world of rugby league and all its ensuing misogyny and homophobia also suffers a blow as crushing as one of Roberts’ famous tackles.13

Even if the entrenched homophobia of rugby league culture, detailed in Freeman’s book, continued following Roberts’ outing, the fact is that the footybrothering fraternity was forced to confront the existence of the queer body among its ranks. The weekly television program The Footy Show (well known for its misogynistic attitudes and sexist and homophobic humour) even ran a panel to talk about homosexuality in football in which Ian Roberts participated. However, throwing into relief this ostensibly open-minded approach, Paul ‘Fatty’ Vautin, one of The Footy Show hosts and an ex-player, let it slip that he had heard that Ian was gay but had doubted the authenticity of the rumour because he thought Roberts was ‘a good bloke’.14 Despite the fact that Vautin later apologised for this statement, his attitude characterises the reception that rugby league gave Ian Roberts following the declaration of his homosexuality. What becomes apparent in Freeman’s biography of the football star is that the rugby league community’s ‘acceptance’ of Roberts is mediated through his body. It is not the acceptance of homosexuality that wins him a place in the rugby league world but rather his ability to perform heterosexual masculinity: a masculinity that is first and foremost bodily.

‘Hitting Blokes’: Ian Roberts’ Violent Resistance

The effort to balance the demands of a heterosexist world with a queer identity is a process familiar to many non-heterosexual people. This delicate juggling act is particularly visible in Ian Roberts: Finding Out due to Roberts’ location in the aggressively homophobic world of rugby league. In his examination of the experiences of gay athletes, Brian Pronger has argued that gay men in general ‘employ masculine and feminine behaviours at will, depending on the social context and what they are trying to express’.15 This social fluidity is, according to Pronger, an important element of gay subjectivity. However, the representation of Ian Roberts in Freeman’s book is not about putting on and taking off masculine and feminine behaviours, so much an attempt to negotiate opposing versions of masculinity. While the very existence of an openly gay man in the national rugby league competition may work to problematise heterosexual hyper-masculinity, the way the football world and its culture manages this gay body is crucial.

Finding Out is a veritable litany of violent incidents. According to Roberts himself, his teenage years were marked by confusion over his sexuality and, with it, a pronounced tendency toward violence as he ‘wanted to fight everyone. All the time. Over anything! If anyone ever laughed at me I would challenge them ... I would never hit anyone first, though’.16 Roberts speaks of these tendencies in past-tense terms: ‘That’s what I was like’ but, by the text’s own admission, his adulthood has seen its fair share of fighting both on and off the field.17 In 1991 Roberts was sued by Balmain player Gary Jack for assault after the latter was injured in an on-
field altercation. Roberts gave an interview to *The Sunday Telegraph* in which he expresses remorse over the incident but also some chagrin, saying that what upset him the most about the whole incident was that he had been ‘painte as a coward and a thug’.18

Roberts justifies his violent behaviour by arguing that he had simply been defending a team mate who was being assaulted by Jack. He claims that he regrets his actions and that ‘[n]inety-nine times out of a hundred I wouldn’t have done it’ because ‘hitting blokes’ is ‘not in my make-up’.19 This claim contrasts strongly with the oral testimony of both Roberts and his friends in the justification of Roberts’ violence in Freeman’s book. For instance, one friend, Lee Slattery, ‘can recall countless incidents where Ian leapt to his defence over-protectively’;20 and Freeman relates several stories of Roberts smashing his hand through car windows; threatening to put bricks through the windows of people’s houses whilst yelling intimidations like: ‘I know where you live’;21 telling friends that, ‘from now on, if anyone says anything to me, I will just give it to them!’22 and, on the field, after another homophobic slur from an opposing player, telling a referee that if it happened one more time he was going to ‘rip [the player’s] throat out’.23 Certainly, these ‘outbursts’ were all motivated by homophobic vilification, and there is some pleasure to be had in the ‘fighting fire with fire’ nature of this kind of resistance.

Yet Roberts’ insurgency ultimately subscribes to the very thing it attempts to retard. Donald Sabo and Joe Panepinto have identified the significant contribution of football to the maintenance and celebration of hegemonic masculinity and its concomitant valorisation of male violence:

Football’s historical prominence in sport, media and folk culture has sustained a hegemonic model of masculinity that prioritizes competitiveness, ascetism, success (winning), aggression, violence, superiority to women, and respect for and compliance with male authority.24

Indeed, Roberts himself accepts abuse and vilification as, literally, part of the game.25 His violence is arbitrary, however, and is based upon a measure of masculine worth that derives its currency from heterosexist football culture. Frank Cookson, at one time Roberts’ coach, tells of an incident in a bar where a man Roberts knew ‘had a go at Ian one night. And Ian copped it sweet, and let it blow over his shoulder because he had a bit of respect for the bloke’.26 Despite this man’s homophobia, Roberts admired his ability to be a man: he ‘had a bit of respect for the bloke’. Sabo and Panepinto’s description of football as ‘a type of male interaction that perpetuates male privilege through dominance bonding’ is clearly applicable here.27 In *Finding Out*, both Roberts and Freeman like to believe that Roberts’ sexuality was largely accepted by the footballing fraternity, including his ‘mates’ in the game. Certainly, Roberts reports positive and supportive reactions to his sexuality from some individual players but by and large the reaction to his sexuality is, again, mediated through his body and its ability to make the difference in a football game. Tugger Coleman tells Freeman that ‘nobody gave a stuff’ about Roberts’ sexuality because he ‘was doing a job for us, and he was doing a bloody good job. It was his personality too. It would have been different if he was a real bastard’.28

Roberts’ selection for the Kangaroo tour of Britain in 1994 is, for Freeman, a mark of the ‘fairness’ of the Australian Rugby League: even though Roberts had
not come out publicly, his ‘alternative lifestyle’ was well-known and selectors would have been aware that he was gay. Freeman believes this meant that the ‘people [Roberts] respected in the game were good men, egalitarian in the true league spirit. Even though they may have found it difficult at times to understand him, they did not allow that to get in the way of their professionalism’.

What Roberts, and Freeman with him, has failed to see is that the so-called ‘professionalism’ of the rugby league fraternity is, in reality, thinly veiled homophobia. Roberts’ gratitude to the organisation is painfully misplaced and does nothing to advance the position of gays in heterosexist society: he is grateful that they let him play, despite his sexuality. What this demonstrates is not the good natures of the men at the top of rugby league but the appropriation of a queer body by a culture that would, in any other circumstance, revile it. Roberts is licensed to inhabit the heterosexual world of rugby league only by virtue of his powerful body. This renders his body a site of confusion of sexual coding which has, to a degree, contributed to the destabilisation of the seeming monolith of heterosexual masculinity. Ultimately Roberts’ body is a tool of rugby league which is itself an expression of a particular kind of Australian masculinity. It is only toward the end of *Ian Roberts: Finding Out*, after relating his bad contractual experiences with the Manly Football Club, that Roberts ruefully remarks: ‘[y]ou are only meat, mate. You are only meat’.

**Playing Queer**

The year 1994 could be said to be one of relatively high visibility for gay men in Australia. Along with the controversy of Ian Roberts’ outing, it saw the release of the gay-themed film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Against the difficulties Roberts’ experienced with the public declaration of his homosexuality, I want to examine the process by which *Priscilla* turns queer into mainstream cultural capital.

Famous for his role in the long-running Australian soap opera, *Neighbours*, Guy Pearce was a favoured hearthrob of many an Australian schoolgirl in the 1980s. The reviewer for *The San Francisco Chronicle* expresses surprise at this fact, commenting that Pearce ‘is supposedly a hearthrob in Australia but in *Priscilla* you’d never know it. He wears a turquoise wig like he’s been wearing them all his life’. Tabloid magazine *New Idea* also bought into the confusion of sexual coding of Pearce’s body with a by-line on the front cover of an October 1994 issue that ran: ‘Guy Pearce: I’m not a weirdo’. The implication of the cover statement is that he is not a weirdo (that is, a drag queen or a homosexual) like the one he played in the film. This statement refers to the fact that Pearce has not attended Australia’s premier acting school. In the body of the article Pearce says: ‘I have faith in myself now and I don’t feel like a weirdo because I’m not like every other NIDA actor’.

John Champagne has argued that *Priscilla, Muriel’s Wedding and Strictly Ballroom* can all be read as gay films because all three engage a certain ‘camp’ sensibility. One of the examples he takes to support his claim is Paul Mercurio. Champagne writes that ‘extra textual knowledge that *Strictly Ballroom*’s Scott, actor Paul Mercurio, is trained as a serious dancer, invites readings of the actor as himself queer’. Champagne is an American critic and, while his analysis of the three films is insightful, when seen within an Australian context, his argument can...
be turned around and used against itself. Paul Mercurio is married with children and has been involved in advertising such things as breakfast cereal and four wheel drive cars. As such, he appears as an image of the archetypal family man. The same can be said of Priscilla’s Hugo Weaving who has been featured more than once in the pages of Who Weekly with his wife and two children. Although a queer film does not necessarily require queer actors to fill its roles, I want to call into question the claim that this film is authentically queer in the Australian context.

When planning the production of Priscilla, writer/director Stephan Elliott asked the organisers of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras if they would be willing to donate costumes from past parades. Elliott has described how the organisers responded enthusiastically and requested to see the script. It was subsequently returned, accompanied by a steadfast refusal of the Mardi Gras to have anything whatsoever to do with the film due to what the organisers saw as the film’s racist, sexist and homophobic narrative. When asked why he cast three well-known heterosexual actors to play Bernadette, Adam and Tic, Elliott initially insists that he had ‘used the best actors for the roles’, but then goes on to expose his own sexual politics by revealing that he could have ‘gone the Julian Clary or Danny La Rue route’, but that he had wanted to cast ‘against type’. The inclusion of Terence Stamp as the transsexual, Bernadette, was based upon the ‘best-known older heterosexual icon’ that Elliott could think of. Guy Pearce, Elliott continues, is ‘a pretty butch character, presently riding a horse around on [The Man From Snowy River], and I said “Let’s turn him into a mincing queen”’. Hugo Weaving’s general popularity means, according to Elliott, that he can do just about anything with the approval of the movie-going public. It is clear then that Elliott’s own reading of the (hetero)sexual coding of these men’s bodies was clearly one of the primary determining factors in his casting decisions.

‘A Really Nice Opportunity’: (Mis)appropriating Queer Performance

Certainly in its revisioning of the ‘road movie’ genre, as well as its ingenious positioning of the feathers and sequins of the drag queens atop the stark red earth of the Northern Territory, Elliott’s film makes a compelling claim to a place for ‘other’ sexualities and alternative gender performances within Australian national discourse. However, taking into account the heterosexual coding of the bodies that are placed in this position, what other textual possibilities might be presented by Elliott’s film? How might Priscilla be read through the frame of a heterosexual masculinity?

In Vested Interests Marjorie Garber suggests that ‘one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of “female” and “male”’. She posits the cross-dresser as a figure of disruption and disturbance of the gender binary, indeed, she argues that this is ‘precisely the place, and the role, of the transvestite’. In his analysis of The Crying Game, Shantanu DuttaAhmed rejects the somewhat indiscriminate assumptions of this statement and argues that ‘[w]hat Garber’s argument subdues are the political realities governing who is allowed to perform; Garber seems to suggest that any performance is subversive and politically useful’. DuttaAhmed’s comment cuts to the core of the representation of transvestism in Priscilla. While the film presents a visual case for queer in national discourse, the politically subversive possibilities Priscilla may have had are subsumed by its
dependence on heterosexuality and heterosexist stereotypes, both extradiegetically and within the film’s narrative.

Elizabeth McMahon has argued that in Australian culture the figure of the transvestite is:

variously in transit, of transience, and an agent of transport across discrete categories of classification. This capacity functions at a literal level in that Australian transvestite narratives are most often journeys … Yet these transvestite journeys and wanderings are also metaphorical in that they represent an internalised sense of displacement and of exile.43

Priscilla is certainly a quest narrative and in this sense McMahon is correct; however, her article tends towards the assumption of cross-dressing as a uniform category and does not take into account the significance of sexuality in this equation. The question of who is allowed to perform and what these performances mean is crucial. Indeed, in late twentieth century Australian culture, hegemonic masculinity has a very particular relationship to cross-dressing, one that is in evidence almost every week on The Footy Show as the footballers dress up in women’s clothes for musical numbers or parodies of recent television commercials. As Heather Brook writes, ‘Fatty and Blocker [two of the show’s hosts] look funny in dresses because they are striving to perform as quintessential “blokes”’.44 Donning a dress, wig and heels for these men is no threat to their hyper-masculinity, on the contrary, it is due to the safety of their positions that they are allowed to perform in this way. In this context, transvestism has very little relation to exile, displacement or instability, but is in fact the embodied performance of patriarchal privilege, and in this case the maintenance of a specific form of Australian masculinity. David Buchbinder has acknowledged that Priscilla has ‘queer potential’ but he also describes how the film panders to the mainstream, relying on stereotypes and thereby making this representation safe for heterosexual audiences.45 But these representations are not only ‘safe’ because of their reliance on demeaning stereotypes, they are safe in the same way that cross-dressing on The Footy Show is safe: the straight audience can be comfortable in the knowledge that this is a fictional ‘queer’ and these bodies are ‘really’ heterosexual. The excess of drag performance in these contexts works not to problematise masculinity, but rather to demonstrate its cultural currency.

In an issue of Who Weekly published in June 1994, Hugo Weaving can be seen at a photographic exhibition of stills from the film standing in front of a large, close-up photograph of himself in drag. He is holding his 18 month-old daughter who is leaning towards the photograph, pointing at the figure she has just recognised as her father. ‘Hey Dad, you can’t fool me!’ the caption reads. The little girl becomes a badge of heterosexuality, a negation of the ‘queer’ image of her father, able to see through to the ‘real’ (that is, heterosexual) Hugo Weaving underneath. Similarly in an interview published in The Age Guy Pearce says that taking on the role of Felicia in Priscilla allowed him to infiltrate the gay culture of Oxford Street in Sydney. Dressed as a queen, he and his two co-stars ‘went to DCM and Gilligan’s … I actually had some guy who kept wanting to buy me drinks and I was being very cheeky and obnoxious, just playing out the character’.46 Paradoxically when asked what he thinks about some of the negative reactions to the film from gay lobby
groups in the United States, Pearce tells the interviewer that these groups ‘should open up their minds a little’ and ‘chill out’. Pearce’s rhetoric distances him from the queerness of Felicia as he stages a kind of reverse ‘outing’; he says that playing Felicia was ‘a really nice opportunity for me to get in touch with my feminine side and really enhance it’ and that it was ‘liberating’ for him to go out in drag because nobody recognised him for the first time in years. In a society where so many gay men feel they must conceal their sexuality at all costs, fearing vilification and violence, Pearce’s ‘liberation’ rings hollow. Thus, like Elliott, Pearce capitalises on queer culture without acknowledgement of cultural debt or the power relations inherent in his appropriation. Pearce can ‘play’ queerer than queer, but safely stay as straight as a die.

It is clear that *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* contains viewing pleasure for some queer spectators, however, this is not the object of my analysis. Indeed, it could be argued that in a heterosexist world any representation of queer culture is a good representation because of its insistence upon visibility. However, in critiquing the gender performances of a star footballer and the actors in *Priscilla*, it has been my aim to ask what we can learn about the place of sexuality in the construction and maintenance of Australian national masculinity. Both the film and the footballer seem to offer alternative masculine ontologies to the iconic masculinity valourised in national discourse, but these ‘alternatives’ are effectively contained by the hegemony of heterosexuality. Ultimately, Ian Roberts’ body performs hegemonic masculinity so well that his effectiveness for queer politics is numbed. It is only his ability to play football that allows him status in rugby league. This kind of homophobia is less visible but just as pernicious as outright vilification to which the silence of other gay footballers (Roberts attests that there certainly are others) is testimony. In *Finding Out*, Ian describes the traumatic (and all too common) adolescent battle to ‘hold it together on the outside. Blend in and that ... I was always trying to run from having to deal with what I thought was me being a fake’. ‘Faking it’ while remaining firmly within the safe borders of heterosexuality constitutes the ‘real’ drag in *Priscilla*. As Hugo Weaving’s character says of Guy Pearce’s ‘Felicia’: ‘he’s turned into a bloody good little performer’.
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5 ibid.
10 Easthope, p 51.
11 Although Roberts was not publicly ‘out’ at the time of *Blue’s* release, his sexuality was widely known.
13 Roberts was unofficially known as ‘The Body’ in rugby league before he publicly came out. It is hard to miss the irony in this.
14 Freeman, op. cit., p 321.
16 Freeman, op cit., p 54.
17 ibid., p 56.
18 Phil Rothfield, ‘Players don’t have right to be avengers’, Sunday Telegraph, 30 June 1991, quoted in Freeman, op. cit., p 195.
19 ibid.
20 Freeman, op. cit., p 185.
21 ibid., p 253.
22 ibid., p. 221.
23 ibid., p. 200.
25 Freeman, op. cit., p 197.
26 ibid., p 169.
27 Sabo and Panepinto, op. cit., p 125.
28 Freeman, op. cit., p 81.
29 ibid., p 259.
30 ibid., p 314.
38 ibid.
39 I will divide these bodies along national lines and here restrict my discussion to Weaving and Pearce.
42 Shantanu Dutta-Ahmed, ‘I thought you knew!’: Performing the Penis, the Phallus and Otherness in Neil Jordan’s The Crying Game, Film Criticism, Fall 1998, no 7, p 62.
44 Brook, op. cit., p 31.
47 ibid.
50 Freeman, op. cit., p 55.