

# THEATRE COSTUME, CELEBRITY PERSONA, AND THE ARCHIVE

EMILY COLLETT

## ABSTRACT

*This essay considers the archived costume in relation to the concept of the celebrity performer's persona. It takes as its case study the Shakespearean costume of Indigenous actress Deborah Mailman, housed in the Australian Performing Arts Collection. It considers what the materiality of the theatre costume might reveal and conceal about a performer's personas. It asks to what extent artefacts in an archive might both create a new persona or freeze-frame a particular construct of a performer. Central to the essay are questions of agency in relation to the memorialisation of a still living actress and the problematisation of persona in terms of the archived object. Can a costume generate its own persona in relation to the actress? And what are the power dynamics involved in persona construction when an archived costume presents a charged narrative which is very different to the actress's current construction of her persona?*

## KEY WORDS

Costume; Archive; Deborah Mailman; Indigenous; Memory; Shakespeare

## COSTUME IN THE ARCHIVE: A CHARGED OBJECT

In this essay I consider the archived theatre costume in relation to persona studies and what the materiality of costume might reveal or conceal about the celebrity performer's persona(s). Can an archived costume have its own persona? What complexities arise when the charged historical narrative of an archived costume is at odds with a current persona? And in the following case study of Deborah Mailman, what happens when the framing of a living Indigenous actress's costume constructs a persona that is quite different to the one that the actress currently constructs for herself?

A costume worn by a performer live on stage is remembered in particular ways – and many in the audience might focus more on the performer's stance, physicality, and verbal prowess than what they are wearing. But once a costume is archived, it is staged and framed differently, becoming an artefact in and of itself. The costume might then be understood to be of a different cultural value and resonance in relation to the performer. In this article I am interested in asking: what does the examination of a three-dimensional object bring, as opposed to two-dimensional source material (image and text), to persona and theatre scholarship? Whilst there are existing models in persona studies which draw from text, film, photography, and social media, there is as yet less study of three-dimensional objects.

---

I take as my case study the performance costume worn by the Indigenous Australian actress Deborah Mailman as Cordelia in Bell Shakespeare's 1998 production of *King Lear*, which is kept in the Australian Performing Arts Collection in Melbourne. Mailman is renowned for her early-career stage appearances and in the last decade has become renowned for her character acting in contemporary Australian television drama. I shall begin by setting out some of the archival context of analysing performance costume in relation to persona. I will explore first how material culture and costume scholarship are useful in understanding the costume as an object and examine the politics of the Performing Arts Collection. I then focus on Mailman's costume itself and interrogate how it sits within and without its material and theoretical framing. I am interested in the silences surrounding Mailman's archival narrative and what her archive costume suggests about persona construction.

Recognition of the research potential of objects is a major preoccupation of material culture in the form of object and museum studies, and has intensified in importance since the 1980s; as has been noted, "[f]ar more than documents, things have a special kind of immediacy ... in a way a written account cannot" (Deetz 1980, pp. 375-6). Having established the significance of three-dimensional research material during the 1990s (see, for instance, Kavanagh 1987; Fisher 1991; Leone & Little 1993; and Corrin 1994), more recently, material culture studies have highlighted how objects can communicate individual and collective identity, due to their integral role in our daily lives. As Ian Woodward argues, "We are defined as people not only by what we think and say, but by what material things we possess, surround ourselves with, and interact with ... All of these material things help to establish, mediate and assist us in the performance of our personal and social identities" (Woodward 2007, p. 133). In examining the ways in which methods for the study of material culture could advance our ability to find new knowledge, Kate Smith and Leonie Hannan suggest that "[r]ather than continuing to look through objects 'to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture - above all what they disclose about *us*,' historians are starting to look at things per se and what they do more broadly" (Smith & Hannan 2017, p. 49). Or, in other words, "[o]bjects offer scholars another form through which to examine human expression" (Smith & Hannan 2017, p. 47). Contemporary material culture, then, has moved beyond a purely semiotic appreciation of objects and now understands objects as a valid resource for gaining knowledge about the people with whom the object interacted. But what does this mean in the realm of theatre costume, which is about role play and might be reflective of the character more than the performer, or suggest a persona which depends on a blurring of both performer and role?

Lisa G. Corrin explores the relationship between artist and museum, where a growing trend in artist curated exhibitions resets the focus onto museum practices themselves which, in turn, explores not *what* the objects mean but *how* they mean: by shifting the way an audience interacts with an object, the object activates new connections, new information, and new ways of thinking. Corrin's study illuminates the wide scope of information, or life stories, a single object can communicate when it is activated in this way. To use Phillip Fisher's turn of phrase in *Art and the Future's Past*, "[t]he life of Things is in reality many lives" (2017 [1991], p. 436). According to Corrin, through a material culture lens we can establish the research value and cultural resonances of three-dimensional objects and explore how a performance costume can communicate multiple individual and collective histories. At the same time, the framing of the costume can suggest more nuanced details about the wearer of the costume's identities, or personas. A three-dimensional object is inherently active as a tool designed, made, used, collected, and archived by individuals informed by personal, institutional, and cultural ideologies. Studying the framing of a single object activates the process of 'how' it means - through the action of each of its lives and the individuals who interacted with it. What sort of

information can performance costume-as-object relay about the personas attributed to that performer and the cultural majority at a particular time?

Performance costume scholar Donatella Barbieri has developed a methodology which argues that the archived costume, “a complex, charged object”, is a lens through which to better understand the archive in which it is kept. The costume highlights the “genealogies of ideas” discovered through the object’s materiality, alongside the functionality and performativity of the object in its original context, by using external evidence and biographical information (2013, p. 282). Veronica Isaac has expanded on Barbieri’s work by uniting “approaches from dress history, theatre history and material culture to offer a specific methodology for the investigation and analysis of theatre costume” (2017, p. 115), offering a detailed analysis of the material object combined with extensive biographical research. Her analysis of celebrity actress Ellen Terry’s 1888 Lady Macbeth ‘Beetlewing Dress’ resulted in detailed multiple histories, and the notion that theatre costumes carry “the ‘memories’, or ‘ghosts’, of their previous wearer(s), acting as ‘surrogates’ for the bodies that once inhabited them” (2017, p. 118). Barbieri and Isaac’s work draws on the theories of haunting and spectrality articulated by Carlson (2003) and Luckhurst and Morin (2014), which investigate the ways in which an actress’s role and previous role-holders can influence and shape the actress’s persona. The study of archived costumes brings yet another complexity to the idea of a performer’s persona where it figuratively exists embedded within the costume. How does the performance costume carry within it the ‘ghosts’ or ‘surrogate’ of the body or bodies who wore it? How does the persona suggested by the costume and framed by other historical and contemporary contexts mutate over time? How much of the persona constructed by the actress at the time of the performance is retained? What overlays are there of reinventions of persona? What framing of persona does the archive itself bring and can those multiple personas be narrativised? And can a costume acquire its own persona overshadowing the persona of its wearer(s)? These questions have only just begun to be asked and often presume that the performer’s costume has been archived since her death. Mailman’s costume was archived while she was and is still living.

## **COSTUME AND PERSONA**

In theatre, understanding celebrity persona requires consideration of a performer’s onstage roles in relation to the offstage persona(s) which make up public perceptions of individual identities. Kim Barbour recognises professional, personal, and intimate registers of performance in the creation of online persona (see Marshall & Barbour 2015, p. 5). Melanie Piper uses a stage analogy to understand American comedian Louis C. K.’s complex on-stage, on-screen, and other public/private personas (2015, p. 14). Study of the archived performer’s costume suggests a more complex model for persona, especially if the performer is indigenou.

One of the most enduring markers of the onstage persona of any celebrity is their costume, a material object which acts as a full or partial body mask that the performer can adopt and remove like a second skin in order to play their professional onstage role. Kylie Minogue’s famous gold hot-pants, for example, in the same performing arts archive as Mailman’s costume, have cultural resonance because there is a living memory of her appearance in them and of her persona as a pop star and iconic female celebrity. The celebrity status of the person is embedded into the garment, which as an object “can stand for particular features of a person, in the absence of interpersonal contact” (Woodward 2007, p.137). But costume also suggests the performer’s intimate, private persona not just in terms of shape, size, and cut but also in the physical traces imprinted onto the costume’s materiality in the form of wear and tear, stains, and other marks. The on and offstage aspects of persona are manifest in the celebrity theatre costume and are inextricable. Deetz has argued that “[t]he artifact is the material

correlate of the individual” (2017 [1980], p. 376). In other words, the ‘ghost’ of each persona lives in the garment and in their reliance on one another they converge to create a single and fully dimensional surrogate for the performer’s body. But again, with performance costume, how much involvement does a performer have in the design? Mailman, as an Indigenous actress breaking a taboo about Cordelia as a white princess as well as a taboo about Indigenous actresses playing Shakespearean roles at all, certainly did not have as much choice or control over the design of her costume as Minogue did.

In addition to the histories a celebrity theatre costume surrogate might or might not tell about the private, public, and professional lives of the performer, it might also reveal a story about the production for which it was worn, and of the hands that made, sourced, or art-finished it. It offers details on the company and collaborators who created the production, the theatre venue(s) the production played at, and the audiences who saw it. Finally, the costume reveals information about those who kept, collected, donated, and, ultimately, archived it. As such, a celebrity costume can contain within it a particularly nuanced account of a specific point in time, giving a detailed picture of the constituencies for whom it was created, something of the *zeitgeist* of its moment, as well as the persona generated by, or attributed to, the celebrity who wore it.

In her essay exploring how the social theory of Michel Foucault can be applied to fashion studies, Jane Tynan suggests “[i]f material things become articulate only within a field of knowledge, then discourse can demonstrate how these objects become carriers of social and cultural meaning” (2016, p. 186). Applied to the celebrity costume, this idea explains how it is only upon entering the archive, as a place suggesting ideologies of study and research and the seriousness of the item’s cultural value, that a persona for the costume in its own right is activated and the object can communicate the importance of its wearer(s) and/or the ‘social and cultural meaning’ of its time of creation. In relating the fictional life of a warrior’s sword, Fisher describes the entry of the object into a museum as “a fourth form of access. Now it is looked at, studied, contrasted with other objects, seen as an example of a style, a moment, a level of technical knowledge, a temperament and culture” (2017 [1991], p. 437). The object has gone beyond its initial function and purpose, beyond being collected as a sacred object or treasure, and is now seen as an artefact, a receptacle of knowledge and marker of culture, and in this case can be treated as a way of understanding a performer’s persona both at the time of wearing and at the time of viewing. Of course the contemporary persona of that performer, if still living, may have been reinvented since the time the archived costume was worn as is the case with Kylie Minogue, whose hot-pants remind us of her youthful stage persona and sex appeal as measured against the mature, elegant celebrity singer who is equally well known for surviving breast cancer. Mailman’s costume, however, is more complex in the questions it poses. Mailman has not performed in a Shakespeare play for some considerable time and prefers contemporary roles in which her indigeneity is not colonised, marginalised, or erased.

Marshall has described celebrity culture as an “explanatory tool” for the discourses of contemporary society, stating that “[c]elebrity in and of itself is fascinating because of the way it can describe significance and value in contemporary culture” (2013, p. 157). In their introduction to persona studies as a potent area for scholarship, Marshall and Barbour assert that the celebrity persona inhabits an “active negotiation of the individual defined and reconfigured as social phenomenon” (2015, p. 9). From this we can usefully understand how a celebrity persona, existing within a celebrity culture, is created as a socially reflexive agent. Understanding celebrity persona as constantly in reflexive negotiation with its creators and its social receivers is also important in the activation of the celebrity costume. I am proposing that both the celebrity persona and the archived celebrity costume are markers of their time and

place of creation and exist in dialogic relation to one another. When a celebrity costume ceases to function as a working garment and crosses over into an archive, the cultural value of that costume is newly activated – sometimes problematically.

### THE POLITICS OF PERFORMING ARTS ARCHIVE

Established in 1975, the Australian Performing Arts Centre (APAC) is “Australia’s largest and most significant specialist collection documenting the nation’s performing arts heritage” (Arts Centre Melbourne 2018) and holds over 680,000 items, presenting exhibitions and displays at the Arts Centre Melbourne. It has an online catalogue which contains approximately ten percent of the collection and a dedicated centre which researchers can visit by appointment. The collection is divided into Dance, Theatre, Costume, Comedy, Broadcasting, Vaudeville and Variety, Circus, Magic, Music, Designs, and Photographs, as well as the Arts Centre’s public art collection, and essentially grew from two founding acquisitions: the J. C. Williamson Theatre Archive and the Dame Nellie Melba Collection. J. C. Williamson Ltd was the dominant theatrical company in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their archive provided a rich source of Australia’s mainstage theatrical history. That history is a white settler history with a colonial narrative of nation-formation and largely contains information on white settler theatrical practices. The contemporary highlight of the collection is Australian actress-turned-singer Kylie Minogue, who donated a vast selection of her stage costumes from tours as early as 1989 up to more recent stage events from 2011. Minogue features prominently on their website, and their free 2016 *Kylie On Stage* exhibition drew over 250,000 visitors, went on regional and national tour in 2017, and is still touring at the time of writing. The theatre collection, to which the costume at the centre of this article’s investigation belongs, is described as the “largest and most diverse part of the Australian Performing Arts Collection” (Arts Centre Melbourne 2018). The collection focuses on personal and company contributions from Australia’s dominant theatre history across drama, comedy, magic, musical theatre, puppetry, vaudeville and variety. Within the context of this archive, the celebrity Indigenous actress Deborah Mailman’s costume sits within the dramatic theatre category – but at the same time disrupts it.

If we consider the suggestion by Marshall et al that “persona studies is a technique that is fundamentally a study of agency” (2015, p. 290), one has to ask in relation to an archived object: whose agency do we mean? Who is the donor? Who makes decisions regarding archival acquisitions? And why? Can a costume create a persona of its own? Once in the archive, who has agency over the construction and dissemination of a version of the celebrity persona through the framing of the object in question? Thinking of how objects can assist in negotiating individual identity within social groups, Woodward suggests:

[t]he fact that one has exclusive control and ownership of an object is the crucial aspect mediating the boundaries between self (who controls the object) and the other (who doesn’t). In this way, *possession* of the object *affords* cultivation of *identity*, sometimes irrespective of an object’s aesthetic or functional qualities. (2007, p. 135)

Chris Fowler goes further when relating material culture to understanding social class structure and states that “social institutions exist, which play an ideological role in policing identities and maintaining particular relations between identity groups” (2010, p. 359). In considering the performing arts archive as a research tool for the study of social, cultural, and political information, it is important to recognise inherent problems with this transfer of agency and the institution’s role in ‘policing’ identities.

An archive is generally understood to be built on a principle of linearity which is more often than not historical; however, within this perceived linearity there is a disjunct between the time of an item's acquisition, the time of its creation, and the time it becomes available to the public. Is a newly acquired costume which was designed and made in the late nineteenth century considered a new item, or an old one? Similarly, a sometimes complex donor lineage exists within each costume's linearity and adds important information to the story the object now tells. This lineage can alter the specific history pertinent to the object and must be recognised as part of the performer's story.

As well as the conscious and unconscious bias of curators, the restrictions on funding and the capacity of archival storage force strict acquisition rules onto the curator. They must rigorously question the cultural value of each costume in relation to the significance of the wearer, the designer, the production and the producing company. As a result, many valuable costumes are rejected to the great regret of the curators and their teams, and the selected items then sit within particular curatorial frames dependent on the person(s) responsible for decision-making. Consequently, bias has been common, intentionally and unintentionally, creating gaps in the knowledge base the institution is responsible for. In the primary performing arts collection of a post-colonial nation this has generated absences and omissions and resulted in the under-representation of marginalised ethnic groups – particularly Australian Indigenous performers and performance cultures. In the case of the APAC, where their starting base was the acquisition of assorted items from J. C. Williamson when it closed in the 1970s, they inherited their collection from a company started by a white American man which was then managed by an assortment of white British and white Australian men. It is clear that the APAC inherited a collection with a particular bias, the original owners of which had already practised their own forms of cultural censorship.

Although their focus is on archives of two-dimensional, textual records and documentation, in *The Silence of the Archive* Thomas et al describe how “it has become more accepted that archival silences are a proper subject for enquiry and to view the absence of records as positive statements, rather than passive gaps” (2017, p. xx). This idea could be applied to archives of three-dimensional objects. Johnson compares the silences to a ghostly voice, or emptiness in an archive, which, when examined, proves to be charged with the energy of what is missing (2017a, p. 105). Speaking of white settler societies in particular, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argues that new approaches to communication and learning in art museums and archives gives communities the opportunity to re-remember their histories, where “[f]ormerly silent voices are being heard, and new cultural identities are being forged from the remains of the past” (2000, p. 563). Johnson relates this even more closely to the artefacts themselves, whereby studying existing bias and resulting silences in an archive is “allowing records to speak with new voices” (2017b, p. 149). But can an absence be viewed? And how can it be filled? Whose communities are being referred to here? These are fraught political issues given that indigenous cultures understand knowledge to be living memory passed from generation to generation. To many indigenous cultures the idea of the archive and the assumption that a life can be captured are alien and oppressive concepts.

Scholars increasingly ask “how do we use these things to produce new knowledge?” (Leone & Little 1993, p. 362). Johnson suggests the answer lies in the idea of ‘sense-making’, which for an archival researcher equates to an active, user-focused, approach with “an emphasis on multiple contextual voices rather than the finding of a universal monolithic truth” (2017a, p. 107). Smith and Hannan agree, explaining that “[o]bjects (like events) can be understood and interpreted only through engagement with ‘multiple sources of data (texts, objects, quantitative data, lived experience, and hands-on knowledge) acquired in a multi-sensory fashion, firmly

grounded in and maintaining a credible link with existing knowledge” (2017, p. 57). In other words, the researcher seeks puzzle pieces from a diverse and complex range of sources in order to better understand the object at large, as well as the potential meaning of any gaps or silences, before piecing them together to create their own ‘sense’ of a story. The performer’s costume as object could be an important focus of a ‘sense-making’ approach to gaining new knowledge relating to celebrity persona. The question of agency needs to be posed in relation to the archival construction of the celebrity performer’s persona, the cultural value attributed to the object, and the politics of the archivists’ decision-making. In these respects, Deborah Mailman’s costume as archived in the APAC, certainly challenges a lot of new archival theorisations as well as assumptions about the community that the sense-making researcher/interpreter might originate from.

### DEBORAH MAILMAN: CORDELIA’S COSTUME IN *KING LEAR* (1998)



Fig. 1: Production photograph of Deborah Mailman as Cordelia in *King Lear*, Bell Shakespeare Company, 1998. Photographer: Jeff Busby. Courtesy of the Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.

Deborah Mailman, born in 1972, recognises both Indigenous Australian and Maori heritage from her father and mother respectively, but is widely celebrated and self-identifies as an Indigenous Australian actress. As the first Aboriginal actress to win the Australian Film Institute (AFI) award for Best Actress in a Leading Role in *Radiance*, Mailman is at the forefront of a pioneering generation of Indigenous actresses. Her career was forged through theatre and she created her role in *Radiance* in a 1998 Queensland Theatre Company production. Although shy as a child, Mailman realised a passion for acting and worked hard to develop a career in the

performing arts (Purcell 2002, pp. 3-28). *Radiance* launched her on-screen career and gave her a public status. Mailman is now held in great esteem and is fondly welcomed into the living rooms of many Australians through television series such as *The Secret Life of Us*, *Offspring* and *Redfern Now*. Her persona is of an actress with a disciplined work ethic who focuses on serious roles, rarely does interviews, and keeps her family and private life out of scrutiny. In the last decade, as her professional status has become increasingly distinguished, her public and professional personas have melded to form the image of a feminist activist and a role model of the progressive Indigenous working woman.

In an interview with fellow Indigenous actress Leah Purcell, Mailman has discussed her initial feelings of alienation within the film industry, and the time it took after winning her AFI award to believe she actually deserved it rather than thinking “[o]kay, yeah, give it to the Aboriginal girl because it’s the right time” (Purcell 2002, p. 15). Early in her career, Mailman was careful to pursue an identity as an actress first and foremost, in order to establish strictly professional credentials, which meant she de-privileged her identity as an Aboriginal woman in a white-dominated public and professional arena. In fact, much was made in the media about the significance of her AFI award in relation to her ethnicity, but Mailman was wary of the discourse and of the pressure to become representative of her community, fighting a private struggle to negotiate her position as an actress in the Australian creative industry sector. In the last decade she has no longer felt the need to remain silent about her Indigeneity, and she now privileges her Aboriginal origins before professional actress, and is accepting of her role as a creative pioneer: “I’m an Aboriginal woman who is an actor and it’s taken me a long time to kind of reverse that kind of description. It’s like. No. My whole being is Aboriginal woman. That’s who I am and I’m fucking proud of it” (Purcell 2002, p. 28). Although hesitant at first to take on the persona ascribed to her because of prejudicial attitudes, Mailman understood the importance of her success, the changes in industry and public perception that her professional profile has brought about, and became proactive in cultivating her pioneering Indigenous persona. She embraced the challenge and responsibility of forging a new celebrity persona and deploying it as a force for cultural transformation.

The APAC online catalogue has just five items attributed to Mailman: her costume for Cordelia in *King Lear* comprising a robe and hat; a photograph and transparency of her wearing this costume in production; and a poster for the 2004 Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) production of *The Sapphires* in which Mailman performed. Her costume for Cordelia was designed by celebrated architect and theatre designer Peter Corrigan and was worn by Mailman in Bell Shakespeare Company’s celebrated 1998 production of *King Lear* directed by Barrie Kosky. The long coat, or robe, of mixed garish pink faux fur features a train and a large fold-over collar which is fixed with strings of fake pearls draping down the torso. The long sleeves are straight, but have been sewn around at regular intervals like a quilt which gives the impression of a medieval maiden’s puffed sleeves. The colour of the fur has been broken down with orange and brown paint or dye which mottles the surface texture and softens the visual impression of the coat. Soft and textural on the outside, the inside of the robe is unlined inside the arms and bears the marks of repeated use through a build-up of grime on the train and multiple repairs across the garment.





Fig. 2: Robe (front) worn by Deborah Mailman as Cordelia in *King Lear*, designed by Peter Corrigan. Courtesy of the Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.

Fig. 3: Robe (back) worn by Deborah Mailman as Cordelia in *King Lear*, designed by Peter Corrigan. Courtesy of the Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.

The accompanying headpiece is covered in pale pink velvet and sat on Mailman's head like a wide court-jester's hat, with fake pearl edging and six large jewel ornaments swinging from underneath its flaps. The production photograph shows the hat sitting low on the forehead, with long sides curving down Mailman's cheeks framing her face, as did the hats on her character's sisters' heads. Her smudgy whiteface makeup is highlighted with red lips, bright pink eyes rimmed in black, and double painted eyebrows which both accentuate her eyes and alter her facial expression. The pink of her coat in the light of the archive is a gentle baby-pink with flashes of orange, but under stage lights the pink becomes bubble-gum sweet, popping out at the viewer and appearing more luxurious than the cheap fabric actually is. Faux fur coats in muted tones featured on multiple characters in this production, yet the quality of colour featured on Mailman's makes her appear almost lewd in her virtue as the honest daughter of the King. In a review of the original performance Kate Herbert suggests you "[i]magine Texas Chain Saw Massacre colliding with the cartoon South Park and a Hollywood musical with gorgeous

costumes and you have an inkling of the cacophony of styles” (Herbert 1998). The style was deliberately mixing allusions of settler colonies and imperialism in a manner that culminated in the domination of an aesthetic of the grotesque. The politics of Mailman’s whiteface is what strikes the researcher of today.

I am mindful of Smith and Hannan’s theory that “[t]he first meeting with a text or an object is an inadequate indicator of future insights; long held assumptions can result in hasty conclusions” (2017, p. 52), but I am using the three-dimensional object of Mailman’s costume as a launching off point to examine the potential of this area of study. Writing about an object cannot be separated from critical thinking about it. Therefore, the act of writing activates critical engagement with the meaning of the object, which, as Smith and Hannan argue, may uncover or highlight new and different connections and meanings, but may also further mystify and deepen contradictions. What kinds of knowledge about an Indigenous woman can be presumed by white viewers, for example?

### **BELL SHAKESPEARE AND MAILMAN’S COSTUME IN PERFORMANCE**

The Bell Shakespeare Company was founded in 1990 by the acclaimed Australian actor John Bell and enjoys considerable fame. It is Australia’s only touring Shakespeare Company, and has a well-earned reputation for taking risks by developing contemporary adaptations of the classics. In 2001 the company worked with the APAC to establish the Bell Shakespeare Company Collection, which holds a selected array of documents and records, and a small number of costumes. It was in these early stages of developing the collection that Bell Shakespeare donated Mailman’s costume to APAC.

Mailman was not the only racially diverse actor cast in the production of *King Lear*, which also included Croatian actress Melita Jurisic, Japanese actor Kazuhiro Muroyama, Russian actor Rostislav Orel, and French actor Christian Manon. Much has been made of the choice to cast Mailman as Cordelia, although Kosky refused “to admit any deliberate intent towards Mailman’s role” (Farrell 2017, p. 35). Rachel Fensham argues that Kosky has been more than evasive, stating that “with very little ‘cross-racial’ casting in Australian theatre critics were hard-pressed not to consider this Aboriginal presence as a provocation” (qtd in Farrell 2017, p. 35). Philippa Kelly observes that “Mailman’s Aboriginal Cordelia remains a singular and largely token mark of multiculturalism on the Australian Shakespeare stage” (Kelly 2005, p. 227). There is no doubt that casting Mailman in a canonical English play, re-worked as only wild-child director Kosky could do, “provokes a post-colonial reading. [Mailman’s] body draws attention to corporeal differences between Cordelia as fair daughter and Lear as white-skinned fleshy old man” (Fensham 2009, pp. 97-8). Indigenous Australians have been notable in their absence from Australian Shakespeare productions, so the comparison between Mailman’s and Bell’s bodily presence alongside each other on stage is significant. Kosky’s *King Lear* presented a white man playing a father to an Indigenous daughter, in an English text brought to Australia by white settlers, and in a play essentially about colonisation and landownership. For some it was radical. However, many Indigenous communities find the continued performing of Shakespeare’s productions on Australian stages an uncomfortably colonial phenomenon.

Mailman’s onstage persona, Cordelia, is the innocent heroine in *King Lear*, who holds true to her morals and is banished from the kingdom as a result, whilst her two sisters deceive the king in order to win his favour and seize his land. Fensham critiques the production as “a serious interrogation of the excesses of power at play in male bodies”, and examines how it “transgressed taboos in the text, and white culture, that normatively secure transmission of male power” (2009, p. 74). By viewing this reading alongside the understanding that *King Lear*

is about ownership and division of land, Mailman's costumed body acts symbolically as a vehicle for both patriarchal as well as colonial power, topics which are very resonant in Australia. The Hollywood glamour of Mailman's fur robe sits at odds with prevalent representations of many indigenous women, and the garish materiality of her robe and matching headpiece contradict the period silhouette and modesty of her character. Mailman's whited-up face and court-jester styled headpiece could therefore be read very ambiguously, as having clothed her in symbols suggestive of settlers. The costume acts as a grotesque mask that actually highlights her Aboriginal body and draws attention to the colonisation of body and land and body as land. Without Mailman's body the costume has no Indigenous signifiers and could be seen as a further oppression.

Although all of the actors in the production wore whiteface make-up, white make-up on a white face reads politically very differently to white make-up on an Indigenous face, on an Australian stage, in a Shakespeare production. Indeed, not so many years later, such an act is no longer deemed appropriate or acceptable. Similarly, a headpiece reminiscent of a court jester's hat on an Indigenous body reads very differently to those worn on her fellow actors' white bodies. Mailman's costumed body in this production could not have been more transgressive, but not in ways perhaps that Kosky intended. With the benefit of hindsight, his directorial concept in itself can be read as an act of oppression.

Fensham believes the powerful dramaturgy of Kosky's production works to "unmake the 'classic body' of Shakespeare" and then contends that Mailman's "corporeal presence is less significant than the difference that her realist acting gives a non-bject identity from the other bodies on stage" (2009, p. 74). I would argue that it is not possible to separate her corporeal presence in the framing of her costumed body from the dramaturgy, nor from her realist acting. The ultimate sacrifice of Cordelia, an Indigenous woman in whiteface make-up, to a white Australian King Lear in a battle for land and power, transgressed the boundaries of Shakespearean tradition. Mailman's costumed body transgressed the social norm of public representations of Indigenous women's bodies. Neither Mailman's, nor the audiences', politically charged experience of Cordelia and her role in Kosky's production could have existed without the specific framing provided by her costumed body.

The political landscape of Australia in 1998, the year Kosky's *King Lear* premiered and the year Mailman received her ground-breaking film award, included the first National Sorry Day, now known as the National Day of Healing, on 26 May. This date marks twelve months from the government tabling a report that recognised past mistreatment of Aboriginal people and was introduced to raise awareness amongst politicians and the general public regarding the Stolen Generations, in response to then Prime Minister John Howard's lack of action. Kosky expressed surprise at the reaction to his racially diverse casting, but critical analysis of Mailman's involvement in particular reflected a contemporary white Australia grappling with the implications of its colonial settler past and the position of Aboriginal Australians in mainstream society. Mailman's costumed body focused the narrative on an interrogation of landownership and on Australia's problematic history but, at the same time, Kosky arguably also objectified Mailman with his directorial concept.

## **MAILMAN TODAY VERSUS THE POLITICS OF THE ARCHIVE**

It is significant that, unlike Minogue, Mailman did not herself own and donate her archived items. The costume was a gift of Bell Shakespeare in 2001, along with the robe worn by John Bell as King Lear in the same production. The APAC online catalogue entries for each of the costume's two parts are factual and brief and not supported by any accompanying documents or

information – this is perhaps unsurprising, given that Mailman is still a working actress rather than an historical figure. Or it may mean that Mailman herself wishes to make no comment. The photograph, transparency, and poster are listed online without an actual image of the archived objects, just as a textual record.

Tellingly, it is not possible to ascertain how many Indigenous actresses are represented in the APAC nor who they may be, as their catalogue is currently organised in a way which does not allow for specific search options of ethnicity, country of origin, or even ‘actor’ or ‘actress’. A search in APAC’s online catalogue using the term ‘Indigenous Australian’ returns 37 results (from a collection numbering in excess of 680,000 items). Deborah Mailman is the only Indigenous performer who appears as a specific catalogue entry in the online database – through the coat and headdress this article is examining. However, unlike items such as those donated by Minogue, the only way to find Mailman’s costume is to search for it specifically. The remaining entries are batches of documents relating to theatre productions and non-specific costume and set designs. These results highlight a significant systemic erasure in the archive itself. The inclusion of Mailman in a searchable system is anomalous, then, and is transgressive in relation to the collection’s historical origins. Mailman’s costume, paradoxically, has become a transgressive celebrity presence in the Australian national performing arts collection and that presence has little to do with the reasons it was donated in the first place. At the time, Mailman was feted by the dominant culture for reaching the heights of a Shakespearean role on a mainstream stage – the donation of her costume attested to her arrival as an actress. But Mailman has made her name and built a following through playing Indigenous roles in gritty political television dramas, where her Indigeneity is unambiguously celebrated and affirmed.

Both Johnson and Fowler question the bias of cataloguing systems in document archives which can silence and suppress materials through their catalogue descriptions (Fowler 2017; Johnson 2017b). Fowler considers whether archives are “deliberately or inadvertently perpetuating the value systems of those rich and powerful individuals who created the records or institutions which hold them” (2017, p. 55). They raise interesting questions about contemporary cataloguing systems and whether they are evolving in their methods for choosing what is important and necessary to catalogue about an archival entry, and what limitations search systems might place on which voices are active and which are silent. At the time of writing, APAC’s cataloguing system is silencing many marginalised voices, but informal communications with staff associated with the collection indicate an awareness of these issues, and an active desire to develop archival and cataloguing systems to better address them. Their collection is certainly growing, intentionally, towards a more inclusive representation of the nation’s performing arts communities.

Mailman’s archival framing constructs a persona which is inseparable from the politics and aesthetics of Shakespearean plays and productions and freeze-frames her at a point in time about which she is interestingly silent. How is it that only Mailman’s and John Bell’s costumes were donated or perhaps selected by APAC? What are the reasons they were chosen to the exclusion of all others? This decision, significantly, appears to place Mailman as an actress on par with John Bell, one of Australia’s most celebrated Shakespearean actors, which is a high accolade, but the politics of framing, or erasing, her through John Bell and Shakespeare are deeply problematic. If the archival measure of success for an Indigenous woman is performing Shakespeare, how does the silence of that Indigenous woman in relation to her archival persona trouble the attempt to colonise her?

Basic records from the APAC indicate that Mailman’s costume has been exhibited once in the Arts Centre foyer as part of the exhibition *A Dream of Passion: The Bell Shakespeare*

*Company*, in 2001-2002. APAC's 2015 exhibition *Rough Magic: Celebrating 20 Years of Bell Shakespeare* included production photographs but not the actual costume itself. Thus far, then, material relating to Mailman in the collection has been exhibited only in relation to celebrating the company who donated her costume, and the politics of her costumed body were not addressed or problematised in these exhibitions.

If we look to Mailman's celebrity persona as it stands today in relation to the persona generated by the archive, there is a chasm between them. In 2017 Mailman was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for Services to the Arts and as a role model for Indigenous performers, and she is also, at the time of writing, a Trustee of the Sydney Opera House. Mailman's decision to identify as an Aboriginal woman first and foremost is integral to her negotiation of her private, public, and professional personas. When Mailman's appointment to the Screen Australia Board was announced in March 2019, her public statement was as follows:

2018 was such an [sic] wonderful milestone for Australia's Indigenous screen creators as we celebrated 25 years of being in control of our stories, and without doubt Screen Australia has been a constant collaborator, partner and of course investor. It is essential all Australians see themselves on screen and we are able to hear our stories told in our voice, from our unique perspective. I am excited to be joining the Screen Australia Board at this time when the industry is energised and the demand for our work both locally and abroad is growing. (Screen Australia 2019)

Mailman's resume includes a long list of nominations and awards and clearly demonstrates her success as a highly respected actor for film and television. For the most part she has left behind her work on the stage. We could speculate, through her archival persona, that she has moved on from theatre because the available roles are ethnically limited in their scope. Instead, Mailman has utilised her celebrity status to create a powerful public persona which she uses to enact change, speak about socio-political issues, and make a positive difference in her social environment.

## CONCLUSION

Mailman's costume as an object and its framing narratives problematise the archive by generating its own Shakespearean persona which Mailman herself has not sought to pursue or promote in more recent times. Studying archived celebrity costume in this way suggests new and important paths for persona studies. Mailman's costume highlights the complexities of persona studies in relation to ethnicity and the archive, and its position and framing within the archival context reveals that, paradoxically, it incorporates both erasures and transgressions.

## WORKS CITED

- Arts Centre Melbourne 2018, *Australian Performing Arts Collection*, retrieved 26 March 2019, <<https://collections.artscentremelbourne.com.au/>>
- Barbieri, D. 2013, 'Performativity and the Historical Body: Detecting Performance through the Archived Costume', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 281-301.
- Carlson, M. 2003, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
- Corrin, L. G. 2017 [1994], 'Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves', in B. M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, pp. 381-402.
- Deetz, J. 2017 [1980], 'A Sense of Another World: History Museums and Cultural Change', in B. M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, pp. 375-380.

- Farrell, C. 2017, *Barrie Kosky's Theatre of Post-Tragic Affects*, PhD thesis University of New South Wales.
- Fensham, R. 2009, *To Watch Theatre: Essays on Genre and Corporeality*, Peter Lang, Brussels.
- Fisher, P. 2017 [1991], 'Art and the Future's Past', in B. M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, pp. 436-454.
- Fowler, C. 2010, 'From Identity and Material Culture to Personhood and Materiality', in D. Hicks & M. C. Beaudry (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 352-385.
- Fowler, S. 2017, 'Inappropriate Expectations', in D. Thomas et al. (eds), *The Silence of the Archive*, Facet Publishing, London, pp. 41-64.
- Herbert, K. 1998, 'King Lear, Bell Shakespeare, Barrie Kosky', *The Australian*, 2 September, retrieved 26 March 2019  
<<http://kateherberttheatrereviews.blogspot.com/2015/12/king-lear-bell-shakespeare-barrie-kosky.html>>
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. 2000, 'Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Communication and Learning', in B. M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, pp. 556-565.
- Isaac, V. 2017, 'Towards a New Methodology for Working with Historic Theatre Costume: A Biographical Approach Focussing on Ellen Terry's "Beetlewing Dress"', *Studies in Costume & Performance*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 115-135.
- Johnson, V. 2017a, 'Dealing with the Silence', in D. Thomas et al. (eds), *The Silence in the Archive*, Facet Publishing, London, pp. 101-116.
- 2017b, 'Solutions to the Silence', in D. Thomas et al. (eds), *The Silence of the Archive*, Facet Publishing, London, pp. 141-162.
- Kavanagh, G. 2017 [1987], 'Melodrama, Pantomime or Portrayal? Representing Ourselves and the British Past through Exhibitions in History Museums', in B. M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, pp. 244-249.
- Kelly, P. 2005, 'Performing Australian Identity: Gendering "King Lear"', *Theatre Journal*, vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 205-227.
- Leone, M. P. & Little, B. J. 2017 [1993], 'Artifacts as Expressions of Society and Culture: Subversive Genealogy and the Value of History', in B. M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, pp. 362-374.
- Luckhurst, M. & Morin, E. 2014, *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance and Modernity*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London.
- Marshall, P. D. 2013, 'Persona Studies: Mapping the Proliferation of the Public Self', *Journalism*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 153-170.
- Marshall, P. D. & Barbour, K. 2015, 'Making Intellectual Room for Persona Studies: A New Consciousness and a Shifted Perspective', *Persona Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1-12.
- Marshall, P. D. et al. 2015, 'Persona as Method: Exploring Celebrity and the Public Self through Persona Studies', *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 288-305.
- Piper, M. 2015, 'Louie, Louis: The Fictional, Stage, and Auteur Personas of Louis C. K. in "Louie"', *Persona Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 13-24.
- Purcell, L. 2002, *Black Chicks Talking*, Hodder Headline Australia, Sydney.
- Screen Australia 2019, 'Deborah Mailman AM appointed to Screen Australia Board', 27 March, retrieved 14 April 2019 <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/sa/media-centre/news/2019/03-27-deborah-mailman-am-appointed-to-board>
- Smith, K. & Hannan, L. 2017, 'Return and Repetition: Methods for Material Culture Studies', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 43-59.
- Thomas, D. et al. 2017, *The Silence of the Archive*, Facet Publishing, London.
- Tynan, J. 2016, 'Michel Foucault: Fashioning the Body Politic', in A. Rocamora & A. Smelik (eds), *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, I. B.Tauris & Co., London, pp. 184-199.
- Woodward, I. 2007, *Understanding Material Culture*, Sage, London.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1: Production photograph of Deborah Mailman as Cordelia in *King Lear*, Bell Shakespeare Company, 1998. Photographer: Jeff Busby. Courtesy of the Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.

Fig. 2: Robe (front) worn by Deborah Mailman as Cordelia in *King Lear*, designed by Peter Corrigan. Courtesy of the Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.

Fig. 3: Robe (back) worn by Deborah Mailman as Cordelia in *King Lear*, designed by Peter Corrigan. Courtesy of the Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.