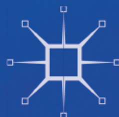
Staging Queer Feminisms

Sexuality and Gender in Australian Performance, 2005-2015

Sarah French

Contemporary Performance InterActions



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Staging Queer Feminisms

Sexuality and Gender in Australian Performance, 2005–2015

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Staging Queer Feminisms

Over the past decade (2005–2015), queer and feminist themes have come to play an increasingly central role in Australian performance. In the independent scene in particular, theatre-makers have exhibited a striking preoccupation with issues relating to sexuality and gender in ways that both reflect and challenge broader trends in contemporary Australian society and culture. While Australian theatre of the 1980s and 1990s often reflected liberal feminist themes, I suggest that the decade examined here is characterised by a more direct engagement with feminist and queer politics. The theatrical works discussed in this book intervene into contemporary debates about gender roles, interrogate the cultural construction of sexual and gendered identity and expose the normative ideologies implicit in such constructions. They break with traditional theatrical forms, including realism and naturalism, in favour of self-reflexive modes of performance that critically stage social issues in a parodic or ironic manner. The book's case studies represent a broad cross-section of recent Australian feminist and queer independent performance, engaging with a range of different forms and genres including performance art, burlesque, cabaret, drag, theatre and contemporary art.

Staging Queer Feminisms is especially concerned with the intersection of feminism and queer in contemporary Australian performance. It argues that feminist and queer theatre-makers have a shared stake in interrogating the intersecting identity categories of sexuality and gender, and in critiquing the interrelated discourses of patriarchy and heteronormativity. This

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study adopts an expansive understanding of queer in which queer refers both to non-normative sexualities (encapsulated within the umbrella LGBTQI, meaning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex), and to an understanding of identity as unfixed, ambiguous and indeterminate. In the performances examined in this book, queer is expressed not only through the representation of non-normative identities but through embodied queer acts and through the use of queer modes of performance. These performances bring an outsider perspective to heteronormative culture, challenge dominant ideological frameworks, and generate queer communities. In many of these works, queer themes are enhanced by moments of utopian possibility as well as by affective levels of experience. Such moments are often produced by direct engagement between performers and spectators, through eye contact, physical touch, and through shared participation in aspects of the performance.

This book suggests that the notion of 'queer feminisms' is a useful strategic alliance, one that does not collapse the two terms into one but establishes a productive intersectionality. The case studies examined in this book stage the encounter between feminism and queer in different ways and with different emphases, but they move beyond the polarities of an oppositional methodology. Later in this introduction, I discuss the intersections and tensions between feminist and queer theory, which provides a lens for understanding the convergence of these themes in recent performance.

Politics and Performance in Contemporary Australia

In her closing remarks to the 2010 special Australian issue of the journal *Feminist Review*, Ann Curthoys suggests that from the mid-1990s Australian feminist scholars had moved away from a primary focus on gender relations, turning their attention to a range of other pressing local and global concerns including 'human rights, refugee and immigrant policies and concerns, environmental issues, genocide studies, indigenous and colonial history and much else' (2010: 130). By 2010, however, she observes that the feminist dimension of these concerns had come more sharply into focus, including 'such issues as the protection of children and women, gender-based power relations, sexuality and the relationship between work and family' (ibid: 130). This assessment is reflected throughout the nation's cultural sphere where the gendered dimensions of contemporary social and political issues have increasingly come to the

fore. In the Australian media, debates relating to sexuality and gender play out daily on television and radio talk shows, in national and local newspapers, and across social media, often focusing on instances of overt sexism and homophobia and gender-based violence, and sometimes on the more subtle workings of gendered power relations. Australian theatre, performance and contemporary art convey a prominent critical engagement with feminist and queer themes, a phenomenon that is widely commented on in arts commentaries and reviews (e.g. Gruber, 2013; Howard, 2013; Rae, 2013; Woodhead, 2015).

For the independent theatre-makers interviewed for this book, sexuality and gender politics are of vital importance to the arts as a result of the persistent presence (both visible and invisible) of sexism, homophobia, racism and inequality in contemporary Australian society. These feminist and queer artists are fuelled by a desire to challenge the patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies that underpin mainstream Australian culture as well as to create counter-cultural spaces for alternative feminist and queer subjectivities to emerge. They share the view that performance has the potential to function as a significant platform for social and political critique. The contemporary Australian socio-political landscape therefore provides important context for the production and reception of their works and warrants a brief overview here.

In 2005, at the start of the decade examined in this book, Australian right-wing Liberal Party leader John Howard was serving the final years of his 11-year term as Prime Minister (1996–2007). Howard's leadership contributed to a period of highly conservative politics in which gender issues were continually disavowed. As Andrew Merrindalh and Sarah Maddison observe, Howard was 'overtly hostile to feminist aspirations, contesting issues such as abortion, paid maternity leave, sex discrimination provision and the funding of feminist non-government organisations' (2010: 171). In *The End of Equality*, feminist cultural commentator Anne Summers argues that the issue of gender equality was removed from the political agenda during the Howard years while the economic, social and political situation for women stagnated and in some areas deteriorated (2003). Howard himself invoked the notion of 'postfeminism' on a number of occasions to argue against the relevance of feminism, stating that for a young generation of Australian women 'the feminist battle has been won' and that the nation is therefore 'in the post-feminist stage of the debate' (Howard quoted in Hewett, 2002).

In the mid-2000s, a growing number of feminist and queer performance works emerged from Australia's independent theatre scene, challenging the dominant conservative political discourse on the state of contemporary feminism. Small independent companies such as Finucane & Smith (discussed in Chapter 2) rose to prominence, producing countercultural works that stood in contrast to the political and aesthetic agendas of the major state-funded theatre companies. The immense popularity and commercial success of works such as the Finucane & Smith production *The Burlesque Hour* (2004–ongoing) illustrated that work with an explicit feminist agenda was highly viable, despite popular views that feminism was outmoded.

In 2007, the comparatively more left-wing Australian Labour Party came to power, initially led by Kevin Rudd, until a leadership spill in 2010 saw Julia Gillard become Australia's first female Prime Minister. Gillard's rise to power implied a certain degree of feminist progress in Australian politics, yet as Raewyn Connell observes, the success of individual women such as Gillard has not been accompanied by the necessary structural reforms advocated by the feminist research of the 1980s. Connell argues that while such reforms have been abandoned by the state, 'the leading public image of gender change is the spectacular rise of individual women within existing structures . . . with all the problems about authority resulting' (2014: 219). Indeed, Gillard's experience in office made visible the considerable difficulties for women who attain positions of leadership within the current gendered power structures. Gillard's three-year term was fraught with controversies that revealed a great deal about the state of gender politics in contemporary Australia. Persistent instances of sexism and misogyny directed at Gillard from the mainstream media and a series of politicians (both from outside and from within her own party) exposed widespread social anxieties around changing gender norms and a highly problematic systemic sexism. As Denise Varney has argued, opposition to Gillard's policies was 'all too readily expressed in gendered language that questions a woman's capacity to govern and delegitimises her right to do so' (2012). The significance of the rise and fall of Julia Gillard will be discussed in more detail towards the end of this book in my analysis of The Rabble's feminist adaptation of *Frankenstein* (2014), a performance that interrogates the themes of motherhood and feminism in ways that resonate with the Australian socio-political context during and after Gillard's term. The growth in feminist independent performance during this period can be viewed as a response to the increased presence of sexism in

Australian society, in which feminist theatre-makers sought to critique public debates about gender roles and offer a counter-narrative to dominant discourses.

In 2013 (following another Labour Party leadership spill and a second brief term of Kevin Rudd), political leadership returned to the conservative Liberal Party, first under Tony Abbott (2013–2015), and then Malcolm Turnbull, who is Prime Minister at the time of writing. Before coming to power, Tony Abbott was accused of being a misogynist by Gillard in her infamous 'misogyny speech', and once elected, he continued to face criticism for his dealings with gender issues. Fuelling accusations of sexism, Abbott commenced his term by announcing a cabinet of ministers that included only one woman before controversially appointing himself as minister responsible for 'women's affairs'. However, Abbott's dealings with gender were overshadowed by increasing controversy surrounding issues relating to sexuality. Debate on the legalisation of same-sex marriage was one of the issues to dominate Tony Abbott's term as Prime Minister and his Christian perspectives caused divisions in his party as well as public protest. The issue of same-sex marriage remains unresolved in Australia and dominates public debates about sexuality, often at the expense of other important concerns for LGBTQI people, such as instances of sexual discrimination and violence.

In 2016, the Safe Schools programme, which aims to teach children about sexual and gender diversity, became a key political issue for Malcolm Turnbull, who ordered a review into the programme on the basis that its content is specifically aimed at addressing the bullying of LGBTQI students rather than bullying more broadly. The programme's aim to develop understanding and acceptance of gender diversity has been consistently undermined by conservative politicians, with accusations from Liberal Party ministers that schoolchildren are being 'prematurely sexualised', socially engineered and even groomed as paedophiles (Ireland, 2016). As this discussion demonstrates, the rise of queer theatre and performance in the early to mid 2010s has taken place against a highly conservative homophobic and heteronormative political backdrop. However, the popularity of queer performance is perhaps indicative of a broader Australian society that is largely at odds with the regressive policies of its political leaders.

The extensive representation of conservative, patriarchal and heteronormative perspectives on issues relating to gender and sexuality within Australian politics, especially since 2010, has served to highlight the

prevalence of these views in contemporary mainstream Australia. It is within and against this socio-political context that Australian independent theatre-makers have sought to disrupt the status quo and challenge dominant assumptions about sexuality and gender, employing a combination of feminist and queer methodologies.

The History of Feminist and Queer Performance in Australia

As stated above, this book observes an intersection of feminist and queer themes in contemporary Australian performance. However, within Australian theatre history the trajectories of feminist and queer performance, as well as their analyses in theatre scholarship, have been largely divergent. It is therefore necessary to trace the two fields of performance separately here to provide historical context for the present study. Given this book's focus on independent theatre, it is also necessary to differentiate between 'mainstream' and 'independent' theatre contexts throughout this discussion. These terms are in some ways problematic as there is certainly some slippage between mainstream and independent performance. However, they remain relevant definitional terms in an Australian context where mainstream and independent theatre scenes predominantly emerge autonomously from one another, reflect different thematic and aesthetic concerns and for the most part play to different audience demographics. This distinction is especially relevant to an examination of feminist and queer politics, which I argue are significantly more visible in independent performance. While Australian mainstream theatre has increasingly engaged with liberal feminist ideas and given greater representation to gay and lesbian characters, the direct challenge to patriarchal and heteronormative culture is largely the domain of the independent scene, where politically subversive performance has always been more prominent.

Feminism in Australian Theatre

The decade examined in this book follows a gradual rise of feminist theatre in Australia from the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s. A series of Australian feminist theatre scholars have documented the increasing prevalence of theatre by and about women on Australia's stages over this 30-year period,

illustrating the ways in which women artists intervened into a highly male-dominated industry (Fensham, 2001; Fensham and Varney, 2005; Gilbert, 1998a; Holledge and Tompkins, 2000; Schafer and Ginters, 2001; Tait, 1993, 1994, 1998a; Tait and Schafer, 1997; Thomson, 1998). In *The Dolls Revolution: Australian Theatre and Cultural Imagination*, Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney write of the 'Boys' club' that characterised Australian theatre from the post-war period through to the 1970s (2005: 36). The post-war period saw a shift in Australian theatre from the dominant production of European plays to the staging of plays that reflected a national identity, exemplified by Ray Lawler's pioneering play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955). At this time Australian theatre was dominated by white, male playwrights, with the occasional successful female playwright such as Oriel Grey and Dymphna Cusack as exceptions that proved the rule.

The 1970s gave rise to a 'New Wave' of playwrights, associated with the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney (now Belvoir Street Theatre) and the Australian Performing Group (APG) at the Pram Factory in Melbourne, who were again overwhelmingly male. Although the impact of second-wave feminism in the 1970s led to some expansion of works by women on Australia's main stages, female playwrights such as Dorothy Hewett and Alma De Groen were nevertheless still relatively rare success stories in what continued to be a male-dominated arena. The New Wave playwrights, including Jack Hibberd, John Romeril, Alex Buzo and David Williamson, dominated the Australian mainstream theatrical landscape in the 1970s and 1980s and their plays constructed an Australian national identity that was masculine, heterosexual and white. They also contributed to the dominance of naturalism in Australian theatre. When female playwrights such as Hannie Rayson and Joanna Murray-Smith arrived on the scene in the 1990s, they too adopted naturalistic modes, which is likely to have been integral to their box office and industry success. Female playwrights working with more experimental forms in the 1990s included Jenny Kemp, who, while highly regarded in theatrical and academic circles, did not receive the same level of popular attention from the mainstream theatre industry.

Fensham and Varney argue that the presence of leading female playwrights in mainstream Australian theatre in the 1990s and early 2000s transformed Australia's theatre culture and expanded theatrical representations of the feminine (2005). However, their conclusion identifies some concerns for the future including 'the decline of the proportion of women writers in the repertoire of the mainstream in the mid-2000s' (ibid: 337).

Seven years after their publication, the Australia Council's 'Women in Theatre' report corroborated this concern, showing that of the productions by major theatre companies from 2001 to 2011, only 21% were written by a woman, only 25% had a female director, and only 10% had a woman in both roles (Lally, 2012). There is even evidence that the situation for women in creative leadership roles deteriorated over the decade examined in the report. A particularly damning survey of nine major Australian theatre companies in 2011 found that of the 80 mainstage works scheduled that year only nine were by Australian women playwrights (Morgan, 2011). Such figures prompted an outcry across the theatre industry about the lack of female writers and directors represented on Australia's main stages. Since then, artistic directors have been held more accountable for their gendered programming, as a result of which there has been some improvement, especially within the 'mid-tier' sector; for example, Sydney's Belvoir Theatre has an overall percentage of 54% of female writers and directors in their 2016 programme. Nevertheless, on the whole Australia's mainstream theatre industry is still far from achieving gender parity (Wright, 2015).

The limited participation of women in Australia's mainstream theatre history stands in contrast to the independent theatre scene where female theatre-makers and feminist themes have always had a stronger presence. The emergence of fringe feminist theatre can be traced to the mid-1970s, when, frustrated by the lack of opportunities for women in the APG, the female members of the group broke away to form the Melbourne Women's Theatre Group (MWTG). Peta Tait's study *Original Women's Theatre* (1993) documents the work of the MWTG, illustrating its overtly political nature and engagement with feminist theories that in retrospect could be viewed as ranging from radical feminism, radical lesbian separatism, socialist and Marxist feminism, and materialist feminism (1993: 5). The MWTG critiqued stereotypical images of women and 'communicated a feminist perspective on women's position in society to a diverse audience' (ibid: 1). Tait's description of a vibrant radical feminist theatre culture in 1970s Australia disrupts the dominant historical narrative that neglects the influence and impact of feminist theatre-practitioners, often positioning 'women's concerns' as marginal. In her 1994 book *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre*, Tait examines the development of feminist theatre in the 1980s in the work of companies such as the Adelaide-based all-women's theatre company Vitalstatistix and the Melbourne-based Home Cooking Theatre Company, demonstrating

how feminist concerns converged with innovative approaches to theatrical form (1994).

In Tait's analysis of women theatre practitioners of the 1980s and early 1990s, and in Fensham and Varney's examination of mainstream female playwrights of the 1990s and early 2000s, there is evidence of a reluctance for women theatre-makers to engage directly with feminist politics. Although feminist concerns were embedded within much of their work, women artists did not necessarily identify themselves or their work as feminist. This trend stands in contrast to Tait's observations of the MWTG in the 1970s as well as to the recent work of the theatre-makers discussed in this book. For the playwrights that Fensham and Varney examine, a distancing from feminist politics might be attributed to the 'contested and stratified terrain' of mainstream Australian culture, which is 'fraught with competing ideologies' that place limitations on 'how and what can be said' (2005: 47). The works of the playwrights they discuss therefore largely reflect a liberal feminist approach, often focusing on female experiences in the private sphere of the family and the domestic or in the public sphere of the workplace, as well as on the psychological inner lives of female subjects.

In an earlier article, Fensham identifies potential problems with such feminist approaches, suggesting that 'the danger for women's mainstream theatre is that it will reproduce the limitations of cultural and liberal feminism by signifying the feminine only within terms set by the bourgeois heterosexual matrix' (2001: 91). The case studies examined in this book avoid this danger by critically engaging with the categories of sexuality, race and class, as well as gender, thereby highlighting differences among women and giving focus to experiences that sit outside white, middle-class, heteronormative culture. In addition to their engagement with queer theory, these performances reflect a materialist feminist approach, in line with Fensham's definition:

> Materialist feminism operates as a critique of the construction of gender. No longer concerned only with female experience, this model argues that both male and female are culturally and historically produced and that differences of gender are inflected by the material conditions of class and race (ibid: 89).

In her 2001 analysis, Fensham observes that 'this approach has had limited influence in feminist theatre in Australia' (ibid: 89). Fifteen years later, I suggest that a materialist feminist model has gained significant

momentum. The performances discussed in this book are no longer predominantly concerned with the exploration of female experience or subjectivity. Instead, they aim to dismantle naturalised codes of femininity and masculinity, highlight the ideological fictions produced by patriarchal and heteronormative discourses and illustrate the impact of these fictions on a range of different subject positions.

While Fensham and Varney examine the feminist content of mainstream theatre, Tait's emphasis in *Converging Realities* is on the expression of feminist ideas through the use of theatrical forms that depart from the realist modes of the mainstream. She discusses 'the physically performative enactment of gender identity' present in women's theatre from the 1970s, especially in women's circus, as well as 'the predominance of comedy and cabaret in recent women's work' (1994: 4). This alignment of feminist content with innovative approaches to theatrical form continues to be integral to Australian independent theatre. Physical theatre, comedy and cabaret remain key forms, along with burlesque, dance, performance art and experimental theatre. However, while Tait's analysis of form resonates with the contemporary context, some shifts in the content of feminist independent theatre can be identified over the past two decades. Tait suggests that women practitioners from the 1980s and early 1990s had 'moved away from presenting arguments around feminist issues in their work some years ago'. Tait argues that 'where the work is identifiably feminist in form, the feminist polemic has been subsumed by aesthetic concerns', and suggests that 'the impact of feminist ideas on some styles of theatre work is covert' (ibid: 12). This 'covert' nature of feminist ideas might be attributed to the bias (conscious and unconscious) against feminist works, consistent with the widespread feminist 'backlash' throughout the western world in the 1980s. Framing work as explicitly feminist during this period risked sacrificing commercial viability and popular appeal.

In the 2000s, and especially in the 2010s, shifting attitudes towards feminism have produced a stronger investment in feminist themes within Australia's independent theatre scene. The performances examined in this book are unapologetically feminist and the majority are promoted as feminist works. They intend to subvert audience expectations through unconventional approaches to both form and content and to challenge dominant ideas about sexuality and gender through a direct engagement with feminist ideas. Thus I suggest that the period from 2005 to 2015 has given rise to a resurgence of feminist politics in independent Australian theatre that has not been prevalent since the 1970s.

As detailed above, a range of important studies from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s contributed to a rich scholarly documentation of feminist theatre in Australia. However, there has been no full-length study since Fensham and Varney's 2005 book, and notably few articles or book chapters dealing with the themes of sexuality and gender, despite their prevalence in contemporary Australian performance. This book is therefore motivated by the recognition of a 10-year hiatus in publishing in the field. It identifies a critical gap and a pressing need to document and analyse key theatrical works from this especially fertile period.

Queer Performance in Australia

Queer performance in Australia has received less scholarly attention than feminist theatre and there is no full-length study to date. The majority of articles that do exist are now almost 20 years old. For example, some key essays appeared in a 1997 special edition of the Australasian Drama Studies journal on lesbian, gay and queer theatre and performance, and a useful book chapter by Bruce Parr provides an overview of gay and lesbian theatre from the 1970s to the 1990s (1998). Two books on masculinity in Australian performance by Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander and Bruce Parr also include chapters on queer masculinities (2008, 2006). With the exception of some important documentation by Peta Tait (1993, 1994, 1997, 1998b), Australian theatre by or about lesbian women has received very little attention. This might be in part due to its location outside the mainstream. Parr discusses the substantial body of mainstream Australian plays focused on gay male characters, including works by prominent New Wave playwrights such as Nick Enright, Michael Gow and Louis Nowra, and observes that there is 'no comparable presence of lesbian characters in mainstream theatre' (1998: 91). Jill Dolan makes a similar observation of queer theatre in the United States, noting that by the early 1980s the work of gay white men was produced on Broadway, yet 'no commercial counterpart existed at the time to tell the story of lesbian lives or those of LGBTQ people of colour' (2010: 22). The lack of parity between the mainstream production of work by queer men and queer women, and queer people of colour, continues to be an issue in contemporary Australian theatre. It is notable that the recent success and popularity of queer theatre on Australia's main stages (discussed in Chapter 5) is attributed predominantly to gay white men.

These observations contrast with the independent scene where queer theatre by women, people of colour and artists from a range of LGBTQI identity positions is far more prevalent. There is also a stronger history of work dealing with the relationship between queer and feminist themes within Australian independent theatre. For example, John McCallum writes of Sydney's 'thriving underground lesbian theatre' of the 1980s in which 'a number of playwrights including Sandra Shotlander, Margaret Fisher, Alison Lyssa and Eva Johnson were also part of feminist identity groupings, and in Johnson's case, Indigenous as well' (2009: 272). Similarly, in her discussion of the work by Vitalstatistix (including plays by Margaret Fisher), Tait highlights the group's focus on lesbian relationships and characters who are positioned 'in relation to a liberal feminist and at times radical feminist world' (1994: 161). It is worth noting that these works dealing with the intersection of lesbian and feminist identity politics were produced prior to the splitting of sexuality studies from feminism that occurred in the 1990s, a point to which I will return shortly.

While mainstream Australian theatre frequently represents gay and (to a lesser extent) lesbian characters in naturalistic works created from written play texts, independent queer theatre tends to employ less traditional theatrical forms. Parr observes that in the 1990s Australian queer performance mostly took place in non-text based genres including 'cabaret, *a capella*, dance, performance art, circus and acrobatic acts, and more recently stand-up comedy' (1998: 93). He further points to the popularity of drag in Australia in the 1990s. Queer theatre is also less likely to be found in conventional theatre spaces and is more often staged in clubs, gallery spaces, site-specific locations, warehouses and at private parties. For Australian queer performers, the establishment of queer festivals and clubs in the 1990s played a crucial role in facilitating experimentation with new performance forms and ideas. Stephen Dunne writes of the 'explosion of queer performance art' that took place across Sydney towards the end of the 1990s fuelled by the creation of the Health Department funded HIV-focused *Performance Positive* series, and the Sydney Performance Space's post-cabaret Mardi Gras show *cLUB bENT*, later *Taboo Parlour* (2008). Australian cabaret artists such as Moira Finucane (discussed in Chapter 2) and Paul Capsis started out performing at *cLUB bENT*, and have gone on to establish prominent careers. These two performers stand as important precedents for a younger generation of Australian queer artists, and both are identified as a key influence (as well as collaborators) by many of the

performers discussed in this book including Sarah Ward, Ash Flanders and Kamahi King.

In tracing the trajectory from 'gay and lesbian' to 'queer' theatre in Australia in the 1990s, Parr discusses the broader nature of queer, its incorporation of 'all forms of non-straight sexuality', and its potential to open up understandings of the 'complex intersections of identity markers like gender, race ethnicity, class, age and ability' (1998: 98). He also emphasises that queer performance illustrates the socially constructed nature of sexuality, critiques cultural and political institutions and offers 'contradictory viewpoints' (ibid: 99). As these descriptions imply, the inclusion of gay and lesbian characters does not necessarily make a performance queer, any more than the inclusion of women makes a performance feminist. In their recent study on queer dramaturgies, Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier further develop this distinction:

> 'gay theatre' might focus on recognisably gay stories and characters, but perhaps within a character/plot-based form that asks for empathy from a mainstream audience, and without drawing attention to the theatrical act as a construct, or questioning the idea of coherence of 'character'... In other words, these works largely remain in the (heteronormative) dominant western theatrical mode of psychological realism and attached to the neoliberal focus on the 'subject' (and their rights) (2015: 13).

As this description suggests, works that feature gay and lesbian characters might still take place within heteronormative structures. In contrast, queer performance aims to destabilise dominant ideologies as well as dominant modes of theatre. Campbell and Farrier argue that queer dramaturgies 'are intricately bound up with the identity of the maker/s (self-identifying as queer), the making process and the context in which they are seen', and they add that in queer theatre, 'the attachment to realism and psychological coherence is fatally ruptured' (ibid: 13–14). The performances examined in this book demonstrate this fatal rupture, exposing the constructedness of the theatrical apparatus as a strategy to critique rather than represent social reality.

Although it is possible to find instances in which feminist and queer ideas have intersected within the history of Australian theatre, on the whole the two areas have developed separately. This divergence can in part be traced to the different concerns of the theatre-makers and their separate social and political projects. While feminist theatre-makers of the

1980s and 1990s wanted to give increased visibility to women, thereby emphasising gender difference, queer performance focused on moving beyond gender binaries, giving expression to non-normative sexualities and contesting the cultural dominance of heteronormativity. These projects appeared to serve the interests of different social groups and therefore feminist and queer themes largely surfaced in performance independently. This separation also reflects the differences and antagonisms inherent in feminist and queer theories. A discussion of these theoretical tensions will help to illuminate the reasons for the historical divergence of feminist and queer theatre, as well as facilitate an argument for their productive intersection in contemporary performance.

Queer Feminisms: Intersections of Feminist and Queer Theory

As already stated, a central argument of this book is that feminism and queer are interrelated political, social and theoretical frames of analysis that can be productively combined in performance, and in performance analysis, to challenge the interrelated power operations of patriarchy and heteronormativity. This may be a somewhat contentious claim, given the different and sometimes incompatible ways in which feminist and queer writers have theorised issues around sexuality and gender. Numerous critics have written of the methodological distinction that accompanied the emergence of queer theory in the early 1990s in which gender came to be aligned with feminism while sexuality was perceived to be the domain of queer theory (e.g. Butler, 1994, 2011 [1993]; Case, 2009; Jagose, 2009; Showden, 2012). This division has shifted in recent years as both feminist and queer scholars have recognised 'the possible new directions that may emerge out of and at the interface of queer/feminist theory' (Richardson, McLaughlin and Casey, 2006: 6).

In her article 'Feminism's Queer Theory', Annamarie Jagose argues that while 'feminist' and queer' are often pitted against each other as 'theoretical keywords', we need to acknowledge 'the difficulty, even the impossibility, of distinguishing decisively between feminist and queer traditions' (2009: 172). She suggests that 'feminist theory and queer theory together have a stake in both desiring and articulating the complexities of the traffic between gender and sexuality' and are therefore 'braided together in ongoing relations' (ibid: 172; 164). What queer theory offers feminist projects, among other things, is the capacity to challenge the

male/female binary, to 'queer' gender by viewing it as multiple and indeterminate. Thus, a queer approach to feminism resists the presumption of heterosexuality that accompanies some feminist formulations and disrupts essentialist notions of gender.

Conversely, the analysis of gender, (as well as race, class and other identity categories) is essential to queer theory if queer is to resist the normalising tendency to re-inforce white, middle-class, male dominance. Anti-feminist positions within conservative factions of the queer movement, both within and outside the academy, often work to affirm male power and homonormativity. In a neoliberal socio-political context in which queer has been 'mainstreamed', feminism might offer useful strategies to counteract the normalising of queer and challenge hierarchies of power. Thus I suggest that the notion of 'queer feminisms' offers a productive intersectional methodology. A significant number of recent scholarly writings point to a growing interest in the philosophical and political advantages of bringing feminist and queer theoretical frameworks together (Berger, 2014; Huffer, 2010, 2011; Jagose, 2009; Lewis, 2016; Marinucci, 2010; McBean, 2016; Richardson et al., 2006; Showden, 2012). This book's focus on the intersection of queer and feminism in Australian performance over the past decade therefore coincides with and reflects this broader theoretical and cultural trend.

The emergence of queer theory is generally dated from around 1990 and is frequently aligned with the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), along with the influence of Michel Foucault's three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, published in English between 1978 and 1986. Early articulations of queer theory, provided by scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis (1991), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) and David Halperin (1995) emphasise the indeterminate character of queer. For example, Halperin posits that queer is 'by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (1995: 62). The indeterminacy of queer is viewed as crucial to its potential to counteract dominant discourses, especially in relation to the construction of the subject. Drawing on Foucault's insistence that there is no such thing as a pre-social subject, queer theory deconstructs unified and stable identity categories. As a movement historically mobilised around the identity category of 'woman', feminisms' attachment to a strategic essentialism is often viewed as antithetical to a queer politics of difference.

The field of queer theory has therefore largely developed in opposition to feminism and this disciplinary split has been accompanied by an

epistemological division between sexuality and gender. An oppositional stance towards feminism first emerged within gay and lesbian studies in the 1980s, heavily influenced by Gayle Rubin's 1984 essay 'Thinking Sex'. In this essay, Rubin suggests that feminism on its own may not be the most appropriate theoretical model for understanding sexuality. Rubin's critique of feminism focuses on the anti-pornography movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Rubin argues that this feminist faction demonises eroticism and most forms of sexual behaviour, constructing a negative discourse on sex that is at odds with the experiences and desires of many women, including lesbian and heterosexual sadomasochists and butch/femmes. For Rubin the anti-pornography (or anti-sex) feminist position conflates sexual oppression with gender oppression and she insists that the two must be separated to differentiate between 'gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire on the other' (1984: 307). Similarly, in *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of the need to construct 'an account of sexuality irreducible to gender', noting that 'sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren't well described in terms of the gender of object-choice at all' (1990: 34; 35).

This separation of sexuality and gender can be viewed as a strategic exercise, intended to contest the tendency to subsume sexuality within feminist critiques of gender that occurs in the work of feminist writers such as Sheila Jeffreys (1981) and Catherine MacKinnon (1982). Importantly, Rubin's vision for the future of feminism suggests a more integrated approach. She writes:

> In the long run, feminism's critique of gender hierarchy must be incorporated into a radical theory of sex and the critique of sexual oppression should enrich feminism. But an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality must be developed. (1984: 309)

Thus, Rubin sought to overturn the privileged position feminism had been accorded as the site of knowledge about sexuality in order to create an analysis of sexuality outside a gendered (and heteronormative) framework. In her essay 'Critically Queer', which appears in *Bodies that Matter* (2011 [1993]), Butler suggests that while the separation of sexuality and gender in the writings of Rubin and Sedgwick had 'constituted important theoretical opposition to MacKinnon's deterministic form of structuralism', the distinction needs to be rethought in order 'to muddle the lines between queer theory and feminism' (ibid: 183).

Contextualising Rubin's work a decade later, Butler is critical of the ways in which 'Thinking Sex' was appropriated by gay and lesbian studies and later by queer theory. Butler argues that Rubin's call was not for an oppositional gay and lesbian or queer theoretical frame, but rather for 'an analysis that might account for the regulation of a wide range of sexual minorities' (1994: 8). In her essay 'Against Proper Objects', Butler contests the methodological distinction between gender/sexuality and feminism/queer. Extending and revising Rubin's argument, Butler states that although 'sexual relations cannot be reduced to gender positions, which seems true enough, it does not follow that an analysis of sexual relations apart from an analysis of gender relations is possible' (ibid: 9).

Butler identifies a further splitting of 'sex' into sex as anatomical identity, 'the sex that one *is*', which is the object traditionally pursued by feminism, and sex as sexual practice, 'the sex that one *does*', which is typically the object of analysis for gay and lesbian studies and queer theory (ibid: 4). For Butler, the feminist object reduces gender to sex, while the queer object repudiates sexual difference, '*to the extent that it defines itself against feminism*' (ibid: 5, emphasis in original). Refuting the notion of 'proper objects', Butler argues that sexuality and gender are neither reducible to one another, nor able to be examined in isolation from one another. This is in part because for Butler sex is itself a gendered construct that does not exist prior to discourse or social context. If sex is always already gendered, it cannot be examined without reference to the discursive practice of gender. In her closing remarks, Butler calls for feminist and queer studies to 'move beyond and against those methodological demands which force separations' in order to 'contest the claim to autonomy and offer in its place a more expansive, mobile mapping of power' (ibid: 21). In particular, Butler is concerned about the potential 'institutional domestication of queer thinking' (ibid).

Feminist critiques of queer theory (and of Butler) claim that queer employs an individualised approach and lacks a consideration of material inequalities or a clear agenda for social, political and economic change (Garber, 2006; Nussbaum, 1999). Since the theoretical approach of queer is characterised by fluidity, ambiguity and a resistance to fixed definitions, it is at odds with a feminist commitment to identity politics. For some feminists, the deconstructive approach of queer poses a threat to notions of collective identity, creating a barrier to mobilising around the identity category of 'woman' as the basis for political action (Jeffreys, 2003; Zimmerman, 1997). However, for other feminists, the importance of