

Welcome To The House Of Pain

By Michael Winkler

A catalogue essay for a contemporary wrestling art exhibition, 'No Holds Barred', held at Stripp Gallery in Fitzroy in the late 1990s.

When you're born they slap you to make you cry, and thereafter pain is one of the few existential certainties. It's a measurement, a currency, an excuse, a motivation.

It is also the central motif of professional wrestling. You may not, in fact, choose to smell what the Rock's cooking – but you can't deny the pain that he wreaks on opponents, and the pain that is in turn wrought back on him. In the years before Steve Austin became anything cooler than lukewarm, when 3:16 was a bible passage in John rather than an interchangeable wrestling honorific, when the WCW hadn't actually been formed, I used to be a faithful devotee of the WWF's televised mayhem.

Then, when the Junkyard Dog stopped biting and Hillbilly Jim hung up his banjo, I drifted away from wrestling – and couldn't, in retrospect, recall what it was that had pleased me about it in the first place. But every generation rediscovers whatever the previous generation has discarded, and some young relatives who are WCW enthusiasts got me watching the grip-and-grapple action on cable recently. It was – frankly – pretty boring. But I was fascinated by the recurrence of all the old clichés, all the old archetypes, all the old unwritten rules.

The winner of a professional wrestling bout is almost always the participant who has borne the most pain. As an audience we expect victory to be earned. In the never-square ring the victor has to bear excessive, even outlandish punishment before his hand is worthy of being raised. Which is not to say that wrestlers have to be sanguine; the only requirement is that they endure their pain, and grace is not a wrestling virtue. I can remember the screaming of a commentator as Abdullah the Butcher was in the throes of agony: "Abdullah's screaming like a pig, squealing like a pig, as if the dogs have hold of his ears; he's screaming and yelling just as a pig would." The Butcher, of course, won the bout.

There is a clear line from ancient tribal practices to the modern wrestling game. The choice of outstanding men as representative participants, be they emblematic of great beauty or great size or great strength or great goodness or great awfulness. The use of masks and body markings to connote good and evil. The watchful referee, an elder invested with the task of regulating conflict.

The actual sound of the event is a tribal echo: the wrestling ring is a percussive canvas-covered drum, and the perverted jazz of stomping feet and slapped flesh and bodyslams is part of the rhythmic continuum that began when history itself began.

As with the expression of all tribal myths, the presence of the audience is crucial. Without an audience professional wrestling doesn't happen. There is no prizemoney up for grabs, no real trophy on offer. It is an event rather than a contest, the endless re-telling of an ancient tale. This is why wrestling translates more readily into every cultural language than any other spectacle you care to name, (with the possible exception of fireworks).

Years ago, I lived next door to a household of fourteen Vietnamese refugees. Some of the kids used to hang out at our place. They didn't speak a lot of English and I speak no Vietnamese, but we all spoke

fluent Wrestling. A figure-4 leglock is a figure-4 leglock regardless of where you're born. We'd watch the wrestling on TV, throw each other around the room, scream out KING KONG BUNDEEEEE (except for little Hong, the youngest, who called him 'Kid Kon Bunny') and understood each other perfectly well. Within that tiny arena, at least, there was no cultural gap.

Wrestlers are chosen for their extremity. They are our representatives, not our kin. Were they to look like us it would be far too dangerous - or dull.

'Proper' wrestling in both Freestyle and Greco-Roman incarnations is the most private sport I can think of. Two contestants face each other, and their very first touch is like closing a heavy door and turning a key in the lock. Thereafter everything that transpires is a secret between the combatants and no-one else. How much force is being exerted? How strong is each hold? How much pain can either participant bear? Only two people know. At the end of the contest they emerge from their locked room and the winner and loser is designated. That is all we, the outsiders, are ever allowed to know.

Compare this to pro wrestling, the most inclusive, most transparent of entertainments, in which every move is telegraphed and extravagantly executed so that even the slow ones in the back row can work out what's going on.

To undertake this emblematic activity we want the hairiest, the ugliest, the most monumental members of our tribe. They are after all standing in for the gods, marionettes of the cosmos acting out the celestial battle, and mere mortals will not suffice. Thus King Kong Bundy, 500 pounds of formless flesh, who gave of his arteries and heart in much the same way as a force-fed goose gives its liver to make *foie gras*. Thus George 'The Animal' Steele, a psychotic with doormat bodyhair who was let loose to chew the foam out of turnbuckles when he should have been consuming lithium or imipramine. And Abdullah the Butcher, crazed with bloodlust, a man who could never be paired in a tag team because he would turn on his partner as well as his foes, stopping at nothing to satisfy his need to taste warm blood.

This is not Archetype Land. It's Freaksville. When Hulk Hogan travelled to Asia he's mobbed at airports by screaming fans. Entering the ring in the US he had sick children thrust towards him seeking a healing touch. His only apparent qualification for the role of Messiah was that he has 23-inch biceps. (An impressive figure, admittedly. 23 inches is something.) The late, great Andre the Giant was 7-foot-5, 500 pounds. He wore size 23 boots, drank a case of beer every day and had a head that would make George Grosz blanch. Sometimes he played the force of good, sometimes the force of evil, but his presence made him hypnotising in either role.

In Mexico, pro wrestling is called *la lucha libre*, literally 'the free struggle'. And yet the freedom is illusory; constrained within the parameters of traditions and possibilities, controlled by choreography and pre-ordained outcomes. While what transpires inside the ring is ostensibly anarchic, it can only be so within the liberating confines of the wrestling arena. On those occasions when the action extrudes from the ring all of the magic disappears. Suddenly the wrestlers are one with us, and it's dangerous.

Likewise the intrusion of outside influences into the sacrosanct space. The use of the 'foreign object' is always seen as the ultimate in underhand tactics. The vicious Oriental stereotype Mr Fuji attacked opponents with a cane, Jake Roberts unfurled a snake from a sack, and the unsurpassable Abdullah the Butcher produced a barbecue fork during a cage match. It is inbounding the out-of-bounds. The simultaneous mundanity and potency of an introduced object makes the rich vocabulary of ordinary

physical violence seem impoverished – and yet the modern WCW contests I have been watching seem to all involve metal chairs or wooden tables or doors that have been unhinged (soomething they have in common with the wrestlers themselves).

Wrestling fans of the previous era came to believe in the flying head lock, the hanging suplex, the crucifix, the Chinese rack, the sleeper hold, the reverse scissors, the abdominal stretcher, the pile driver, the reverse chin lock. That arsenal of pain should be enough for anybody, but the evil 'foreign object' mocks the willed reality of the contest. It is a transgression that breaks the supernal force-field of the wrestling ring and allows ugly reality to intrude. I have no explanation for the modern mania for foreign objects and frankly, as a purist, it offends me.

Female wrestling is an uncomfortable concept that has existed all this century without ever becoming accepted or acceptable. The novelty of the notion that women could - or would - grip n' grapple has been sufficient rationale, just, for the spectacle to continue. Recently there have been some 'genuine' women contenders introduced, muscular and surly, but too often they are a mere tub of gelatine removed from their jellywrestling counterparts. If anything, the marginal popularity of female wrestling is waning. It seems unlikely that anyone will ever match the Fabulous Moolah's record of 28 years as women's world champion – and the rise of real-deal knockouts like Leila Ali and her female boxing cohorts seems far more exciting, anyway.

Because wrestling is really about men. Big, sweaty, bloated men. Wrestling stands with dancing and sex as one of the timeless forms of wordless communication; unlike the other two, wrestling can be undertaken by grown men in public. Joyce Carol Oates suggested that boxing was an erotic contact for men who cannot love unless they can hit. In wrestling the love comes as much from being hit as from hitting. Love of self, the love of the fans, the love of pain itself. Sometimes pain is a price. Sometimes it's a reward.