

The Changing Room

Sex, drag and theatre

Laurence Senelick



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Introduction

I can quite easily think of opposites,
but it isn't men and women.

Dame Rebecca West¹

Clothes reading

In the first years of the French Revolution, Restif de la Bretonne, that indefatigable commentator on his own morals and would-be reformer of his compatriots', turned his attention to sartorial abuses. He fulminated against the unwarranted adoption by one sex of the accoutrements of the other, warning that the deplorable popularity of pederasty in the classical world had been due to insufficient differentiation in male and female gender markings. To prevent a similar degeneration in his own society he insisted that each sex stick to its own wardrobe.

Let us then prevent our women from wearing men's hats, as they sometimes do. Let us prevent men from wearing women's shoes, English head-stalls, corselets resembling the surcoats of women, etc. . . . A woman in a man's hat and trousers has a hard, imperious, unlovable, antisocial personality. A man in pointed shoes is a fop, an effeminate, a trifler (*bagatellier*), a pederastomaniac or, at least, one of those nonentities who slavishly imitate whatever they behold.²

Restif's complaints have a familiar ring, intoned down the ages in sumptuary laws, *ex cathedra* anathemas, newspaper editorials, school dress codes. Boys must not wear long hair, earrings, high heels; girls must not wear short hair, trousers, or — simply fill in the blank.³ At the base of these injunctions lurks a primordial belief that gender tokens are magical, and to abuse them will transform and denature the abuser. It confuses signifier with signified, in its belief that the clothes

which betoken gender also constitute it. Potency has been transferred from essential nature to adventitious attribute.

This is only natural, since the primary social role of clothing, distinct from its utilitarian functions of warmth and protection, is to render the gender of the wearer discernible at a glance. Even when the garments are seemingly unisex or not immediately distinguishable (as with the Attic chiton, the Samoan sarong, the Celtic kilt), men and women are assigned separate indices of gender, such as a manner of draping or pleating, a particular length or a style of ornament. Beyond certain occupational requirements, there is no consistency among civilizations as to which item of clothing will be assigned to which gender. The long gown, which is the only garment common to all female costume in Europe for over two thousand years, has also been worn by men and even today remains a uniform of dignity at traditional functions.⁴

In fact, such differences in clothing, even when a society invests considerable importance in them, rarely appertain to the basic level of materials or construction techniques, or even the formal level of assemblage: the separation of tailors for men's clothes from seamstresses and milliners for women's was a rather late development in Europe, connected more with distinction between homespun goods and external purchases than with basic gender differences. Gender differentiations in dress are generally made at secondary or tertiary levels: the points at which named garments are endowed with precise meaning, and when rules regarding how garments are to be worn are established. In this respect, the rule determining whether one wears trousers or skirt is no more fundamental than that deciding which handkerchief goes with which tie.⁵

However, since clothing, rather than any unveiled physical attributes, is the standard marker for gender, the cross-dresser and the androgyne are often confused. This confusion has led to Marjorie Garber's siting the transvestite, rather than the androgyne, at the crux of civilization, and defining transvestism as the substance of gendered systems. The arbitrary semiotic system is misread as those essentials for which it stands: the extrinsic and incidental tokens or badges elected by a community to make sure distinctions are taken to be intrinsic and immanent.

A good deal of philosophic and poetic effort has gone into defining the essence of androgyny, attempting to recover or re-create it as an ultimate boon. Most cultures, at least in their early stages, may deify or idealize an androgynous principle, but, outside their religious practices, seldom seek to embody it. When it does occur in nature, as in the birth of a teratological hermaphrodite, attitudes change. The perfect fusion of genders in androgyny is now seen as an imperfect hybrid, less, not more than the sum of its private parts. Such a creature is customarily ostracized, destroyed or else segregated to a sanctified periphery. When a specific gender is chosen for it, clothing is used to declare this gender. Pictorially, true androgynes are shown naked or partially naked, displaying the anatomical sexual attributes of unclothed men and women: their nature is best demonstrated stripped bare. Traditional cross-dressing rarely intends fusion, the *sine qua non* of androgyny, but rather gender division through choice of one polarity or other. Whatever androgynous qualities it may possess tend to be adventitious.

The transvestite therefore falls under the category of what Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty calls pseudo-androgynes, a category which also includes such liminal figures as twins, the eunuch, the sexual masquerader, the transsexual, the pregnant male and the alternating androgyne.⁶ Whereas the ideal androgyne has various modes of coming into existence, the transvestite can do so in only one way, by changing clothes. Anthropological evidence provides any number of reasons why one identifies with the opposite sex by temporarily or permanently donning its clothing: the transfer of experience of the other, the desire to deceive supernatural beings, sexual allure; but in every case a magical symbol is involved.⁷

Mixing and matching, let alone switching, the signs a culture uses to distinguish gender spells danger. If essence of gender can be simulated through wigs, props, gestures, costumes, cross-dressing implies that it is not an essence at all, but an unstable construct.⁸ Gender assignment which at first looks to be deeply rooted in biological imperatives and social exigencies turns out to be no more essential than table manners. Therefore, most taboos against cross-dressing, except when they are rooted in religious belief, are related less to 'elemental' or 'fundamental' concepts of gender than to codes of conduct and social status.

First impressions

In tribal communities all institutions cooperate in determining and shaping gender, so that, as Lévi-Strauss demonstrated,⁹ the opposition between *confusing the sexes* and *differentiating the sexes* becomes an important antinomy in folk religion and mythology. In most cases, the problem is not to split a primal androgyne into male and female; rather it is to distinguish the male from the female, which is often regarded as the primordial state. Rites and ceremonies are established to mark these distinctions, frequently incorporating transvestism as an essential ingredient both during the religious occasion and within the larger patterns of social interaction.¹⁰

For the Soromaja, Hua and Gimi tribes of New Guinea, an unborn human is a glob of psychic energy, an amalgam of both parents' natural fluids, representing an hermaphroditic ancestor who possessed a penis-clitoris and female breasts. When this foetal androgyne is born, it is said to be essentially female until made into a male. How can such an undifferentiated creature slough off its femaleness and become a pure and integral male? Only through initiation rites, by avoiding females, by ingesting semen, and by symbolically expelling the female substances it was either born with or absorbed from breast-feeding. During the male initiation cycle, these substances must be extruded from the boys' bodies, especially their heads, by bleeding and abstinence from female food. To make a man one must have recourse to contrasting images.

Among these tribes, 'male' and 'female' represent two halves of the cosmos, each an integral unit with specific roles and functions complementing the work of the other. Good order is upheld only by maintaining a rigid separation, cooperation of the two halves being indispensable to life. Crossing boundaries or blurring frontiers between the halves, enacting the role of the other, entails chaos, death and disease. This strict segregation of men and women is separate but not morally equal. No Soromaja male will touch the instruments used to prepare sago or anything considered female, for the 'taint' would blight him. At the same time, the themes of male dominance and female subordination that saturate their rituals and taboos convey a male covetousness of female physiological powers. New Guinean myths grant that it was women who originally owned the cult house and who discovered the power of the totemic flutes. Men at that time were barred from the rituals; with supernatural aid, they waged a war, stole the flutes and took the cult house by force. Their victory sealed the consequent exclusion of women from the cult.¹¹

The entire culture is organized around the ritual stealing and guarding of the sacred flutes, because of the need for male self-definition. If the men did not steal and guard the flutes they would remain foetus-like, a mere phallic appendage to woman. But women take their revenge in skits performed during marriage ceremonies and initiations, when they mimic an obsolete cannibal feast with a dummy corpse. In this orgy, wives and mothers dance through the throng and compel the male players protecting the dummy to back off; then, howling and beating their breasts, they dismember the effigy and fight for the parts to be eaten. The bamboo flutes they lost to men are returned to them emblematically by an anthropophagic ingestion of an artificial penis.¹²

Contrast this simulation of the cannibal feast with the circumcision ceremony of the Walbiri of Central Australia, an initiation rite enabling boys to cast off any vestigial female characteristics. Men imitate the sounds and movements of women dancing: as they utter high-pitched yelps and jump up and down, knees bent and feet splayed, the flapping, subincised penis spattering blood on the dancer's leg simulates menstruation.¹³ Among the Hua-Gimi, blood-letting has risen beyond imitation and actual scarification to a symbolic phase. Once actual dismemberment and bloodshed have been sublimated into mimic representations, the next step is emblematic cross-dressing, which prefigures an acting out of mythic scenarios. So in Masai circumcision ceremonies, the boy candidates do not violently reject female qualities. They don the earrings and ground-touching garments worn by married women until their penile wound has healed; only then do they assume the pelts, ornaments of warriors and plaited hair of mature men. To adapt to their own sex, they must first assimilate the gender attributes of the opposite sex.¹⁴ Cross-dressing enables this act of sympathetic imagination, and the norms of society are reinforced.

Mistaken identities

That gender is the product of social technologies, institutionalized discourses, everyday behaviour and critical perception has been an axial plank in the feminist theoretical platform. 'The sex-gender system . . . is both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning . . . to individuals within the society' is how Teresa De Lauretis puts it.¹⁵ Such a concept has become the shibboleth of modern (and postmodern) thought about gender and cross-gender. The term 'gender role' gained currency, since a role is assumed and built; it is an extrapolation on to one's nature, just as a stage role is an assumption by an actor. The gender and the self were seen as two distinct entities.

This had, in fact, long been the position of the psychiatric establishment, whose textbooks regularly distinguished between *gender identity* and *gender role*. The former meant the unity and persistence of one's individuality as male, female or ambivalent, privately expressed through one's self-awareness. The latter was the public expression, through mien or speech, indicating the degree to which one is male, female or ambivalent, and, though linked to sexual arousal and response, was not restricted to them.¹⁶ The clinical tenet was that gender dysfunction occurs during a pronounced slippage between identity and role. It is noteworthy that these definitions derive from the 1950s, when, in the North American experience at least, a profound if repressed cultural concern over gender identity motivated absolutist notions of male and female.

In arguing over the substantiality or illusory nature of the female identity, feminist theory first embraced the idea that all gender is masquerade, which denotes a false face laid over the real one. The transgressive power of masquerade to overthrow socially dictated roles and effect a form of personal liberation has been argued in studies of Georgian London by Terry Castle.¹⁷ But what seemed plausible in an eighteenth-century context became a rib-bone of contention when applied to the question: what constitutes a woman? The French psychoanalyst Joan Rivière had argued that masquerade was the fundamental point of femininity, that 'all women are female impersonators'; but later Luce Irigaray defined masquerade as a false vision of femininity arising from a woman's awareness of a male desire for her as his opposite.¹⁸ There were two fundamental flaws in Irigaray's formulation: ontologically, it presumed a hypothetically 'authentic' femininity; politically, it condemned masquerade to be not a creative act, but an inferior's other-directed survival strategy. Michèle Montrelay extended Irigaray's position even further to argue that women are incapable of

representing a negative quality; unable to lose or repress their child-bearing bodies, they manifest an extreme proximity to their bodies that precludes representation.¹⁹ In other words, woman can only be, she cannot play at another. Peremptory as this sounds, it offers a non-demeaning thesis to explain why women have not been allowed to serve as actors in many cultures.

Support came from film theory and its definition of the conditions of female subjectivity. Mary Anne Doane suggested that because feminine masquerade was incapable of disguising gender successfully, it had a subversive or disruptive function. She was careful to distinguish it from the sort of cross-dressing which seeks to pass: 'Masquerade is not as recuperable as transvestism precisely because it constitutes an acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask – the decorative layer then conceals a non-identity. . . . The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance.'²⁰

The problem with the masquerade approach to gender is that its distinction between the real and the false is almost Manichaeian (or perhaps Platonic, in its implication that the real is better, more authentic, than the assumed). It is tied to the sociologist's search for a 'fixed code' or 'deep structure' underlying surface behaviour, but since this deep structure has to be imputed from surface elements and cannot be known except through them, the whole exercise becomes a circular one. Western thought has a tendency to seek the static and constant behind the fluid and mutable, a tendency Norbert Elias has called 'process-reduction', whereby 'the changeless aspects of all phenomena [are] interpreted as most real and significant'.²¹ Somehow, it is believed, in probing one's gender, the mask and the face will ultimately be distinguishable from one another. The dilemma can be heard in the plaint of a part-time male transvestite celebrating the fluidity permitted by masquerade while deploring it as a diversion from the quest for a true self: 'When I was in drag nothing seemed impossible. Drag allowed me the separate identity to do, act and react to people who would never get to know who I was. [But] I wanted to find my real identity. Drag, drinking, and drugs were all distractions from this process.'²² The liberating aspect of transvestism is seen as a subterfuge, which, for all its potency, shuns authenticity.

A less judgemental approach was to return to the theatrical processes of creating or building a 'role' and to hypothesize the 'performative' nature of gender, a thesis expounded most fully by Judith Butler. In this postulation, we are not dissembling when we perform gender: it may be 'unnatural', an artifice insofar as we created it, but with its own integrity and not simply a superfluities overlying some other reality. This applies to men as well to women. Gender is no longer a disguise that has to be stripped away, but a congeries of actions, statements, appearances, constantly in flux. Transvestism is simply an appliance to enhance the performativity.

Except in its specific application to gender, little of this was new. The notion of the reactive 'characterless character' goes back as far as Strindberg and the Nancy school of psychiatry, and was recycled by Erwin Goffman in sociological terms. Most of this theory, however, was concerned with the everyday processes of human thought and behaviour. What happens, however, when the self-conscious act of confecting an identity by means of gendered clothing does not simply adapt to normative styles of gender, but hyperbolizes and competes with them? 'When', in Rosalind Morris' words, 'habitual acts are brought into consciousness and objectified, they are transformed; practice becomes representation, and everyday acts become strategies that presume a timeless or totalized vision.'²³ Dressing for success to further one's career has little to do with drag and masquerade which tend to parody, not to naturalize, gender. Dragging up to pass as a man or to be rented as a prostitute are more blatantly performative acts than putting on a regimental tie or a Chanel suit.

As Johan Huizinga noted back in the 1920s, 'dressing up' is the most vivid expression of ludic secrecy, interweaving childhood terrors, sheer pleasure, mystic fantasy and sacred awe. It makes the esoteric exoteric. When Magnus Hirschfeld launched the term 'transvestism', he meant it as a variety of fetishism, a temporary state of sexual gratification achieved by cross-dressing. The desired effect may take place in private before a mirror or it may require an outside spectator; but the donning and doffing of the signs of gender offer an illusion of an essence. Its effects may be unsettling, even traumatizing, but since the effects derive from a semblance, they require an audience.²⁴

Stage business

In trying to clarify gender identities in society, theorists showed no particular interest in the special case of the theatre. Performativity occluded performance. Yet for the transsexual lesbian actor Kate Bornstein, 'I see theater as the performance of identity, which is acknowledged as a performance. We're always performing identities, but when we *consciously* perform one, and people acknowledge our performance it's theater.'²⁵ The performing arts provide the most direct, most graphic, often most compelling representations of gender; however, their form and function are often at odds with the concerns of everyday life or even with the common sanctions of society. The methods and motives of the performer involve different mechanisms and are less rooted in personal psychological concerns than those of the Goffmanian projector of self in everyday life.

When her early formulations were criticized for neglecting such distinctions, Butler responded by positing a dialectical relationship between the sociocultural 'constitutive constraint' and the agency or subversion of that constraint.²⁶ This allows for finer discrimination in the investigation of highly deliberate constructions of gender, such as those performed by theatrical transvestism. Earlier feminist theory of gender performativity had been grounded in the concept of the male gaze (a concept invented to study film, a static form whose observer's *optique* is severely constricted). It accepted the traditional definition of the theatre as *speculum mundi* and so inquired into who is doing the looking and at whose reflection. Women's subjectivity, this school argued, was in fact absent from the theatre, except as it was configured as the other by male imaginations; some critics went so far as to declare that the traditional theatre was wholly a male preserve for the appropriation and exclusion of women. Only the women re-invented by a male-dominated system could be reflected in this looking-glass. From this standpoint the political uses of transvestism were laudable: lesbian drag was welcomed as an exposé of this cartel of the male imagination, and contemporary alternative performance as a charivarian overthrow of the imposed gender roles. 'While drag is a joke trivialized in the camp context,' Jill Dolan pointed out, 'as a feminist theatrical device meant to point to real-life gender costuming, its effect is quite different.'²⁷

By dismissing all pre-contemporary uses of gender illusion as repressive masculinist fantasizing, this kind of rhetoric obscured the immense complexity and variety of theatre gender impersonation. Neither the false face of masquerade nor the lamellations of personal identity fit comfortably on to the professional actor. The dramatic actor is defined by the assumption of another's identity for a discrete period of time: the actor has to become the other while still being anchored to a personal identity. Actors may employ the techniques of shape-changing shamans or magicians, but without the involuntary yielding to an outside afflatus. Just as the shaman who lacks inspiration uses external means to simulate or excite trance, the actor effects his transformations with similar auxiliaries. But, in the process, 'how can you tell the dancer from the dance?' The operator is interwoven in the

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operations, may temporarily be effaced; or, in the words of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, 'Acte technique, acte physique, acte magico-religieux sont confondus pour l'agent.'²⁸ The actor's identity may melt within the magma of the character without losing self-consciousness; inspiration may possess the actor, but distinct elements of the actor's personality continue to float in the 'character'. Even when actors are criticized for 'playing themselves', the Stanislavskian concept of 'becoming' a character is purely figurative. No one ever plays oneself on stage, even though selective aspects of a personality or a manner may be enlarged and transmitted.

In Garber's statement that 'transvestite theatre is the Symbolic on the stage',²⁹ there is less than meets the eye, simply because the theatre is, by nature, a symbol-making art. Anything put on stage automatically assumes an aura of extra significance; it is apprehended in a manner which lends it greater meaning than when it is encountered outside the theatre. The simplest word or gesture delivered from a stage can rivet attention and evoke a host of emblematic, semiotic, metaphoric and, of course, symbolic possibilities. Then to claim that stage transvestism is the symbol of symbols somehow abates the alchemy achieved by the theatrical performance of gender.

In the most striking cases, the transvestite theatre does not symbolize some pre-existing reality so much as it establishes a new reality. The process is culinary: a good cook can translate raw liver into a refined pâté, which is not a 'symbol' of liver but a totally new synthesis, a Gestalt or sublimation far more complex than its basic ingredients. The educated palate may try to discern the various components but the residual taste is superior to any of them. In much the same way, the theatrical performance of gender, especially when it is cross-dressed, transcends the function of symbology to the act of creating something different from the reality on which it is based. Elements of masculine, feminine or androgyne observed in life become refracted through the theatrical presentation: if the stage is a mirror, it is a funhouse mirror, magnifying, distorting, and ultimately sending out an image in which the shock of recognition is promoted by an alienation effect.

This is accomplished because the actor's shifts of gender are accomplished primarily through the public presentation of his or her own body. Here we return to Hirschfeld's association of the transvestite's need for an audience with sexual gratification. In the chaotic disorder of postwar Berlin, the young actor Klaus Kinski was cast to play the woman in Jean Cocteau's monologue *La Voix humaine*; prohibited by the military government, it was eventually staged in a private club to sold-out houses with Cocteau's blessing. Kinski, a heterosexual cocksman of epic prowess, sought to get under the skin of woman.

At night I went out in full drag: panties, bra, garters, and high heels. Not to flaunt anything, but for my own sake. Dressing like a woman struck me as natural, as a matter of course, because I felt like a woman once the metamorphosis began. I was fully conscious of being a woman.³⁰

Kinski's approach seems to represent a standard Stanislavskian *modus operandi*: to inhabit a character through self-identification. However, traditionally the 'System' requires emotional identification, a 're-experiencing' (*perezhivanie*) of the character's psychology. Kinski's technique was to adopt the outward appearance of the character and test it against a reality existing outside the theatre: his 'becoming a woman' occurred because his appearance as a woman was validated by the real-life observer. Characteristically, he went out alone and at night, allowing these observers to assume he was a prostitute; his feeling like a woman was associated with the sexual attraction he exerted, wholly by means of his looks.

Displaying the body to the gaze of others automatically implies the availability of that body for sexual exploitation. Merely by coming on stage, an actor of any gender becomes a site for erotic speculation and imagination. The act of cross-dressing is the paradigm for acting since it directs the attention to the enigma of the actor's body, and leaves the spectator with troubling memories, unanswered questions. In explaining why so many of the productions of his troupe Gloria are structured around the putting on and taking off of clothes, Neil Bartlett has reported

the deep feeling that you put the show on, you inhabit it, you say what you've got to say through the medium of the costume, make-up, genre that you're adopting, and then you may go away but the genre, the voice, the costume, the make-up stays there and has an uncanny life of its own which you speak through for the duration of the performance.³¹

(I am old-fashioned enough to believe that the flesh-and-body human on a stage has more potency, especially in the reconfiguration of gender, than do film and video. The powerful images diffused by canned media are apprehended differently and in a safer atmosphere: their dimensions and unchanging repeatability alter the nature of the confrontation of spectator and performer. That is why I have confined my observations in this book to live performance.)

I find the changing room to be an apt metaphor, because it points up the temporary nature of the transformation. In sports facilities, changing rooms are where athletes kit up to display their prowess, whether as the robotic behemoths of American football or the near-naked aquatics of the swimming competition. In clothing stores, the customer tries on a new look inside the changing room, requiring no other audience than the reflection in the mirror. When actors apparel themselves in areas known as dressing-rooms, tiring-rooms, *loges*, the change occurs only at the point when they step on to the stage and test their transformation against the reception of the spectators. Consummated in this space shared by shape-changer and audience, the change becomes an interchange.

The unsettling nature of actors' bodies has dictated their status as outsiders. In most pre-modern societies, with a few remarkable exceptions, the professional actor has been ranked at the bottom of the system, classified with slaves and gladiators in Imperial Rome, with rogues and vagabonds in early modern England, with prostitutes and grave-diggers in Tokugawa Japan. These sanctions stood in sharp contrast to the adoration lavished on the actor by the public. Both the opprobrium and the admiration directed at actors is analogous to that directed at women. It is therefore considered no great stretch for a male actor to play a woman; already an 'other', subservient, restricted and dependent, his own experiences contribute to the impersonation.³² When the actor's sexual identity is also suspect or proscribed, when he himself prefers men as love objects, the impersonation can be even more convincing. Women who change their gender are more problematic: on the one hand, they seem to threaten by usurping male prerogative, but on the other, their transformations can be interpreted as yet one more adornment to an already available body.

'God has given you one face, and you make your selves another' was one of Hamlet's denunciations of womankind. It could as easily be applied to actors. Organized societies are fond of characterizing their institutions as God-given: one's place in that society is divinely predetermined. To change it is to defy God and to deceive one's fellow-man. In the eyes of the anti-theatricalist, when actors apparel themselves in another gender, they are merely carrying to the logical extreme

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the deception in which they normally engage. When he inveighs against cross-dressing on the stage, as the Elizabethan pamphleteer Stephen Gosson did, he construes it as a lie:

that in Stage Playes for a boy to put on the attyre, the gesture, the passions of a woman; for a meane person to take vpon him the title of a Prince with counterfeit porte, and train, is by outwarded signes to shewe them selues otherwise than they are, and so with in the compasses of a lye.³³

A youth pretending to be a woman is equated with a commoner pretending to be a nobleman: to pass oneself off as something other than what one is socially defined to be is worse than presumption. It is damnable deceit. It disrupts the divinely appointed order of things.

Similarly, in his overheated attack on stage plays, John Rainoldes insists that an actor is indeed an errant rogue, 'for his chief essence is, *A daily Counterfeit*. . . . His [profession] is compounded of all Nature, all humours, all professions.'³⁴ The foundations of social stability – the ascertainable natures of an individual's identity, residence and vocation – are undermined by this feigning. The rogue and the whore feign to cheat, so why should the actor's aims be different? His very calling makes him lawless and immoral. The actor, male or female, by exposing the body, is a tempter, his profession a gang of 'profane men and shameless women who go about corrupting youth', 'altogether lascivious and libidinous'. In the eyes of these critics, the stage is defined by its playing with gender, 'women dressing as men and boys as women'.³⁵ The changing room of the theatre, open to the public, presents its greatest threat in gender metamorphosis.

The rants of the anti-theatricalists, hysterical as they are, have more than a germ of truth in them. However much the theatre has been pressed into service to endorse and advertise society's values, it is staffed by a suspect and marginal personnel. How is the theatre to serve the establishment when its exponents are condemned as anti-establishment? Historically, it has always walked this knife-edge: a socially sanctioned institution with roots in religion and myth, expected to clarify and convey the establishment ethos in a public forum; and, a haven for outcasts, misfits and uncomfortable temperaments of all stripes, offering opportunities for self-expression that are otherwise unavailable. Much of the theatre's excitement comes from this dynamic, an oscillating tension between these two callings. The theatre is constantly eluding controls and violating the terms of its social compact. Like a recessive gene, its magical and shamanic origins keep cropping up. It tends to mingle the fleshly and the divine, the accessibly human and the unreachable ideal, in unsettling ways. Its effects are heavily erotic, and offer the audience unorthodox examples and alternatives.

The animosities directed at cross-dressing, homosexual practices and the performing arts are part of an ideological tangle, in which the various strands of fear and prejudice are hopelessly knotted together. Civil and religious authorities have always directed attacks on any organisms which contradict their authority until the evolution of mores favours the integration of such communities by paralysing and then annihilating their original subversive tendencies. The nexus between theatre and prostitution has been a commonplace of moralistic attack on both institutions, and in its drive for respectability over the past three hundred years, the Western theatre has tried to sublimate the connection and to establish claims as high art, something standing above the needs of the flesh. This may be wrongheaded, for it cuts off a primary source of the theatre's dynamic: its appeal to the libido is also a channel back to its magical beginnings. To appear on stage is to display one's body to strangers: a commodity available to the common gaze may, in given circumstances, be

vendible in its entirety. The inscription of gender as allure, in a more blatant manner than society approves, becomes one of the theatre's most potent attractions, and, to the authorities, one of its most dangerous features. Since the object of desire is traditionally woman, the actual deployment of women and the use of surrogates, such as boys and young men, becomes problematic; but in both cases, the gender signals sent from the stage are more powerful than those transmitted in ordinary life. The prostitudinal aspect of theatre makes its performance of gender especially dynamic.

What complicates the relationship of the theatre to prostitution is that the theatre does not act but enacts, offers not actuality but fantasy. Intercourse with a transgendered shaman was dangerous; the union with the divine essence demanded servitude and self-abnegation. Intercourse with a cross-dressed sacral prostitute diminished the danger, since the medium was not so much possessed by the god as a surrogate for it: the fleshly begins to edge out the religious, without losing its religious sanction. The transvestitic actor still possesses vestiges of magical prestige, but here, even when the actor is sexually available, the transvestism is divested of any divine consummation. The man playing woman and woman playing man are the ultimate tease, being at the same time more and less than what they seem. Actors indulge not in gender-crossing but in gender-mixing, and offer a polymorphism more desirable than attainable.

By nature a 'queer' institution, the theatre is most itself when challenging the norms of its ambient culture. One of its most powerful means of doing so is shape-changing, particularly with regard to sex and gender. This is why Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister* is at pains to explain the cross-dressing of the acting troupe as a phase in his protagonist's journey towards maturity.³⁶ Goethe was particularly alert to the erotic *frisson* produced by sexual transformation, and the ways in which it offers opportunity to explore the spectrum of passion. In his description of carnival in Rome he observed, 'everyone is curious, among the many male forms which seem to sit there, to seek out the feminine and perhaps to discover in a cute officer the object of his passion'.³⁷ The transvestism that for Goethe unfolded a spectrum of desire, for Genet offered the supreme opportunity for subversion. To mimic the opposite sex (or race) constitutes the greatest profanation of all, because, as Artaud writes, on stage bodies and feelings become compounded. 'To play love is to imitate love, but to mimic love is to demystify love, to mimic power is to demystify power, to mimic ritual is to demystify ritual'.³⁸ Or as our contemporaries would say, to deconstruct these entities in order to reveal their artificial nature.

Cross-dressing in the theatre thus engages with more than concerns about gendered personal identity: it invokes aspects of divinity, power, class, glamour, stardom, concepts of beauty and spectacle, the visible contrasted with the unseen or concealed. The much-quoted notion of transvestism as a 'confusion of categories' and a locus of cultural anxiety loses much of its validity when applied to theatrical cross-dressing. It has to be said, first of all, that the terms 'anxiety' and 'crisis' have been bandied about pretty loosely by cultural materialists. The temptation is understandable: it is highly dramatic to characterize a phenomenon as being in a state of crisis. Borrowing heavily from psychoanalytic theory, academics have posited that every issue of sex and gender, at any historical moment, whatever the context, perspires anxiety. Gender is seen as so unstable that any action relating to it must be an attempt to either shore it up or demolish it.

By opposing the transvestite to a rigid set of binaries, man/woman, Garber essentially endorses the pioneer sexologists' formula of a 'third sex'. Her much-quoted remark that the transvestite creates a traumatic 'crisis of category', which makes the very foundations of personal identity quake, is grounded in such a system of classification.³⁹ One has to bear in mind that the categories in question are not natural, but the artificial and mutable constructs of given circumstances; in this

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respect, the transvestite in the theatre does not confute or elude categories; it creates new ones. The actor, cross-dressed or not, resembles the *nadleehi* or berdache of the Navajo, 'simultaneously male, female and hermaphrodite', or Nanabush, the central hero figure in Cree mythology, described by the gay Cree dramatist Tomson Highway as 'neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or . . . both simultaneously'.⁴⁰ No potentiality is foreclosed.

The categories themselves, rather than being in crisis, are ignored for fresh configurations of gender never seen outside the theatre. The *onnagata* and *wakashu* of Kabuki, the dame and principal boy of English pantomime are only superficially connected to any off-stage gender categories. When Mei Lanfang selected and recombined elements from two separate Beijing opera techniques for performing women in order to create a more multi-faceted character, his concern was not to find a better way to impersonate an actual woman or even a socially constructed idea of femininity. His interest lay in expanding his own performance opportunities; incidental to this, his stage women were endowed with more dimensions, wholly unrelated to the experience and presentation of quotidian femininity. Even the drag queens of pre-Disney 42nd Street wished not to appear as woman but as larger than life, as ultra-glamorous, in-your-face superwoman.⁴¹

Moreover, if true transvestites in life were to play roles in the theatre, their interior lives, hitherto led in abjection, would blossom; the role would authorize cross-dressers to lay innocent claim to their liberated condition, by channelling their inner feelings and physical appearance into the action and dialogue which, through the character, represent the cultural acceptance of gender. Because the modern actor as an individual is hedged round with a universal social respect and adulation which may be as unbalanced and unjustified as the ancient condemnations that overwhelmed him, the actor's private life tends to be dissociated from the characters he plays (Hollywood press agency and the naïveté of tabloid readers aside). So, for the performer with transvestitic penchants, the stage offers licence and liberty, not anxiety and crisis.

Although stage-gender types can be located on a gamut running from extreme masculinity to extreme femininity, the individual type is multi-planar: it layers and interfoliates the different signs of gender to destabilize categorical perceptions of male or female. Watching such a figure in action is like looking through a stacked set of photographic plates or film-frames through which a multiplicity of images is superimposed on the eye. Stage-gendered creatures are chimeras which elude the standard taxonomies and offer alternatives to the limited possibilities of lived reality. That these alternatives cannot exist outside the realm of the theatre makes them all the more cogent to the imagination.

In the traditional Christmas pantomime, for instance, the principal boy played by a woman and the dame played by a male comedian are not evading the standard gender binary to become a third entity. Rather, they are establishing a Pantoland binary, in which maleness plays almost no part. Sexual (or at least, romantic) viability is located in young women, whether dressed as male or female; comic impotence is invested in old women, whether played by male or female. The world of Victorian panto is one devoid of male authority (the Demon King was always vanquished by the Fairy Queen) and the realities of heterosexuality displaced to a utopian, pre-sexual child's world. This is why such innovations as male rock stars as the principal boy or Danny La Rue's introduction of the drag-queen dame upset the now traditional *données* of the genre. The other-worldly illusion is broken by the intrusion of potential sexual fulfilment.

Similarly, the Tokugawa kabuki, an all-male performance form, does not offer the *onnagata* or female impersonator simply as a challenge to male/female binaries. The *onnagata* is a sophisticated contrivance, incorporating the sodomitical attraction of the beautiful youth, the refined charms of

the female courtesan and the awe-inspiring technique of the expert actor. She is not the polar opposite of the rough hero, but rather one stage along a spectrum of gender combinations, including the *wakashu* or soft youth who retains his male garb and appearance while presenting a more feminine (and hence more acceptable to Japanese women) allurements. Ironically, when the *wakashu* is played by a woman, the result is the *otoko-yaku* of the Takarazuka revue, who comes across to a Western observer as a Barbie-like modulation of a butch lesbian. Such reconfigurations of the objects of desire do not stir up anxiety or cause crisis, any more than Shakespeare's invention of Caliban and Ariel caused audiences to tremble for their identities as human beings. (Here I have to reiterate that it is the performer-audience relationship that matters. Rarely did the reformers who fulminated against theatrical practices actually experience what they claimed to define; and this tends to hold true for many modern thinkers as well.)

The transvestite in performance rarely displaces dichotomous systems of sex and gender; and to look at the cross-dressed actor solely in that light runs the risk of accepting uncritically, even bolstering conventional concepts of sexual dimorphism. To define the stage transvestite solely as a third alternative and to relegate fluidity and ambiguity exclusively to such an alternative is to overlook the wide range of reinventions of masculine and feminine within the theatrical frame. The Elizabethan boy actor playing Rosalind playing Ganymede may seem androgynous, but is not an androgyne. A trained professional, who incidentally exuded an ambiguous physical appeal, enacts a fictional girl who in turn enacts a fictitious youth. Since the process begins with an adolescent who by definition is not wholly a man and can be identified sodomitically with a woman, his primary disguise does not so much belie his physical reality as enhance it. The second disguise, working upon stage characters rather than audience, then increases spectatorial pleasure by multiplying erotic possibilities and again offers a chance to admire the skill in juggling so many identities. There is in this no postmodern desire to deconstruct socially imposed form or to provoke and then allay cultural anxieties. Instead, the impulse is to create something never seen on land or sea and thus to distract and enchant an audience. Rather than confounding categories it invents new ones, providing fresh matter for desire, and releases the spectator's imagination and libido by an ever-changing kaleidoscope of gender.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in S. Blow, 'Taking down his name and a dress', *Spectator*, 18 June 1994, p. 36.
- 2 H. Bachelin (ed.), *L'Oeuvre de Restif de la Bretonne*, Paris, Edition du Trianon, 1932, vol. 9, pp. 253-4. Restif was a devoted foot fetishist, which may explain some of his animus.
- 3 For a précis of American court decisions about student hair length, see L. Kanowitz, *Sex Roles in Law and Society*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1973, pp. 634-44.
- 4 Y. Deslandres, *Le Costume image de l'homme*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1976, pp. 242-3.
- 5 O. Burgelin and M.-T. Basse, 'L'unisexe. Perspectives diachroniques', *Communications*, 1987, p. 280.
- 6 W. Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 282.
- 7 J. C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930), New York, International Universities Press, 1971, p. 1210.
- 8 M. Hunt, 'Girls will be boys', *Women's Review of Books*, September 1989.
- 9 C. Lévi-Strauss, 'Structure et dialectique', *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris, Plon, 1958.
- 10 A mid-century study of seventy-six non-Western societies revealed that forty-nine of them sanctioned some form of cross-dressing. C. S. Ford and F. A. Beach, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, New York, Harper, 1951.

- 11 G. Oosterwal, 'The role of women in the male cults of the Soromaja in New Guinea', in A. Bharati (ed.), *The Realm of the Extra-Human. Agents and Audiences*, The Hague, Mouton, 1976, pp. 323, 327-32. A classic essay on the construction of gender identities in New Guinea societies is S. Lindenbaum, 'The mystification of female labors', in J. F. Collier and S. J. Yamagisako (eds), *Gender and Kinship. Essays Towards a Unified Analysis*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987.
- 12 P. R. Sanday (ed.), *Divine Hunger. Cannibalism as a Cultural System*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 62, 66, 74-7, 85-9. Sanday points out (p. 147) a similar complementary revenge ritual in the Iroquoian creation myth, when men break up the paradise of the parthenogenetic woman; but warriors and women are complementary, interdependent for validation and status fulfilment.
- 13 S. A. Wild, 'Women as men: female dance symbolism in Walbiri men's rituals', *Dance Research Journal*, 1977-78, vol. 10, pp. 15-19.
- 14 E. Crawley, *Dress, Drinks and Drums. Further Studies of Savages and Sex*, London, Methuen, 1931, pp. 140-4. It would be a mistake to assume that institutionalized male transvestism is more likely to appear in societies founded on values of martial valour than in others. In their study of seventy-three primitive societies, Robert and Ruth Munroe found that only the quantitative contribution of the males to the subsistence economy, not the degree of task differentiation from females, was predictive of male transvestism. A society is likely to institutionalize a male transvestite role if high subsistence requirements exist for the men. Another study also showed that societies which maximize sex distinctions will not have institutionalized male transvestism; whereas societies which make minimal use of sex as a discriminating factor in prescribing behaviour and membership will have institutionalized male transvestism. R. L. and R. Munroe, 'Male transvestism and subsistence economy', *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1977, vol. 103, p. 307; and R. L. Munroe, J. Whiting and D. Hally, 'Institutionalized male transvestism and sex distinctions', *American Anthropologist*, 1969, vol. 71, p. 88.
- 15 T. de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 2-3.
- 16 J. Money and A. Ehrhardt, *A Man Woman/Boy Girl: Differentiation and Dimorphism of Gender Identity from Conception to Maturity*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972.
- 17 T. Castle, 'The culture of travesty: sexuality and masquerade in eighteenth-century England', in G. S. Rousseau and R. Porter (eds), *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- 18 L. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 220.
- 19 'Woman is the ruin of representation', Montrelay declared in 'Inquiry into femininity', *m/f*, 1978, vol. 1, pp. 83-101.
- 20 Quoted in A. Solomon-Godeau, 'The legs of the countess', *October*, Winter 1986, vol. 39, p. 81.
- 21 N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process. The History of Manners*, New York, Urizen Books, 1970, p. 112; J. Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class. A Study in Comparative Sociology*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 31; S. Mennell, *All Manner of Food. Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1996, pp. 13-15.
- 22 R. Serian, 'Big hair and new makeup. Drag and gay identity', *Whole Earth*, Autumn 1987, p. 6. It is interesting that when the notion of masquerade is applied to the masculine identity, it is assumed that the disguised individual, in playing another being, will turn into that being. H. Brod, 'Masculinity as masquerade', in A. Perchuk and H. Posner (eds), *The Masculine Masquerade. Masculinity and Representation*, Cambridge, MA, MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1995, pp. 16-17.
- 23 R. C. Morris, 'All made up: performance theory and the new anthropology of sex and gender', *American Review of Anthropology*, 1995, vol. 24, p. 583.

- 24 J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. A Study of the Play-element in Culture*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1968, p. 13.
- 25 K. Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw. On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 147.
- 26 J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York, Routledge, 1993.
- 27 J. Dolan, 'Gender impersonation on stage: destroying or maintaining the mirror of gender roles', *Women & Performance*, 1985, vol. 2, pp. 7-9.
- 28 M. Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1960, p. 371.
- 29 M. Garber, *Vested Interests. Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York, Routledge, 1993, pp. 11-13, 40.
- 30 K. Kinski, *Kinski Uncut. The Autobiography of Klaus Kinski*, trans. J. Neugroschel, New York, Viking, 1996, pp. 85-7, 92, 315. Although Kinski boasts of his successes with women, in the postwar period he was closely connected with the homosexual Berlin salon of Prince Alexander Kropotkin. See B-U. Hergemöller, *Mann für Mann. Biographisches Lexikon zur Geschichte von Freundschaft und Mannmännlicher Sexualität im deutschen Sprachraum*, Hamburg, Mannerschwarmskript, 1998, p. 420.
- 31 A. Kiernander, "'Theatre without the stink of art,'" an interview with Neil Bartlett', *GLQ*, 1994, vol. 1, p. 228.
- 32 M. Novy, 'Shakespeare's female characters as actors and audience', in C. R. S. Lenz, G. Greene and C. T. Neely (eds), *The Woman's Part. Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1980, pp. 264-6.
- 33 *School of Abuses*, quoted in M. Twycross, 'Transvestism in the mystery plays', *Medieval English Theatre*, 1983, vol. 5, p. 138.
- 34 *Over-throw of Stage Plays*, 1599, quoted in J. Dollimore, 'Subjectivity, sexuality, and transgression: the Jacobean connection', *Renaissance Drama*, 1986, vol. 17, p. 63.
- 35 From a letter (2 May 1572) to Carlo Borromeo from a father in Piacenza whose only son had joined a troupe of players; quoted in F. Taviani, *La Commedia dell'arte e la società barocca: la fascinazione del teatro*, Rome, Mario Bulzoni, 1969, pp. 20-1. My thanks to Fr. Michael Zampelli who drew my attention to this quotation.
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- 37 J. W. von Goethe, *Italienische Reise*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Munich, Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977, vol. 11, pp. 533-67.
- 38 J. Kott, *Theatre Notebooks 1947-1967*, trans. B. Tabori, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1968, p. 268.
- 39 'The "third" is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis.' Garber, op. cit., p. 11.
- 40 Quoted in M. Abley, 'In two spirits', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 May 1999, p. 7. See W. Roscoe, *Changing Ones. Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*, London, Macmillan, 1998.
- 41 The most sympathetic and imaginative study of midtown drag shows is H. Falk, *Transvestie. Zeichnungen, Gouachen und Collagen. Der silberne Cocon. Notizen zur Transvestiten-Szene in New York 1979-1985*, Zurich, ABC Verlag, 1985, esp. pp. 11-57.

Queens of clubs

A lot of queens I know come from small towns where there weren't many options. After a lifetime of being repressed, it's easy to understand the appeal of drag. You've got a dressing room, you've got a costume, you've got a stage, you've got an audience. You've got options. You can be anything you want. You can be a star.

Unnamed drag queen¹

A group of USO actors on their way to entertain the troops in the South Pacific during the Second World War did a little sightseeing in San Francisco before embarking. At Finocchio's a mixed crowd of servicemen and women, jammed in at the tiny tables, enjoyed Karyl Norman the Creole Fashion Plate and other female impersonators:

excellent entertainers, disporting themselves in such elegant, expensive and luxurious apparel as to make a girl's head spin. . . . Of course, everyone coming back from the forward area and everyone making ready to go out there, tries to pack a lifetime of fun and sight-seeing into a few hours . . . we want to enjoy the decadent luxuries of civilization as much as we can before we go.²

'Decadent' female impersonation might be, but it offered vestiges of scarce luxury and sophisticated fun. Norman was refined in the tradition of minstrel virtuoso, his two-octave range capable of shifting from coloratura soprano to baritone, and could leap from a male to a female falsetto 'with the agility of a Flatbush commuter changing trollies'.³ He was praised for avoiding the unpleasant mannerisms (i.e. swish campy) of his colleagues, a 'robust straightforward, manly youth, a skilled student of human nature, who can characterize remarkably through the medium of women's attire'.⁴ For the public at large, awareness of cross-dressing usually derived from such a professional femme mimic in a club ambience.

The venues for gender impersonation, even as performance, were severely limited by municipal legislation. Most cities had on the books laws such as New York's Statute 780 of the Penal Code which stated:

an assemblage in public houses or other places of three or more persons disguised by having their faces painted, discolored, colored, or concealed is unlawful, and every individual so disguised, present thereat, is guilty of a misdemeanor, but nothing contained in this section shall be construed as prohibiting any peaceful assemblage for a masquerade or fancy dress ball or entertainment.⁵

Private parties might engage in wholesale drag, so long as the context was agreed upon by consensus. Annual drag balls and fashion shows in large cities were looked on benignly, especially if sponsored by a pre-existing organization and justified by donating its proceeds to charity.⁶ For twenty years Finnie's Club sponsored such a masquerade in Chicago, and the Harlem social club the Fun Makers held an annual fashion contest in New York for at least a decade. 'We're not freaks,' explained one Fun Maker. 'We just love to dress up and have fun.'⁷ During the Depression, the Hamilton Lodge Ball, held every February, was a 'melting-pot' that temporarily dissolved barriers of race, class and sexual preference.⁸ That these events, though fully integrated, took place in black



Figure 71 When a female impersonator could have his name in lights: Francis Renault (d.1956) advertised on Broadway in the late 1930s.

neighbourhoods may have contributed to the authorities' turning a blind eye to their activities. Social endorsement of a periodic bacchanal was still possible, but did not stretch to continuous drag performance.

More pointed and specific in its strictures was Section 888 (7) of the Code of Criminal Procedure, in which impersonation in public of the opposite sex by male or female is denominated 'vagrancy' and liable to prosecution and imprisonment up to six months at hard labour. In 1912, a man dressed as a woman was arrested in a theatre lobby advertising the play *The White Slave*, though he avoided conviction for vagrancy when it was conceded that his drag was only a publicity gimmick.⁹ These laws were still enforced in the early 1960s. Under these conditions, the annual drag balls had an inevitable air of hysteria about them: identities and proclivities kept tightly under wraps the rest of the year suddenly erupted into the public eye. A thirst for theatrical glamour, pomp and circumstance was finally if temporarily satisfied.

During Prohibition, speakeasies and clubs protected by organized crime could offer entertainment that skirted legality. The sissy was a popular figure in New York night-life; there was even a Club Pansy, and Minsky's ran a weekly burlesque show called 'Ima Pansy from Central Park'.¹⁰ A number of sleazy niteries, among them the Glory Hole in Central City, Colorado, the Coon Chicken Inn in Reno, Nevada and Dante's Inferno in Kansas City, offered 'sideshows', where men in makeup and permanent waves, though otherwise in male attire, swished around for the delectation of a straight audience. Hollywood night-life was dominated by drag queens, with Rae Bourbon's revue *Boys Will Be Girls* at Jimmy's Backyard and Francis Renault starring at Clarke's; movie stars were not embarrassed to be sighted there. No alcohol was served, but same-sex dancing and nudity were carefully monitored by the police. However, the comic songs on offer left little to the imagination: Bourbon's 'Mr Wong', about a leader of a Tong society, is typical:

When he puts on the spot a rival guy
The guy says, OOOH! What a way to die!
Mr Wong has got the biggest tong in China.¹¹

The impressionist Charles Pierce has insisted that 'until the night club came along in the '30s, "homo" was not inevitably attached to female impersonation. The female impersonation image was shattered when impersonators were forced to fraternize with customers.'¹² The high reputation which Julian Eltinge and his imitators had won for female impersonation in vaudeville had always been difficult to sustain; they had constantly to challenge and counter accusations of effeminacy. This was particularly difficult since the rank-and-file of the profession, while insisting on their artistry, had no objection to hustling on the side. One such veteran who did a vaudeville act imitating Eva Tanguay and occasionally stripping, insisted 'We were treated as artists and ladies', making up to \$200 a week in the 1920s; he and his associates assumed women's voices, but only one of them, Arabella, 'had a chest' and billed herself as half-man/half-woman at Coney Island. Even so, Scarpie admitted to hustling the audience, working stag parties, and having sex with stars at parties 'under cover'.¹³

Female impersonators tended to live segregated from other variety performers: in Boston they clustered at the Bostonian, a small rooming house on Howard Street known to the other actors as the YW.¹⁴ The disciplined fictions that went into their transformations – the body shaving, the withdrawal into intimate elastic and the shoring up of the body's foundations with an intricate architectonic of undergarments – set them apart, and injected a kind of diablerie into their personal magnetism.

Given the legal restrictions, it was crucial for clubs which featured drag to stress the performance element, and in most cases the performers had honed their skills in some other realm of show business, usually carnival, vaudeville or burlesque. Expertise was at a premium, for as one female impersonator said of playing 'burleycue', 'It's one thing to work nude against a bunch of impersonators, and seem like a real woman. But when you're performing on a stage with the genuine article, real women, you have to be faultless.'¹⁵ Specialities made a performer stand out: Lester (aka Lestra) La Monte who served his apprenticeship in variety and minstrel shows became famous at Finocchio's from 1948 as the 'Paper Fashion Plate', in costume fashioned of crepe paper. In 1958 José Sarria began performing his 'camp operas' at the Black Cat Café in San Francisco, and carried on for the next forty years.¹⁶ Performers were rarely allowed to mingle with the customers. If the drag artistes came round to front of house in the course of the evening they would be confined to their own table, where the customers might visit, but often only female customers were allowed to sit down with them.¹⁷

Reclamation efforts

A concerted attempt to reclaim female impersonation as a legitimate theatrical genre was the Jewel Box Revue, first produced in 1939 in Miami, Florida. Having solicited funding from a wealthy woman, its founders, the couple Doc Brenner and Danny Brown, opened it in 1942, and, billing themselves as 'boy-ological experts', toured the show from their Miami headquarters for thirty years. Their programme notes invariably stated that their intention was to bring back glamour and professionalism, and cited as precursors the Elizabethan boy player (the imprimatur of Shakespeare), Samson (the imprimatur of the Bible) and long-haired Buffalo Bill (the imprimatur of the frontier male). 'Feminine impressionists' or 'femme-mimics' was the appellation of choice.¹⁸

Although it originated in a gay bar and was managed and staffed entirely by homosexuals, the Jewel Box Revue was geared for straight audiences, aiming to win acceptance through comedy. 'If you were serious, the public would be offended so you kept it light, a novelty.'¹⁹ Many of the chorus members would tell interviewers about their wives and girl-friends coming to visit them, but these mythical womenfolk never materialized. 'Despite loud protestations that it was all "only a job," I found in every instance a distinct pride in feminine appearance.'²⁰

Flashy, upbeat and resplendent (the programme acknowledged its Parisian purveyor of plumage), the show kept the level of impersonation highly theatrical: gowns had falsies built in for quick-change, the heavy makeup and cheap wigs were compensated by strong lighting and distance, and, unlike the amateur transvestite, the performers eschewed elegant lingerie. Credibility was not at a premium: reviewers occasionally noted a brawny arm, an oversized foot or a contralto that slipped into baritone.²¹ The star was a comedian who could perform celebrity impressions: Francis Russell, Ricki Renne, T. C. Jones and Lynn Carter. Jones' act was relatively clean, but Carter laid on sexual allusion with a trowel, and often incurred the displeasure of the press. For the most part, the innuendo was milder than that in the sideshows; witness Jerry Ray's 'Spinach Song':

I didn't like it the first time,
 But I was so young you see,
 But I've smartened up and I've gotten wise;
 Now I've got enough for two dozen guys.
 I didn't like it the first time,
 But oh how it grew on me.²²

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Figure 72 A
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Brenner performed in the earlier shows, while the good-looking Brown served as master of ceremonies, playing up to the women in the audience. They then introduced the novelty of a lesbian crooner as MC: Mickey Mercer, who, the programme pointed out, 'looks not unlike a young college boy', provided a standard of rugged good looks which threw into relief the 'femininity' of the performers. It became *de rigueur* for drag clubs to feature a butch compère or head waiter, but the Jewel Box Revue remained ahead of the pack by hiring Stormé DeLarverie. To engage an African-American woman in 1955, when Jim Crow laws and McCarthyism were rife, was a radical act; and by including in the hiring blacks, Latinos and even native Americans, the Jewel Box Revue became the first integrated drag show. It was thus able to make an unprecedented tour of the black theatre circuit, playing the Apollo in New York, the Howard in Washington and the Regal Theatre in Chicago. DeLarverie was already established as an equestrienne and a big-band singer, but sheared her hair, lowered her voice an octave to baritone, and took to wearing men's clothes at all times; an experienced air-conditioning technician, she also served occasionally as stage-manager and musical arranger.²³ Michelle Parkerson, who made a documentary film about DeLarverie in 1985, declared that 'for many ahead of me the Jewel Box was their first exposure to cross-dressing and homosexuality'. She was 8 years old when she overheard her mother, a middle-class, devout Catholic black woman, telling her aunt 'how fantastic were these men who looked just like women'.²⁴

A handful of establishments, heartened by the example of the Jewel Box, promoted female impersonation as a reputable professional entertainment. Finocchio's in San Francisco had begun as a small Bohemian café managed by Marjorie and Joseph Finocchio; since *finocchio* (fennel) is Italian



Figure 72 A postcard handed out to visitors at the 82 Club Revue, directed by Kitt Russell, at East 4th Street and 2nd Avenue, New York City, 1950s. Photo: Maurice Seymour.

slang for faggot, it was clearly a case of *nomen est omen* when it reopened as a drag club with a company of sixteen in 1937. There was the Moroccan Village in New York City, the My Oh My Club in New Orleans, the Gayla in the Miami area, the Club Flamingo in Hollywood, the Garden of Eden on Los Palmas in Hollywood, the Paradise Club in Minneapolis and another Garden of Eden in Seattle. Pat Patillo was one of the most indefatigable of New York entrepreneurs, beginning with the Howdy in 1945, which featured a cross-dressed revue popular with demobbed servicemen, and the 181 Club at 181 Second Avenue, and in 1953, the 82 Club on the corner of 2nd Avenue and East 4th Street. It would remain the arena for serious drag performance until 1978, a popular tourist attraction offering three shows a night. Although in its latter day the shows became tackier and more conventional, in its heyday one had to reserve a table well in advance to see the thirty-member revue. It too offered butch lesbians in men's clothes who waited on tables and danced in a 'Miss Waiter' number.²⁵

Although all these clubs harboured a sizeable gay clientele, they were under pressure to direct their appeal to the general public, advertising their theatrical values, to avoid police harassment. The authorities' close scrutiny of drag clubs was not the only reason for playing down the homosexual preferences of the performers. In gay bars throughout the 1940s and 1950s, 'nobody wanted anything to do with an effeminate man'.²⁶ A 'butch mystique' prevailed; which asserted that a homosexual male wanted to have sex with a 'real man', rather than with a sissy or imitation woman. On those rare occasions when the performers did act as B-girls or mingle with the customers, it was with the heterosexual contingent. They also had to be 21 or over, and arrive and leave in male street dress.

New restrictions, new freedoms

When Julian Eltinge, in desperate need of employment, came out of retirement in 1940 to appear at the small night-club the Rendezvous in Los Angeles, the Police Department refused to issue him a waiver of a new city ordinance that prohibited the impersonation of the opposite sex. The grounds for refusal were that the club was indeed a rendezvous for 'many people of questionable morals'. Eltinge spoke his piece in a tuxedo, standing beside a clothes rack from which he would remove his costumes and provide appropriate commentary.²⁷ The Los Angeles crackdown was a symptom of what was to come after the war.

As it turned out, the servicemen and women who packed Finocchio's during the war were fighting for freedoms that were denied to Finocchio's in peacetime. Retrenchment was the byword of Cold War America, when boundary markers which had been displaced during the national emergency were returned to their original positions. Women who had been welcomed in the workplace as major contributors to the war effort were supposed to return to their kitchens; men who had been urged to bond closely with other men in the name of military might were now to keep their distance. In 1947 the Boston Licensing Commission outlawed feminine impersonation in night-clubs and cafés on the grounds of 'bad taste', but also because 'normal men and women like their men manly and their women feminine. They want to see pretty girls in women's parts and rugged men in masculine roles.'²⁸ It issued orders to the Police Department that

no innholder, common victualler, or person owning managing or controlling a café, restaurant or other eating or drinking establishment shall permit on the licensed premises the impersonation of a female by male entertainers, or by male

employees of the licensee, nor shall any male employee impersonate a female as a master of ceremonies, hostess, waitress, or in any other way whatsoever.²⁹

Consequently, the Boston police regularly harassed the 'gay-friendly' College Inn: its workers were put under surveillance, arrested at home as 'lewd persons' and routinely remanded to the Deer Island Correctional Facility for six months' incarceration. The Board's draconian ordinance received strong support in December 1951, when Cardinal Cushing published a wholesale condemnation of female impersonators, exotic dancers and 'blue material'. There followed a mass exodus of nightclub performers, and by New Year's Day not one impersonator was working in Boston: regular purges throughout the decade saw to the maintenance of that new status. Advertisements for what had previously been drag clubs now advertised 'singing waiters - New York style'.

Most of the performers drifted southwards. The trajectory of the young Boston drag queen Minette is typical: he became a hostess at a truck stop in Fonda, New York, but, despite the inoffensiveness of the acts, the police forced the owner to eject him in April 1952. Minette lived as a woman before joining Rayleen's Review, playing a circuit of Pittsburg, Harrisburg, Philadelphia,



Figure 73 Minette with maritime admirers at the College Inn, Boston; in the early 1950s. Her commentary runs 'I still love seafood, seafood's still my favorite. There were a lot of inexperienced ones, and they'd say, "Oh, I've never done this before." But they did it so well. And only some of them would be more honest: "Oh, we do this with each other on the ship, but when we get to port we look for real queens."' From Minette's album, *Recollections of a Part-time Lady* (New York, 1979).

Cleveland, Detroit, Bridgeport and Wilmington between 1953 and 1954. After the law made female impersonation unwelcome in Philadelphia, he retired, ending up as a sporadically employed singer and piano player in New York City.³⁰

The 181 Club folded in 1950, and by 1956 it was estimated that there were only about a hundred female impersonators working in a handful of night spots. Many had retired to become costumiers or choreographers.

Even in New York and San Francisco in the 1960s, drag was illegal: frequenters of clubs had to wear a minimum of five articles of male attire to avoid arrest in case of police raids. An early warning system was to turn up the lights: dancers would run to chairs, 'grab a diesel dyke and pretend she was your girlfriend'.³¹ Eyelashes and wigs would be ripped off and thrown aside; those who could not so easily cast off their finery fled. To prove their status as performers, impersonators had to procure cabaret cards, a procedure requiring fingerprinting and photographing by the police department. Hallowe'en remained the only night when cross-dressing was officially tolerated, so traditional drag balls, such as those on Chicago's South Side, survived, except in Los Angeles which reinforced its ban on all public appearances of female impersonators in 1951. Even then, in San Francisco where the bars closed at 2 a.m., paddy wagons were waiting outside to arrest men attempting to stumble home in their holiday finery on 1 November.³²

The effect of this mounting pressure on drag clubs is typified by what happened to the Garden of Allah in Seattle.

The musician's union made more demands, the city levied heavier cabaret taxes, and the police continued to use the payoff system as an extra-legal tax on gay businesses. The state legalized liquor by the drink, depriving beer and wine clubs of much of their appeal. Officers showed up more often to intimidate managers and patrons . . . the military kept the Garden off limits to servicemen. Police would drop in with light meters because if it was too dark surely people would be doing nasty things under the table. A local board began to censor some of the more racy songs and dialogue . . . at times the Garden wasn't allowed to have drag at all.³³

The drag artiste, now dressed as a man, had to play host to a girlie show; and if drag was grudgingly tolerated, it had to be worn over male underwear.

Increased expenses and a gradual loss of clientele compelled the clubs to give up expensive live musicians and replace them with canned music. But if accompaniment could be pre-recorded, why not the voices as well? Suddenly, lip synching became the rage, cheap because it obviated both professional musicians and drag artistes. 'Amateurs took over overnight',³⁴ an influx deplored by veteran performers. 'The general public judges the whole art of impersonation by what it sees one mimic doing,' complained Pudgy Roberts. 'If he's terrible, it follows that all of us are terrible. Amateurs should stay out of the business until they are sure enough – and sufficiently talented – to compete with pros.'³⁵ Roberts' use of the term 'mimic' (from 'femme mimic') was already anachronistic; it was coming to mean, especially in Britain, a lip syncher. One seasoned British drag artiste was willing to accept 'mime' for comic purposes, but

all this miming to Bassey and Streisand is strictly for the birds . . . mime often gives very untalented people an excuse for getting onto the stage, and it can be very

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Lip synching

Making an im

Responding rather than performers, soprano virt as a topical performers

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Jones was the legit bec attempted dr piano enterta Frenchness ai portray Pearl Baker by La E material was at Carnegie F

embarrassing. Let's face it – my mother could do a drag act, and so could yours. My dog could with the right training.³⁶

Lip synching had become a godsend for the inept impressionist.

Making an impression

Responding to attacks through the 1960s, the Jewel Box's insistence that it purveyed 'impressions' rather than 'impersonations' signals a new arena for men in skirts. The parody of celebrated performers, especially prima donnas, had been a staple of the minstrel wench, a show-case for soprano virtuosity; and most music-hall impersonators would spoof a danseuse or *grande horizontale* as a topical gag.³⁷ They counted on their audiences, regulars at the variety theatre, recognizing performers who might have appeared on the same bill.

In the US, however, renaming the genre was not welcomed by the reviewers. When Karyl Norman the Creole Fashion Plate billed his female impersonations as 'character impressions', *Billboard* noted that his 'impersonations are not as much as is his showmanship'.³⁸ Julian Etinge always preferred to suggest types rather than individuals, so that his audiences were never at a disadvantage, never anxious at being out of the swim. Not everyone might know who Annette Kellerman was, but everyone knew that one-piece bathing suits were controversial. The transition from these conventional representations to the impressionists of the 1950s and after came as a direct result of the rise of the mass media. A wider public could share knowledge of the media's darlings and catch the allusions to their mannerisms. Drag revues, which advertised sophistication, gave their audiences a sense that they were in the know.

This was the case with Thomas C(raig) Jones who had first attempted drag with the Provincetown Players in e. e. cummings's oneiric play *him* in 1946. When he starred in the Jewel Box Revue, his impressions included Edith Piaf, Katherine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Claudette Colbert and Tallulah Bankhead. This last was so extraordinary an assumption that it moved Jones from the fringe to the mainstream: Leonard Sillman starred him in *New Faces of 1956*, descending a staircase to the strains of 'Isn't She Lovely?' Sillman had been told that to star a female impersonator in a Broadway show meant commercial suicide, but justified his decision saying, 'I never think of T. C. as a female impersonator, as a man imitating a woman. T. C. on stage is simply an extraordinarily talented woman.'³⁹ In Brooks Atkinson's words, he 'put a gay look'⁴⁰ on the show by serving, in his Tallulah guise, as master of ceremonies introducing the numbers with camp swagger. Jones' cross-over success had to be accompanied by reassurances about his masculinity; chubby rather than svelte, he was married to the hairdresser who made the wigs which he invariably removed at the end of his act to reveal a scalp as bald as Daddy Warbucks'.⁴¹

Jones was replaced as star of the Jewel Box Revue by Lynne Carter, who was less acceptable to the legit because of the scurrility of his act. A Naval veteran of the Second World War, he first attempted drag at a masquerade as Hildegarde 'queen of the armpits' (Hildegarde, a pretentious piano entertainer of chi-chi clubs was a favourite target of female impersonators, for her pseudo-Frenchness and her elbow-length gloves). Winning \$100 and a bottle of champagne, he went on to portray Pearl Bailey at the Chez Patee in Chicago, and then, allegedly, was asked to imitate Josephine Baker by La Baker herself. Carter's impressions were extremely skilled and carefully crafted, and his material was barbed but without malice.⁴² The Peeps of New York gay life, Donald Vining, saw him at Carnegie Hall in 1971, and recorded,

I expected to see the usual takeoff of easy people like Bette Davis and Phyllis Diller but he went beyond that and had really funny material . . . T. C. Jones didn't have very clever material either and wasn't very accurate in mimicry. Carter really shows us the possibilities.⁴³

Unlike Jones' amiable facsimiles, Carter's renditions reeked of self-disgust camouflaged as revulsion at his subject's failings. His Marlene Dietrich would hymn her face-lifts in 'Having It Done Again', and croak to the audience, 'Yes, boys, I've still got it. Trouble is it's so bloody old, nobody wants it.' The horror of ageing was explicit when Carter gazed into a mirror and recoiled with the remark, 'Oh, I scared myself. I thought it was an old man with a bloody mouth. [After another look.] It is an old man with a bloody mouth.'⁴⁴ The stereotypical queen's fear of ageing meets the menstruation taboo. Carter himself believed that he was 'on the same wave length' as the women he lampooned: 'I get terrible knots in my stomach until that heady moment when I'm portraying the woman-in-question with cold, calculating, uncompromising honesty.' He distanced himself from 'drag queens' who exploited grotesque, cruel parody, and eschewed imitating Judy Garland because he knew her personally.⁴⁵

Carter's renunciation of travesty of an unhappy star he knew firsthand points to the complicated relationship between the 'impressionist' and his female subjects.⁴⁶ Pearl Bailey lent him gowns from her wardrobe, Kay Thompson instituted lawsuits against him. But, as has often been noted, the chief targets of these performers were *monstres sacrés*, women whose images were already larger than life and verging on caricature. That T. C. Jones should be most successful as Tallulah was unsurprising, since she herself had, through self-advertisement, created a freakish image of an alcoholic nymphomaniac. It was widely believed that Bette Davis had based her characterization in *All About Eve* on Tallulah, whose hair-style, scarlet gash of a mouth and rasping voice made her easy prey.

The same might be said of Davis herself, the favourite victim of Charles Pierce, who would win an Obie in 1975 for 'special achievements'.⁴⁷ (His Bankhead to Davis: 'Bette darling, if you ever become a mother, can I have one of the puppies?') Pierce entered showbiz delivering risqué monologues of female stars at gay clubs, the LaVie in Atladena and the Chi Chi in San Francisco, and began to do impersonations of West and Hepburn in turtleneck and slacks, then in a tuxedo. 'At first I thought I would never work in drag, because who wants to deal with all that paraphernalia?' When he first donned a dress in 1955 at the Echo Club in Miami Beach, he wore it over rolled-up trousers, because full drag remained illegal until the following decade; gradually, he added high heels and more glamorous accessories, but always in the service of satire. 'A stand-up comedian in a dress' was his preferred description.⁴⁸

Pierce referred to the women he satirized as 'my ventriloquist dummies. You could say that my gimmick is being in drag as a character, not as Charles Pierce, though he is there in the background . . . I keep away from harping on being a man dressed as a woman.'⁴⁹ The onset of feminism and gay liberation forced him to alter his stance. Later, he would claim that, although he opened and closed the show as a male actor, he had invented an *alter ego*, a woman named Celene Kendall, to do the impressions.⁵⁰ He also began to extol the stars he mocked as 'a symbol of a kind of strong independence in women who are campy, glamorous and dressed up . . . women . . . from a certain era, and they're imitable.'⁵¹ His impressions had to be of the past, for, as he complained, there was no way and no reason to impersonate Molly Ringwald or Meryl Streep. Pierce never made the switch to legitimate theatre (although Ellis Rabb asked him to play the drug-addict mother in *The Vortex*), and retired early, returning to the stage in 1990 for an AIDS benefit.⁵²

Craig Russell served as the bridge between raucous man-eaters like Carter and Pierce, and the more illusionistic approaches of Jim Bailey and Jimmy Jones. Russell rose to fame with the successful film *Outrageous!* (1977), a semi-autobiographical account of how an oppressed Canadian hairdresser wins fame, fortune and a hunky lover through his impersonations in a New York club. The political climate conducive to this success, for, although his secretary kept telling interviewers 'he is not a homosexual',⁵³ the fable was one of gay liberation. Russell had grown up in Toronto at a time when walking down Yonge Street in a dress meant police arrest; and the film itself showed drag queens oppressed by 'passing' homosexuals as well. In Germany, Russell's show was taken to be a psychodrama and the bills read 'Schwule in Exil'.⁵⁴ He often brought down the house as Anita Bryant singing the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

But Russell's performances were not essentially different from those of his precursors. Trying to make a name for himself in Hollywood, he had worn drag to parties (which he later described as 'humiliating') and, as President of a Mae West fan club, had been allowed to try on one of her gowns. But he broadened his octave range from one and a half to three, enabling him to imitate Streisand in her own key and performing double-voiced duets between her and Kris Kristofferson or Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong. John Simon, rarely a fan of female impersonation, praised his dexterity and flexibility, comparing his changes to cinematic dissolves.⁵⁵ For Simon, there was a moral function to this commentary on the absurdities of the stars, teaching us to temper our enthusiasms for banality. The more thoughtful commentators noted how Bailey's impressions, at once tributes and caricatures, were quasi-Brechtian, so that even when 'his creations seem on one level to possess him . . . he still maintains a critical detachment from them'.⁵⁶

It is the suggestion of possession which strikes a new note here. Russell himself explained that 'it has to come from the solar plexus if it's to be real. When I do Judy Garland I actually cry. I forget Craig and become Judy and all her problems.'⁵⁷ The Tallulahs and Betties were bold, brassy and indomitable: by inhabiting them, the earlier impressionists could don the armour of the 'hard woman' to shield their vulnerable swishiness. The choice to replicate Garland, herself the most vulnerable and helpless of victims, infused indignant self-pity into the impressionist's act. (That the Stonewall Riots came in the wake of Garland's funeral is often commented on as a cause-and-effect phenomenon.) The mediumistic concept seemed nobler when one is possessed by such a fragile personality, the showbiz equivalent of Nō's Sotoba Komachi. This fusion of the tarnished and tragic diva and her male devotee was most compact in the work of Jim Bailey.

Bailey started out impersonating Phyllis Diller, which, as female impersonation, would seem to be supererogatory. Then, Bailey reports, while he heard a broadcast of Judy Garland singing over a car radio, he had an epiphany that he could 'do her'. Garland saw him imitate her when he was 16 or 17 years old and embraced him saying, 'I never realized I was that pretty'. She gave him tips on how to re-create her more authentically, and later Liza Minnelli appeared with him in a mother-daughter act. These tales create a sense of apostolic succession, the mantle passed not to a woman, but to a worthier successor who has sacrificed his manhood and indeed his personality to his goddess. Bailey too repudiates the term 'female impersonator', describing himself as a character actor who must devote research, time and money to creating his roles, which take two hours to make up, and then are sustained for twenty-five minutes at a time. 'I become that person until I take everything off.' He eschews lip synching and always sings his own parts. At other times he calls himself 'an illusionist'. 'I don't impersonate, I recreate, I become who I'm recreating totally.' 'When I'm Judy, I don't think about being Judy. I am *Judy*.'⁵⁸ We are back in the realm of daemonic takeover.⁵⁹



Figure 74 Craig Russell as Judy Garland. 'I may not look or sound like her at moments in my act, but it doesn't matter in a live performance because it *feels* like Judy to the audience.' Photo: David Street.

Bailey had the benefit of meeting the woman who later obsessed him. Jimmy James had no idea who Marilyn Monroe was when, as a makeup student in San Antonio, he noticed a similarity between his bone structure and that of the recently deceased sex goddess. Puberty seems to have bypassed James, whose glabrous androgyny and three-octave range enabled him to re-create Monroe. Without hormones, plastic surgery or voice lessons, he set about presenting 'the entire illusion'. Paying close attention to the use of his mouth and diaphragm, often substituting physical for vocal accuracy, and carrying out three years of research, so that he could answer all questions from the audience, he did so. 'Marilyn was a total artist, a fantasy that embodied so many different aspects of what show business is really all about.' Having experienced Marilyn only as a screen image and a legend heavily freighted with tragic baggage, James put his emphasis on glamour: 'to take people totally away from the ugly realities around all of us and transport them to the realm of the magical.'⁶⁰This is Marilyn the Messiah, who died for our sins, and whose voluptuousness constitutes a Platonic Idea of the good, the true and the beautiful.

The appeal of Garland and Monroe to the drag artiste is all too obvious: women who staked their being on 'their beautiful outward forms, felt cheated because no one appreciated their beautiful

inner selves, and then couldn't face living'.⁶¹ That a homosexual, of unstable status in society, should feel a bond of sympathy, should identify with the risks and ruination of these queens of sex is a commonplace of cultural criticism. But it only applies if the homosexual regards himself as a victim. At a time of political demos and queer theory, an uncritical attitude to these impersonations would be unacceptable. The reverent approach to Marilyn Monroe's after-myth was bound to come in for deconstruction, and various perpetrators of alternative drag have done their best to tarnish the image. The first and probably the most sensational was Peter Stackula (né Stack), a former Cockette (see Chapter 16), who would show up as Dead Marilyn in torn clothes and ghastly white makeup. Stackula's stage show began with Monroe clawing herself out of the grave, shaking off the dirt and standing alone and defiant in a wet, torn gold dress and diamond earrings. Under the strobe lights the white halter dress from *The Seven Year Itch* combined a mad sensuality with phantasmal mystery. Stackula can be considered less a drag queen than a spook queen, bringing the notion of possession back to its original roots.⁶²

As a backlash to the sentimental projections of Bailey and James, performers hearkened back to the unapologetic bitchiness, but from a more critical vantage-point. *Marilyn – Something's Gotta Give*, a one-man show by Randy Allen, was an exploration of sexual freedom. Allen, having studied acting at LAMBA and the Strasberg Institute and worked as a female impersonator in Atlantic City and Los Angeles, was in a strong position to subject traditional impressionism to the critique of acting theory.⁶³ The internal critique of impressionists, particularly those who relied on lip synching, was echoed by journalists as well. What had begun as an economic recourse had become an empty convention. Where was the courage of making a career of imitating someone else? In obliterating the physical presence of live theatre, the personal, idiosyncratic, unreproducible element of human beings on stage was excised. Such a critique reiterates the objections of early commentators to the seeming loss of human presence in any of the canned media.

A later generation, less familiar with the attractions of live performance and raised on music videos that were equally disembodied, could establish an aesthetic for lip synching. An appeal could be made to the notion of possession, of the performer as a literal medium for the dead or absent talent, 'a morbid exchange between the voiceless queen and the disembodied vocalist: without the other each is stuck in sort of techno-limbo.' If a recording is a lifeless facsimile of a voice, it needs a mediumistic conduit to the living.⁶⁴

Tell me about your operation

Lip synching to recordings was one of the two major factors which changed the nature of drag performance irrevocably; the other was transsexualism which first came on stage in France.

Laws against cross-dressing, still on the books in liberated France, were generally ignored, especially in relation to the most famous postwar Parisian drag clubs. Madame Arthur in Rue des Martyres (founded in 1945 and named after a song popularized by Yvette Guilbert), whose MC, Loulou, was reputed to be a defrocked priest; and Le Carrousel at 40 Rue du Colisée, near the Champs-Élysées (founded in 1948 by Marcel Ouissmann), were luxurious but intimate tourist traps. The décor, heavily muffled in pastel draperies, was reminiscent of an old-fashioned bordello; since bordellos were now illegal in France, it lent a touch of nostalgia to the proceedings. In contrast with American practice, performers mixed with the audience and 'the boys dance together', enhancing the brothel ambience. No less a connoisseur than Tennessee Williams testified to its excellence, bolstered by the presence of 'the most beautiful mâle whores'.⁶⁵ At Le Carrousel, the

orchestra was first-rate, the show fast paced, and the impersonators, costumed by Fath and Dior, always removed their wigs at the end – all except for Coccinelle and Bambi, who were saving their money to go to Denmark for surgery.⁶⁶

In principle, the clinical alteration of sex organs had been feasible at least since the Danish painter Einar Wegener (Andreas Sparre) underwent surgery to change him into the woman he believed was imprisoned in his male body. In 1930 a new creature, Lili Elbe, emerged from the operating theatre, but the outcome was tragic, since a later operation, intended to provide him with a vagina (a request arising from the maternal instinct to 'effect a natural outlet from the womb'), resulted in death. Wegener's case was symptomatic, however, in representing a patient's voluntary recourse to surgical intervention to alleviate a sexual dysfunction. Medical science now had the means to accommodate such requests, and supported new claims of physiological intersexuality.⁶⁷ The female athlete Edith Weston made the change in the opposite direction in 1934 and two years later married her former girlfriend.⁶⁸ It was the widely publicized alteration of George Jorgensen into Christine in 1952, however, which opened the floodgates for demands for surgical sex-change; the newspapers ran stories of such metamorphoses almost weekly, touting advances in hormone treatment and plastic surgery. The original impetus had come from private individuals, eager to correct gender dysphoria; the performers at Le Carrousel seem to have been the first public impersonators to wish to change their sex in order to enhance stage illusion.

Bambi did not ultimately go through with it: he was content to let his hair grow long, take hormone treatments to enlarge his breasts, and live as a woman among women off-stage.⁶⁹ Coccinelle, however, became a *cause célèbre*. Jacques Charles Dufresnoy (b.1936) suffered a wretched childhood, persecuted by his loutish father and his working-class neighbours for his effeminate manners. Conscripted into the 8th Transport Division of the French army, he was discharged after six days on the grounds that his presence caused disruption in the barracks. Told on all sides that he was a woman in a man's body, he took to wearing women's clothes to escape comment on his effeminacy. In 1950, to resemble Sophia Loren, he became a blond, had rhinoplasty to straighten his nose and alter the shape of his eyes, and went on a prolonged diet of hormones to enlarge his bust.

Stripping down to an ostrich-plume bikini at La Carrousel, Coccinelle became one of the most popular performers in France, a convincing clone of Brigitte Bardot. Press agency spread the canard that he was a real woman, which led to the *bon mot* 'A woman as beautiful as Coccinelle can only be a man'. But, he alleges, transformation into a complete woman was necessary if he was to satisfy his lover. He underwent surgery in Casablanca, and in March 1962, wearing a white gown, the newly made female married her agent, the photographer Francis Bonnet. Angry Parisians pelted the car with so many tomatoes when they drove to the church in Montmartre that no banners were posted. European magazines blazoned photos of the couple's blissful domestic life, eating soup and doing home repairs.

The idyll soon ended. That summer Coccinelle fell in love with the Paraguayan dancer Mario Hayne and petitioned for a divorce. Relying on a surgeon's report that her operation had been 'sheer mutilation' and her feminine characteristics 'artificially acquired', the French Faculty of Physicians declared that she was still a man and that magistrate and priest had both been tricked, a deception which incurred excommunication. Bonnet renounced his vows, stating, 'there can never be a divorce because there never was a marriage'. Vindication came in December 1962, when the Civil Tribunal, on the evidence of the eminent gynaecologist Ravina, granted Coccinelle official civil status as a woman: Jacqueline Charlotte Dufresnoy.

Figure 75 Cocc



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Figure 75 Coccinelle before and after the operation:



(a) In her Marilyn Monroe avatar with a bemused Bob Hope at Le Carrousel. Unattributed news photo; (b) After surgery showing her scars. Photo: Apis-Paris.

The sequel to this precedent-setting case was a succession of calamities: jarring imbroglios with ill-chosen boy-friends, a brief second marriage to an architectural student, engagements cancelled and finally a self-imposed exile to the more congenial drag clubs of West Berlin.⁷⁰ Coccinelle's comparatively frank memoirs, published in 1987, end with a wistful hope for a return to Paris and perhaps new fame.⁷¹

The scrag-end of Coccinelle's career raises questions about transsexuality as a viable theatre mode. The ingenious legislation of her mutilated condition allowed her to be integrated into collective society but cost her, in addition to physical pleasure, abdication of her androgynous powers. A pseudo-woman, she survived her former personhood, unlike the many transvestites who chose to advertise the contradictions of their alienated state. Some felt that if they were women in actual fact, they would probably be doing different work. Others, like the former GI Sasha D'Or, thought a sex-change would lessen their homosexual appeal: 'I'd rather be a pretty boy than a "change."⁷² Refusing to be locked into the artificial dilemma of transsexual potentiality, performers who resisted complete transformation into a woman preferred to discover and reconcile the dual phases of desire. They reasoned that the art and the challenge resided in simulation which would be

cancelled out by hormones and surgery, an interesting variant of Goethe's art versus nature opposition. For all the change in dress and customs, the stage transvestite is still invested with this mystical allure. By renouncing ambiguity, the transsexual is no more than the sex he or she has definitively chosen; the potential to be the nexus of a complex attraction to both sexes, of sublimating the tensions of gender identity within society has diminished. The frontier has been closed.

Were the transsexual's self-imposed 'freakishness' to be exhibited, in side-show fashion, with all the panoply of latex-lined vagina or hydraulically operated penis, the effect would be a display of the wonders of science. The supernatural element would be missing. The spectator would no longer feel in communion in some small way with the divine wholeness the alchemists sought and the gnostics praised. The hormonal impersonator embodies the very female ideal that the heterosexual male is supposed to desire. The theatrical impact of the gender blending disappears, and in the process the myth that drag queens are self-loathing and pathetic becomes reinforced.

Recovering from the operation

The prevalent popularity of transsexuals, both pre- and post-operational, over cross-dressers in the female impersonation clubs became so great that, with the exception of Madame Arthur in Amsterdam, managements discouraged placement of photographs of its players in magazines dealing with transvestism.⁷³ Performers eager to push the advantage hormones gave them were often incredibly misinformed about the medical world to which they were now indentured. One male topless dancer, a miner's son who performed at working-men's clubs in Northern England, protested that he was 'not kinky': 'I have developed my bust solely for my act, and I have been told that when I give up showbusiness I can take male hormones to get my chest back to normal.'⁷⁴

The need to be in the swim infected even some of the old-timers. Least likely was the irrepressibly obscene Ray Bourbon (Ramon Icares, 1893-1971). In 1956, Bourbon became known as 'Rae' after he mendaciously claimed to have undergone a sex-change operation in Juarez, performed by an Hungarian refugee.⁷⁵

The publicity that attached to these purported operations and sex-changes won the female impersonation show an even shadier reputation in the public psyche. Earlier, a distinction could be made between the larger-than-life cross-dressing of the stage impersonator and the commercially seductive appeal of transvestite prostitutes. As a result, what could once have been dismissed as good clean fun now became more closely linked with sexual deviation. After considerable harassment, the venerable Black Cat Café in San Francisco lost its liquor licence in 1963 and closed the following year. The City Council of Reno, Nevada, passed an ordinance in 1962 to prohibit shows involving sexual impersonation in order to ban the venerable Jewel Box Revue, regarded as an 'undesirable element';⁷⁶ and two years later the Jewel Box's engagement at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem was protested by pickets characterizing 'the dregs and drags of society' as a threat to the black family.⁷⁷ Neither measure succeeded in preventing sold-out performances; but both were straws in the wind, indicating that much of the public no longer saw drag as high-spirited masquerading, but associated it irredeemably with sexual perversion. In the Apollo case, in addition, an emergent African-American activism found the multiracial casting offensive in its undermining of black male images.

Hostility came from within as well. Established drag performers were sceptical and indignant about the transsexual competition, insisting that a professional female impersonator did not use silicone or hormone injections. 'Those who claim to have switched sexes successfully are phony publicity seekers,' protested Pudgy Roberts, 'who are desperate to break into showbiz. Once one of

them proves "her" womanhood by producing a baby, I'll believe their press releases.⁷⁸ When the revue *French Dressing* came to Washington in 1975, it was boycotted by the transvestite community and closed after a single performance, in part because it was advertised as performed by 'female impressionists' rather than by 'female impersonators'. 'Anyone so ready to imply that they are better than the people who support them deserves this treatment', declared a periodical aimed at transvestites.⁷⁹

That there should be a community large enough to make such a gesture reveals the emerging conspicuousness of cross-dressing in the mid-1970s. A host of specialist publications – *Drag, Mr Ms, S-he?*, *Drag Scene*, *Transvestite*, *TV Guys*, *Transvestia*, *Leslie*, *Queens in Drag*, *Dressed*, *Female Mimics*, *Mimic* – became available. They ranged from the cross-dressing equivalent of the *Lady's Home Journal*, aimed at the domestic transvestite, to semi-pornographic displays of colour photos of undressed pre-ops, their bosoms heaving above erect penises; still others were intended for the female impersonator who wanted to break into show business. Nomenclature became more exact: transvestites were defined as private individuals who cross-dressed for their own pleasure and gathered discreetly among their own kind. Usually married men, they tended to distrust the garish exhibitionism and blatant homosexuality of the theatrical female impersonator. One transvestite, however, insisted that the latter be regarded as 'our heroines, as the ultimate in dressing as a woman . . . all seem to share with us the supreme joy of becoming for a while, a woman.'⁸⁰

Training camps

By this time a critical mass had formed to enable Esther Newton in her ground-breaking study of female impersonation, *Mother Camp* (1972), to distinguish between the street impersonator and the stage impersonator. In both cases, they had begun as drag queens because the role attracted group support and led to a job, 'where the approval of the mirror [of the audience] is ratified by the payment of cold, hard cash'.⁸¹ Rarely would a professional admit to having a fetishistic interest in women's clothing, but street drags often confessed to having cross-dressed as children. A childhood manifestation of female characteristics frequently presaged their interest, especially among the transsexuals.⁸²

As Newton defines him, the street impersonator is younger, relatively unskilled, and prone to intertwine performance with an everyday life; he is a conspicuous, full-time member of a gay scene; and experiences all the personal problems of the street fairy. He is always 'on', and his projection of a female persona often entails prostitution, deliberate confrontation and drug abuse. The professional impersonator is, by definition, a dedicated performer who attempts to segregate the stage from life, hone his skills and commit to a profession.⁸³ An Australian performer, asked if she were a drag queen or a female impersonator, coolly replied, 'I just see myself as an entertainer,' but went on, 'Drag queens are men that live like ladies all the time, dress that way, while a female impersonator is a guy, a really clever guy, that sort of gets it all together just for the hours he works.'⁸⁴

Like most such distinctions, these tend to collapse under scrutiny, since many professionals did hustle clients, brave civic ordinances by going outdoors in drag and abuse alcohol and drugs; but even they sought to preserve the distinction, as more and more 'street fairies' and pre-operative transsexuals filled the stages.⁸⁵ Many pre-ops claimed to be making a living expediently while preparing for sex assignment surgery and purported to give up the stage afterwards; in the meantime, the hormones helped the illusion.

So did wigs. Wigs as high fashion made a return in 1958 when the Parisian couturier Givenchy showed them in his collection. Although it took a while before inexpensive but illusionistic wigs were available to the mass market – not until the late 1960s in the American South, according to one source – the fact that both a biological woman and a cross-dresser might be wearing artificial hair contributed to the confusion.⁸⁶ In fact, 1960s styles in general, with their teased hair, shaved eyebrows, thick false lashes and pancake makeup, Cleopatra mascara in the style of Elizabeth Taylor and go-go boots abetted the resemblance between the average woman and the average drag queen. When the natural look came in, it became more difficult for drag queens to pass for women and there was a stage reversion to Hollywood glamour.

The fashion shifts from outrageous masquerade to passing for a woman to glam drag were exemplified by the metamorphoses of the rock performer Wayne County. In the days of glitter drag and the Theatre of the Ridiculous, he would go out in full makeup and painted nails, sometimes wearing a beard and women's clothes, sometimes, Garbo-like, in a man's suit and hat: the aim was to bewilder and disorient the observer. By the early 1970s, at 82 Club, he moved to total drag, with an oversized blond wig, a blond fall and a gold lamé bathing suit, as he sang 'If You Don't Wanna Fuck Me, Baby, Fuck Off'. Audiences showed up in long teased hair, hot pants and occasionally swastika armbands. In 1976 County began taking female hormones and later had plastic surgery to

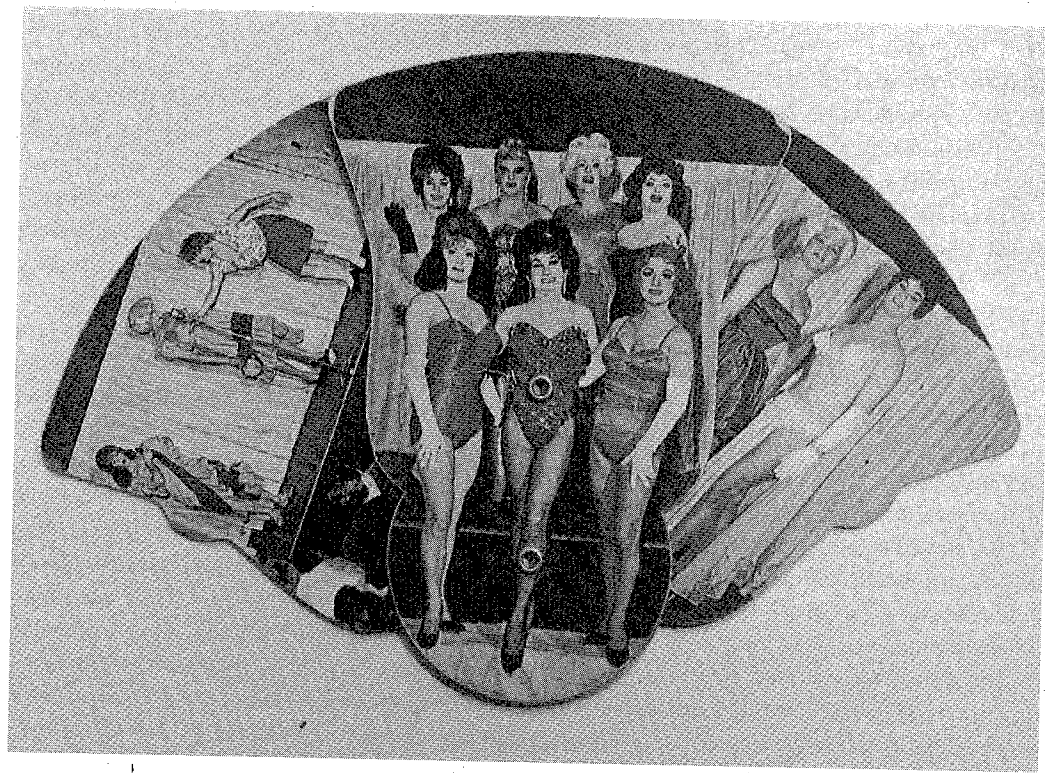


Figure 76 Coloured paper fold-out fan advertising the Jewel Box Lounge in Kansas City, Missouri, around 1960. 'The most talked about nite club in the Midwest' with 'a cast whose only desire is to please the audience.' To sanitize itself, it described its show as 'the old time hi-jinks of vaudeville' and pointed out that all the performers were members of the American Guild of Variety Artists.

alter his nose, but never went through with the operation. The following year in Britain, punk having set in, County came on in full makeup with thrift-shop trousers, a shirt and narrow tie, and cheap plastic sandals. In 1978, he returned to wigs and see-through dresses, but his breasts and close simulation of a woman bothered critics, because it suggested he was trying to seduce the boys in his audience.

There was a distinct cooling of attitude, even among the fans; underneath that liberal exterior, a lot of punk fans were really straight-down-the-conservatives, and they hated the fact that I was actually living out the implications of my songs. Some of them even said, 'You've betrayed your sex.'⁸⁷

As this remark reveals, audience attitudes also underwent changes before the brunt of transsexuality. The professional female impersonator had been adept at putting a heterosexual audience at ease, aiming the mockery at himself, and whipping up a sense of camaraderie. A more 'out' homosexual audience had fewer problems with gender ambiguity, but was, paradoxically, less indulgent, more competitive and demanding.⁸⁸ Many homosexual transvestites and transsexuals who assumed that their mere presence on stage would win approval from a like-minded audience found themselves sorely disappointed. Angie Stardust, a black performer from Harlem who appeared with the Jewel Box Revue and 82 Club in the late 1950s and early 1960s was one of the first American pros to take hormones and develop breasts; she was severely rebuked and when she quit was told by one of the owners, 'Girls like you are going to be the death of this business'.⁸⁹

The talent booker for 82 Club thought it no great feat for a good-looking male with a well-proportioned body to apply makeup, wig and feminine attire and pass himself off as a reasonably convincing woman. He was particularly insistent that the stage be a show-case for talent, and not a lure for bedmates. 'Your homosexual temperament must never come in play at any time regardless of how "feminine" you feel and how many stage-door johnnies are convinced of the fact that you are a female. Remember, this is a business.'⁹⁰ He emphasized the need to leave the club in many cities in convincing male attire, and deplored the usage in New York of allowing impersonators to go on the streets in their stage makeup, something unheard-of as late as 1968.

Although the increase in pre-op and post-op performers led to professional female impersonators being looked down on by show business and the gay world (closely linked) as 'a good giggle or a bad joke, a clever put-on or a perverse parody',⁹¹ not to be taken seriously, a large number of new establishments opened to present female impersonation to straight audiences. The casino boom in Atlantic City spawned a particularly large number of such clubs, including the Femme Jester, Chez Paree, Fabulous Fakes and the Hialeah Club (known as 'Fagalah Follies' from the Yiddish for 'faggot'). The 46th St Theatre in New York, suffering from falling receipts, invited drag queens to do a show to bring in 'husbands and wives, families, couples'. Frank Quinn, pulling out a falsie, would wave it at an old lady and shout, 'Okay. I've shown you mine. Now you show me yours.'⁹² This provocative insult comedy was hugely successful, and has, in more aggressively bawdy terms, remained a staple of such performances, especially in the New South.

The predominance of transsexuals shifted the performance's centre of gravity. Seasoned Pudgy Roberts was of the opinion that most audiences came to see the costumes and the 'art of female mimicry', and that too many would-be femme mimics simply wanted to show off their bodies, which was ludicrous since few of them were accomplished dancers.⁹³ He, however, was playing King Canute to a swelling tide of interest in transsexual nudity. In addition to lip synching, strip-tease became the norm. With bodies artificially remodelled by silicone and hormones rather than disguised

by mere depilation and nip-and-tuck methods, female impersonators were eager to display their synthetic womanhood. It added a new *frisson* to the traditional de-wigging of the earlier femme mimic. Vicki Starr, a Puerto Rican pre-op whose injections had produced a 36–24–36 figure, would strip and dance topless in a North Beach bar, then lean into the microphone and announce, in a rich baritone, 'I've got a secret. I'm a man.' The audience was invariably shocked.⁹⁴ Many reporters observed that these shows, with the femme mimics lip synching Barbra Streisand or Diana Ross, and the spectators sidling up to offer a banknote or a drink and get a kiss in exchange had only the gender illusion to distinguish them from panty-stuffing strip shows. However, reversing the usual gender stereotypes, one performer explained that 'a guy must shed his natural shyness and imitate a woman's pride in her body'; but he has an advantage over the female stripper, since 'a man knows best what other men like to see. That's why we do so well.'⁹⁵

Local arrangements

The progress of club and cabaret drag performance in twentieth-century Great Britain does not follow the curve of the American experience. In the first place, although bars and cabarets in Great Britain never underwent the criminalization that accompanied Prohibition, stringent legislation controlling such places prevented female impersonation from happening anywhere but in the theatre or the most private of parties. Public houses catering to gay clientele were particularly pressured to keep the ambience subdued and discreet. Moreover, the tradition of the 'local' or neighbourhood bar, in which customers and performers were drawn from the same milieu, made it unlikely for a closeted femme mimic to set his debut close to home. (In America, taverns and clubs catering to homosexual customers tended to cluster in downtown areas and to draw their custom from all over, including the outlying vicinities, so anonymity was more possible.)

Wartime experience fostered a tolerance for the all-male service shows, however, and in the postwar period, unlike in America, where the military drag experience was deliberately obliterated, British drag shows purportedly featuring ex-servicemen were enthusiastically supported (see Chapter 14). Eventually, these 'puff shows' merely became show-cases for exhibitionistic gay men cruising for trade and eventually died out, leaving a few hardy talents in their wake.⁹⁶ Drag acts became unpopular with variety bookers, leaving pantomime as one of the few venues still open to them.

Danny La Rue's phenomenal rise and particularly his appearance at a Royal Variety Show redefined drag as a specialized but respectable branch of show business, acceptable as a sign of trendy sophistication. Still, even by 1975, drag acts were the exception in the West End. It was the East End and North London pubs and working-men's clubs in the North of England which proved to be the fertile breeding-grounds for good drag. Most significantly, it was in working-men's pubs in the North of England that drag became a staple and lucrative source of employment, paying far better than in London. One star of this circuit, Bunny Lewis of Manchester, earned about £15,000 a year.⁹⁷ A man dressing as a woman could always fill a club, – 'Bloody good entertainment' or 'terrific stuff' were common appraisals – although the audience, ripe for queer-bashing, could often be abusive and contentious.

For £5 to £15 a week, mounted on the bar or a small platform, female impersonators played to a rowdy, beer-swilling crowd that made any kind of sophistication impossible; lip synching was resorted to chiefly in order to be heard. In this aggressively testosteroneated environment, interaction with the performers became a test of manhood. While the young men relished the

bentness of the mimics, they easily became disconcerted if one of them approached them jokingly, while his pals, exempt non-combatants, urged him to play up to her. 'Come on, it's only Vera. He won't hurt you.' Under this chivvying, the victim might respond in kind, but more often blushed or even left. Impartial observers noted that the accompanying girl-friends looked on impassively.

The authorities still fined landlords for overstepping the mark when their impersonators told 'offensive' jokes, but La Rue's regal example led the customers to repress any sense that the performers might be 'bent' and to see them as acceptable variety artistes.⁹⁸ Many pubs added other vaudeville acts, including female strippers, to their bills, but virtually everyone had drag. A booking agency might handle some thirty drag artistes and ninety strippers exclusively for pub entertainment.⁹⁹ The pub drag act offered three basic attractions: first, it stirred up a kind of voyeuristic excitement, raising questions that were never answered. Sexual come-ons were always couched in comic terms, and the performers recoiled from any suggestion that a drag artiste was motivated by a fetish or was exercising a sexual lure; said Michael Rogers of Rogers and Starr, 'If you're all got up in wigs and make-up, the last thing you want is for anyone to touch you'.¹⁰⁰ Second, the drag act could get away with blue jokes, whose vulgarity, coming from a comedian in male dress or from a 'lady', would be resented by married women; somehow the drag neutralized the offence. Finally, the 'drag artist is the theatre's bullfighter, and his audience knows it':¹⁰¹ subduing the audience took skill, nerve, and, as the profession became crowded, originality. The drag served both as a goad to the opponent, the public, and a platform that raised the performer above them.

Overshadowed by La Rue's example, most of these performers pursued the dame or comic MC tradition and had no desire to carry over the masquerade into street life. Many resented the discomfort of the get-up, wore three pairs of tights so they wouldn't have to shave their legs and bought their clothes off the rack. The more threatening gender confusion of transsexuals was out of place in the pub's homey atmosphere. Music-hall and pantomime traditions may have been an enduring contributory factor, but transsexual illusionism never came to dominate the British drag scene, although in 1973 April Ashley, a former merchant seaman who had undergone a sex-change, made his debut as the MC of a West End club. Since he only then began taking dance lessons, it was obvious where his attraction was supposed to lie.¹⁰² Female response to seeing a hormone-enhanced male topless dancer ranged from a young married woman's 'If I had what he has, and I was able to use it, I'd be on the stage myself' to a matron's 'He makes me laugh, but I'd have nightmares if he were my own son'.¹⁰³

La Grande Eugène

One of the few attempts to convert the ubiquitous lip synching into an art-form was made at Chez Michou, a Parisian cellar where the accomplished painter and musician Frantz Salieri (né Francis Savel) directed a half-hour cabaret in which the waiters were dressed as Mistinguett and Yvonne Printemps. In 1970 he moved an expanded show, La Grande Eugène (the stage name of an actor briefly in the company), to a small *boîte* off the Champs-Élysées, and the next year became a chic sensation with a record 700 performances. The pretensions of La Grande Eugène could be gauged by a vatic quotation from Baudelaire in the programme: 'I should like to see the players wearing only high platform shoes and masks more expressive than the human face, and speaking through megaphones, and the role of women should be played by men.' Falsies, hormones and wigs were all banned; the jokey *nom-de-théâtre*, such as Erna von Scratch and Belle de May, was the exception, most of the eleven performers billed under their own names. The programme of thirty-eight satiric

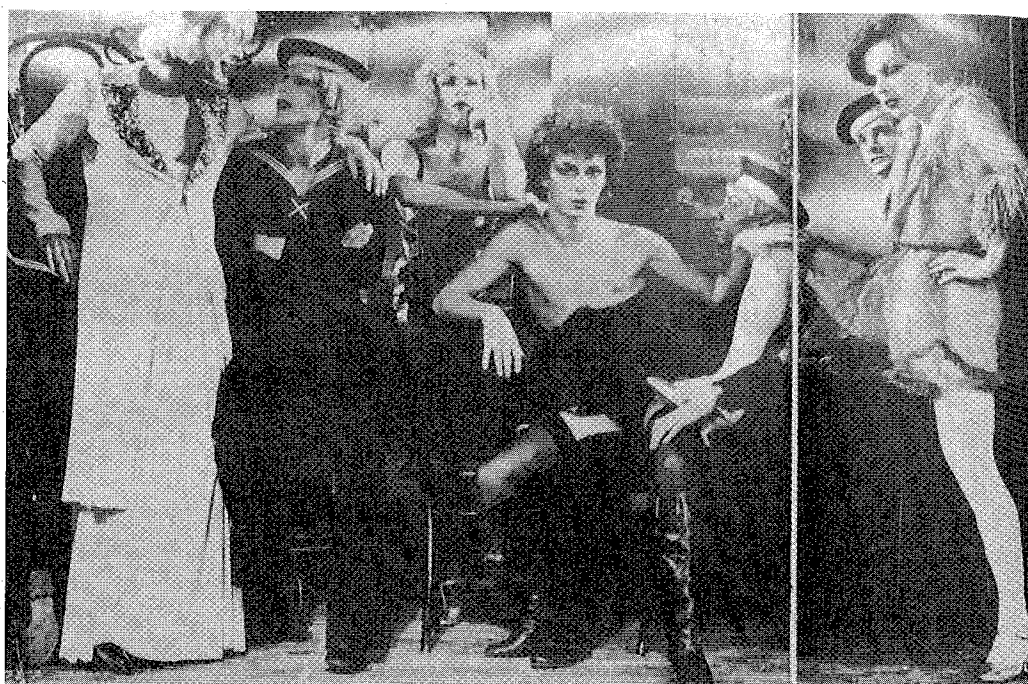


Figure 77 A publicity photo of the company of La Grande Eugène in 1976; left to right: Erna von Scratch (Christopher Basso), Pierre Althoff, James Cameron, Buno Tonioli, Patrick Louis-Sidney, Jean François Decarufel, Belle de May (Luc Chevalier). Photo: Lesley Hamilton.

sketches, all mimed to recordings by ten to a dozen androgynes whose physical type ranged from willowy to monolithic, was far more eclectic than the usual lazy-Susan of pop hits; it included Offenbach, Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, the Beatles, a transcendently arch 'Tea for Two', Aznavour's 'Old Fashioned Way' and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Angela Davis, rather than Bette, was the diva of the hour, portrayed by Erna von Scratch in a red pants-suit flashing the black-power salute before a backdrop of a scowling Statue of Liberty. Salieri was nothing if not *au courant* in his *faux* radicalism; during the Watergate crisis he proposed a musical version of the Watergate Affair to feature Martha Mitchell.

In interviews, Salieri, who had worked with Roland Petit at the Ballet des Champs-Élysées and Jean Cocteau on *La Belle et la bête*, was either disingenuous or misinformed in saying,

to me transvestitism is a spectacular act with no sexual or erotic meaning. I use it as Shakespeare used a 17-year-old boy to play Juliet . . . I find that boys are the most prodigious actors, and when they play women, there's a double phenomenon of distance between the character and his interpretation.¹⁰⁴

An epigone of Artaud, he scorned the theatre of words and ideas for one of masks, attitudes and gestures that evoked phantasmic images. Feminine attire and kabuki-style makeup, he claimed, 'were used in a painterly fashion, like painted paper in a cubist collage'.

By 1973, La Grande Eugène was the cynosure for the Parisian in-crowd, attracting cabinet ministers, movie stars and millionaires. French critics were particularly enamoured of Jean-Claude

Dessy-Dreyfus, shave-pated creator of Erna von Scratch. One reviewer, unwittingly echoing Walter Pater, called him 'a vampire whose bloodstained smile . . . bears a shadowy resemblance to that of the Mona Lisa'. Even *Le Monde* found a 'disquieting power' in his 'eagle's face and lascivious gestures', and said of the whole show that 'these representations of a reconstituted world reverse and invert the most deeply rooted values and criteria'.¹⁰⁵ Such exegeses rarely concerned audiences who came to drink and laugh, never pausing to consider whether the eschewal of simple nostalgia or camp were attacks on fashionable attitudes (Black Power, Jesus freaks, the cult of art deco), and even on the traditional drag show.

Kenneth Tynan, who saw La Grande Eugène while planning *Oh! Calcutta*, was bowled over by what he judged its audacity and originality. 'The performers aren't camp or drag queens,' he gushed, 'they are like gods who are above mere matters of sex'; he toyed with the possibility of Salieri staging the sex-show sequence in his suppositious sequel *After Calcutta*.¹⁰⁶ When I saw La Grande Eugène at the London Roundhouse three years later, it already seemed dated fag-chic, some of its thunder stolen by the irreverent campness and pyrotechnics of *The Rocky Horror Show*.¹⁰⁷ What made it work was the Beardsleyesque grotesquerie of the costumes and the manic energy of the rather sketchy choreography. The best moments were those which injected a kitschy sarcasm into the proceedings. A clean-cut rendition of 'Tea for Two', as if by Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler, waxen musical-comedy stars extolling the smaltzy joys of marriage and family life, was undercut by a wraith-like maid, imitating and wondering, perhaps an incarnation of the gay sensibility bemused by hetero romance. In the pastiche from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Mary Magdalene, stripping off her robe to reveal a charlady's outfit, mopped the stage throughout for the rest of the show, no doubt in penance for her sins. Set in a drag bar, the Cannon song from *Der Dreigroschenoper* took on a new aggressiveness; and the notion of Taglioni dancing her way through the cancan from *Orphée aux enfers* had a great comic pay-off. But routines rooted in French camp culture, such as an imitation of Bernhardt as L'Aiglon, misfired. The second half of the evening was more openly gay in a self-consciously daring fashion: the touchings and pairings-off during the Jesus number had seemed to equate Christian *caritas* with promiscuous sex in the Bois de Boulogne, and during a rock ballad of love sung by one motorcyclist to another, the object of affection was nude under a clear vinyl suit. 'Exquisitely erotic', opined one magazine, but 'clean enough for family audiences' was the verdict of another. *Time Out* appraised such camp as 'only decadent to the most superficial eye, and, hopefully, will provoke a new breed of cabaret/spectacle'.¹⁰⁸ La Grande Eugène's most original innovation was to refashion the usual appurtenances of female impersonation to project an equally factitious masculinity, and, despite imitators, did not foster any serious progeny until the alternative drag movement of the following decades.

Go-go and JoJo

Influenced by *La Grande Eugène*, *The Rocky Horror Show*, the Alternative Miss World competition, organized by the designer Andrew Logan, drag made a fashion statement just at a time when men's fashions were becoming staid again. A number of performers, among them 'Poison Ivy', 'Bette Noir' and 'Praying Mantis' were trying to recapture the outrageousness of Neo-romantic sartorial splendour by borrowing from a different closet. Fun club wear led, in many cases, to full-time drag performance, but in neither case was there a serious attempt to convey an illusion of being a female. By the late 1980s, drag clubs and balls had become the most hysterically popular in London, and insisted on outrageous make-believe. The Miss Drag International contest at Porchester Hall



Figure 78 Men's toilets, Black Cap cabaret night, London 1989. Photo: Jeanette Jones. Courtesy Barricade Books.

featured not only the extravagantly be-jewelled, be-sequined and be-feathered, but a gorilla in frilled tutu and diamanté earrings and a silver Christmas tree with spangled breastplate and matching codpiece.¹⁰⁹ Weekly gatherings at Absolutely Fabulous at Subterania, Sex at Café de Paris and House Nation at Busby's were always packed, as were the Supermodels' Ball, Do Brazil and Night of the Stars. These were hosted by Winston Austin, a black British Guyanan, who wears foam rubber falsies and repudiates hormones. 'In the US they sit around moaning about being men and

talking about painful operations. It is supposed to be fun. They've made it terribly serious.'¹¹⁰ New Wave drag became, in the words of Miss Kimberley, a hostess in London clubland,

not about parodying women and it has nothing to do with that old-fashioned bitchiness of the pub drag act. What we're doing is exploring a more natural, a more 'real' form of femininity . . . that is, being a man and looking like a woman, but still wanting to be a man. . . . Drag is my business.¹¹¹

The business of drag was carried on most profitably by Kinky Gerlinky, the nickname of Gerlinde Kostiff. She and her husband Michael organized travelling party nights held every second Monday of the month; after her death in 1995, they settled into monthly drag extravaganzas at the Empire Ballroom, Leicester Square, with 500 transvestites on parade. 'Terminally trendy', it attracted members of Duran Duran, Sexpress and other successful pop groups, as well as has-beens and wannabees. The club's status among fashion victims was confirmed when it was chosen as the venue for the Fashion Week post-show party of the dressmaking duo Body Map.¹¹² Videos of such events were sold for £20 apiece at branches of Boy. Kinky Gerlinky was more a fashion statement, an aspiration to glamour and excitement, than theatrical drag performance, and in this respect it resembles the New York voguing recorded by the film *Paris Is Burning*.

The participants in the voguing balls, which may go on for eighteen hours at a stretch, are intent on looking as closely as possible like a professional fashion model, with a concomitantly high emotional investment in the similitude. The lives of black and Puerto Rican poor and homosexual youths may be severely circumscribed, but their fantasy lives are not. Jennie Livingston, the film's director, saw voguing as an extreme version of the pressure put on the average American by advertising and cultural imperatives.¹¹³ In a society that denies reality to anyone who has not become famous, i.e. appeared on television, the construction of a celebrity identity through voguing legitimizes the existence of the economically disadvantaged. Enforced reality means hustling, drug dealing, performing menial work; constructed reality provides wish fulfilment and nurtures the hope that 'someone will discover me'. This attitude undercuts the seeming subversion of black or Latino men aiming to become idealized white women, for it endorses the overarching social assumptions that happiness is being a beautiful, heterosexual white protégée of a wealthy man.¹¹⁴

The erotic charge of ambiguity is the appeal of Madame JoJo's which began in 1986 as a basement nightclub at 8 Brewer Street owned by Paul Raymond, where heterosexual men were invited to ogle and chat up other men because they are dressed as women. Some of the pretenders to womanhood had recourse to dyed hair, immaculate makeup and shaved, slender torsos, while the body language of the Barbettes, the male bartenders got up as Barbie dolls, achieved their effect with flashing smiles and wagging bottoms. They teetered on high heels, sat on customers' laps, tossed their locks, flirted and danced, mimicking all the exploitative features of woman as commodity. These 'girlie' transvestites seemed to be pandering to the idea that a perfect woman is a sex object, a confection of cut-away clothes and false nails and eyebrows, eager to be drooled over; in fact, they were undermining it by showing that anyone of whatever biology is capable of achieving the effect by assiduous striving. And the men who fell for the disguise are the biggest chumps.¹¹⁵

Others, however, simply shaved their chests just down to the nipple level, leaving the impression of teddy bears wearing bibs. They joked about the difficulty of smiling 'with my giblets up my arse'. JoJo himself, 'the Queen of Trivia', was allowed to wear wigs and false breasts, but none of his clients were. Madame JoJo, a six-foot-tall Eurasian from Singapore, maintained the tradition of the

classy drag hostess as big-hearted brothel madam, claiming her heroes were Danny La Rue, Dame Edna Everage and Mother Theresa; she also alleged she launched the catch-phrase 'Qui moi?' before Miss Piggy.¹¹⁶

For all the creativity of the costumes, the acts were dreadful, seldom intentionally so: the obese star Ruby Venezuela comes on dressed as a chicken, stands behind a gold cardboard cage and sings 'I tawt I taw a puddy tat'. It amounted to old-fashioned, homely camp, devoid of any real decadence.¹¹⁷ Over the years, as budgets got larger, the shows became longer and more spectacular. What began as a gay club soon became a draw for straight audiences, often playing to parties of provincial matrons. One such woman observed that the outside world reacted to this microcosm as being 'very intimidating, on the basis that you have these "women," who have almost no concerns or concept of what it means to be a real woman, i.e. the metabolic rates, the way a woman's body works: weight gain, water retention, periods.' By disguising themselves by means of external factors which please the eye, they project themselves as the perfect woman, boldly exposing her body with masculine self-confidence. Male spectators, unable to conceive of themselves pulling off such a metamorphosis, leave in awe, whereas 'the women leave feeling ugly, fat and very simple'. And yet the impersonators, being over-the-top, never really persuade the women that they are women.¹¹⁸

One of the female female impersonators, Beatrix von Watzdorf, having overcome her initial sense of inadequacy and loss of control, soon recognised camp impersonation as 'easy manipulation': 'Give the audience what they want, to be shocked, titillated and entertained, but all the while make sure you call the shots.'¹¹⁹ The audience at Madame JoJo was made up largely of ordinary office workers uncritically craving excitement, in contrast with the more discerning and diverse gay crowds who infrequently attended. The heterosexualization of drag resulted in part from the fickleness of the gay habitué, ever seeking the newest and most fashionable venues; moreover, exclusively drag clubs, at least in Britain, tended to be sleazy and down-market, with tiny dance floors and obsolescent sound systems. A concomitant factor in the gay clientele's desertion of the drag club with its overpriced drinks is the improbability of scoring in an ambience that is largely straight. (JoJo's was exceptionally strict about drug use in the toilets and on the floor.)

Gay clientele were even less charmed when JoJo abandoned the Brewer Street premises, all rumpled red velvet and low lights, in 1991 for the Limelight Club in the theatre district of Shaftesbury Avenue; the tone was advertised as more genteel and elegant, 'a relaxed atmosphere' with 'no loud music'.¹²⁰ But the *Zeitgeist* required more violent attractions. At the old Madame JoJo's, a blonde transvestite Mitzi and the barman Florian bought the lease, and laid on grotesquerie with a trowel. Guests might be greeted by waiters in drag on roller-skates and, although one night was devoted to an all-female audience, the more characteristic innovation was the monthly Smashing's Monsters of Drag night. Hosted by Matthew Glamorre, it featured the Sheila Tequila puppet show, the tableaux vivants of David Cabaret in full Marilyn Monroe makeup to achieve his 'lesbian femme fatale' look, Philip Salon in Napoleon bondage guise, and the musical set Ming and the Diamond Gussets in five o'clock shadows and laddered tights. Leigh Bowery's contribution was to simulate sex with a giant yellow canary, a far cry from Ruby Venezuela's bird in a gilded cage routine.¹²¹ This rough mix of retro-punk and wilful transgression seemed to proclaim that drag no longer bore any relation to gender deception or sexual stimulation; it was simply one of the handier if less effective weapons in the arsenal of the artist of outrage.

Notes

- 1 B. Richardson, *Guy to Goddess. An Intimate Look at Drag Queens*, Berkeley, CA., Ten Speed Press, 1994, p. 15.
- 2 A. R. Williams, *Operation Greasepaint*, Hollywood, House-Warven, 1951, pp. 22–3. On 'straight' servicemen visiting West Coast gay bars, see M. R. Gorman, *The Empress is a Lady. Stories from the Life of José Sarria*, New York, Harrington Park Press, 1998, pp. 114–16.
- 3 Con, *Variety*, 1925, quoted in R. Liechti, '4 of a kind', *Gay Ways* (undated), p. 5; see also *Toledo Blade*, 19 April 1921, 21 April 1921, in A. Slide (ed.), *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*, Metuchen, NJ, Scarecrow Press, 1988, pp. 143–4. Cf. Francis Renault who performed a parody of Geraldine Farrar in *Carmen*.
- 4 B. Sobel, *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 9 October 1920, p. 598.
- 5 Quoted in L. Langner, *The Importance of Wearing Clothes*, New York, Hastings House, 1959, p. 171.
- 6 When Flawless Sabrina, the organizer of the drag beauty contest at Manhattan's Town Hall in February 1967 suggested that the proceeds go to the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign with Lady Bird Johnson as sponsor, the plan fell through since both Mrs Johnson and the Muscular Dystrophy Foundation refused to lend their names. This and other contretemps are recorded in Jack Simon's film documentary *The Queen* (1968). See 'Mother doesn't really understand', *Nova*, October 1968, pp. 36–7.
- 7 See 'Female impersonators', *Ebony*, March 1952, pp. 62–7. San Francisco brought back the practice with its Imperial Court in 1964. The use of drag balls as fund-raising events was revived on a grand scale as a result of the AIDS epidemic. See e.g. M. Friedlander, 'Gays having a ball with fundraising', *Toronto Star*, 9 October 1993, p. J3, and D. Graham, 'Drag artists honor queens of queens', *Toronto Star*, 3 November 1994, p. H2.
- 8 For the Harlem drag balls, see G. Chauncey Jr., *Gay New York. Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940*, New York, Basic Books, 1994, pp. 227–64, 293–6, 332–3.
- 9 L. Langner, op. cit., p. 170. For drag queens at a dance hall in the 1920s see S. Grahame, *New York Nights*, New York, J. H. Dorna, 1927, pp. 130–3. The male impersonator Arlette Bascom was arrested in Baltimore in 1912 while dressed in her female street clothes by a detective who suspected she was a male fugitive advertised as likely to be disguised in women's clothes. 'The Usher', *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 27 July 1912, p. 4.
- 10 S. Walker, *The Night Club Era*, New York, Blue Ribbon Books, 1933, pp. 101, 207.
- 11 J. Gavin, *Intimate Nights. The Golden Age of New York Cabaret*, New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1991, p. 52; W. J. Mann, *Wisecracker. The Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star*, New York, Viking, 1998, p. 154.
- 12 F. Howe, 'An exploration of the history of female impersonators', *Advocate*, 21 September 1977, p. 29.
- 13 B. Scarpie, 'Famous E. Russell reminisces about a famous star of yesteryear', *Drag*, 1973, vol. 3, pp. 23, 25.
- 14 F. Allen, *Much Ado about Me*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1956, p. 93.
- 15 'All about your editor Mr. Pudgy Roberts', *The Great Female Mimics*, January 1973, vol. 1, p. 36. Roberts was supposed to be Gypsy Rose Lee's favourite stripper.
- 16 'Veteran female impersonator passes away in San Francisco', unidentified clipping, Kinsey Institute; Gorman, op. cit., pp. 118–19, 209–11 *et seq.*
- 17 D. Paulson with R. Simpson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah. A Gay Cabaret in Seattle*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 44, 108.

- 18 C. Stinson, "Jewel Box" reveals mixed array of gems', unidentified clipping, Kinsey Institute; Howe, op. cit.; Jewel Box revue programmes at Kinsey Institute; E. Drorbaugh, 'Sliding scales', in L. Ferris (ed.), *Crossing the Stage. Controversies on Cross-dressing*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 120-43.
- 19 Paulson with Simpson, op. cit., p. 80-1.
- 20 Linda, 'Backstage at the Jewel Box Revue', *Transvestia*, 1962, vol. 15, pp. 56-7.
- 21 Stinson, op. cit.
- 22 Quoted in D. Paulson with Simpson, op. cit., p. 85.
- 23 A. Willard, *Female Impersonation*, New York, Regiment Publications, 1971, pp. 60-4.
- 24 A. Leveritt and T. Armstrong, 'Filmmaker, activist, writer Michelle Parkerson', *Hot Wire*, July 1987, p. 26. See her film *Stormé, The Lady of the Jewel Box*; and Drorbaugh, op. cit.
- 25 J. E. Jeffreys, 'Who's no lady? Excerpts from an oral history of New York City's 82 Club', *New York Folklore*, 1993, vol. 19, nos 1-2, pp. 185-202; J. Fleischer, *The Drag Queens of New York. An Illustrated Field Guide*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1996, pp. 29-30; '82 Club with Gigi Williams and Ronnie Cutrone', unidentified clipping, Kinsey Institute.
- 26 Ed Earle, quoted in B. Landis, *Anger, the Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger*, New York, HarperCollins, 1995.
- 27 A. Slide, *Great Pretenders. A History of Female and Male Impersonation in the Performing Arts*, Lombard, IL, Wallace-Homestead Book Co, 1986, p. 29.
- 28 'Staid Boston bans females imps', *New York Star*, 18 July 1947.
- 29 Quoted in The History Project (eds), *Improper Bostonians. Lesbian and Gay History from the Puritans to Playland*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1998, p. 178-9.
- 30 Minette, 'I, Minette', *He-She*, 1966, vol. 1, pp. 20-4.
- 31 Ron Russell, in *Persona*. Photographs by Susan Brown, interviews by Steven Reinberg, New York, Rizzoli, 1997.
- 32 Gorman, op. cit., pp. 179-80.
- 33 Paulson with Simpson, op. cit., p. 165. As late as 1996, a planned professional production of *La Cage aux Folles* was pre-censored in Raleigh, NC, because of a municipal ordinance which stipulates that female impersonators constitute 'adult entertainment' subject to a number of restrictions. B. Paterson, 'Raleigh, North Carolina', *Stage*, 5 September 1996, p. 7.
- 34 Paulson with Simpson, op. cit., p. 166.
- 35 'All about your editor', p. 27.
- 36 Lorri Lee, quoted in K. Kirk and E. Heath, *Men in Frocks*, London, GMP, 1984, p. 34.
- 37 O. P. Gilbert, *Men in Women's Guise. Some Historical Instances of Female Impersonation*, trans. R. D. Douglas, New York, Brentano's, 1926, pp. 270-1; A. Retana, *Historia del arte frivolo*, Madrid, Editorial Tesoro, 1964, p. 137.
- 38 *Billboard*, 21 March 1931, p. 12.
- 39 L. Sillman, *Here lies Leonard Sillman straightened Out at Last; An Autobiography*, New York, Citadel Press, 1959, p. 90.
- 40 B. Atkinson, 'Mask and gown', *New York Times*, undated clipping, Kinsey Institute. Visiting Jones backstage, the composer Ned Rorem found him 'complètement la grand dame', and felt his own masculinity bolstered by Jones' batting his painted lashes and speaking in breathy tones. N. Rorem, *Knowing When to Stop*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 372.
- 41 'The impersonator', *Time*, 20 July 1959, p. 70; B. Atkinson, 'New Faces', *New York Times*: H. Morton, 'T. C. Jones brings his impersonations back home to San Francisco', *San Francisco Examiner*, 20 July 1958; Sillman, op. cit. In the Summer season of 1959, Jones played the female role of the predatory siren Lorraine Sheldon in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, but a proposal that he be cast as one of the strippers in the new musical *Gypsy* was vetoed by Ethel Merman.

- 42 R. Hornak, 'Tribute: Lynne Carter was not a female impersonator', *TV-Ts Tapestry*, 1985, vol. 46, pp. 29-31.
- 43 D. Vining, *A Gay Diary Volume Four 1967-1975*, New York, Pepys Press, 1983, p. 170.
- 44 Slide, *Great Pretenders*, p. 149.
- 45 Hornak, op. cit.; M. Christy, 'High styles are worn by female impersonator', *New York Herald-Times*, 7 March 1971; W. Bald, 'Female impersonating is a real love-in', unidentified clipping, Kinsey Institute.
- 46 Arthur Blake, a nightclub performer who was a major influence on Charles Pierce, did an impersonation of Eleanor Roosevelt until 1946 when she personally requested that he discontinue it.
- 47 *Drag*, 1975, vol. 9, p. 6.
- 48 K. Garfield, 'Charles Pierce. A legend steps from stage to screen', *Advocate*, 23 January 1989, pp. 48-51.
- 49 R. B. Marriott, 'Charles Pierce - "America's favourite male actress"', *Stage*, 4 December 1975.
- 50 Howe, op. cit.
- 51 Garfield, op. cit., p. 50.
- 52 D. Kalmansohn, 'The return of Charles Pierce', *Frontiers*, 16 March 1990, pp. L38-43;
- J. Armstrong, 'Interview: Charles Pierce, female impersonator', *Advocate*, 19 May 1976, pp. 19-21. Pierce passed away in 1999.
- 53 T. Carlson, 'Craig Russell lets the mask drop', *Boston Herald American*, 9 October 1979, p. B2.
- 54 V. Janoff, 'A different dress. Craig Russell turns 40', *Mandate*, January 1988, p. 30.
- 55 J. Simon, 'Zestful imitations, flaccid originals', *New York Magazine*, 21 November 1977.
- 56 D. Robinson, 'The real Craig Russell - actor and actress', *The Times* (London), 5 October 1975.
- 57 Robinson, op. cit.
- 58 F. Weil, 'Jim Bailey puts punch in Judy show', *Boston Herald American*, 23 January 1979; Howe, op. cit., 5 October 1977, p. 28; M. Veljkovich, 'Phyllis and Judy and Barbra and Mae and Peggy. Would the real Jim Bailey please stand?', *After Dark*, January 1972, pp. 48-53; E. Braun, 'Garland of poses', *Stage and Television Today*, 16 November 1989, p. 6. Contrast the mimic Claude Sacha of Michou's Follies, 'I really feel I am Streisand as soon as I put the wig on. I become an absolute bitch'. A. Earle, "French dressing" a la Left Bank', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 August 1974, p. 35.
- 59 Cf. Tommy Femia, another Garland impersonator, who repudiates the title drag queen, does not lip synch, but at the same time says, 'I am not channeling. I'm am not going to say anything as nuts as that. But in a way I become her. . . . It's not method acting. I'm Judy through Tommy.' *Persona*, p. 64.
- 60 R. Edmondson, 'Imitation of life', *Advocate*, 16 January 1990, pp. 62-3; WERS interview 20 February 1988.
- 61 M. Warner, 'What a drag!', *Punch*, 16 March 1977, pp. 458-9.
- 62 'Artist drags Monroe back from the grave', *Stage*, 19 February 1987, p. 4; M. Griffiths, 'Monroe doctrine', *Time Out*, undated clipping, David Cheshire collection.
- 63 S. Timmons, 'A new wrinkle in Drag', *Advocate*, 25 February 1992, p. 79; J. S. Dwyer, 'P.S. Randy Allen', *IN Newsweekly* (Provincetown), 26 July 1993, pp. 22-3.
- 64 Fleischer, op. cit., pp. 76-7.
- 65 T. Williams, 9 March 1948, *Tennessee Williams' Letters to Donald Windham, 1940-1965*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1977, p. 212.
- 66 Le Carrousel Female Mimics, 'Where girl-boys make he-men blush'. Carrousel programmes always reproduced head shots of the performers as men superimposed over their drag photographs.

- 67 N. Hoyer (ed.), *Man into Woman. An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, London, Jarrolds, 1933. See also B. L. Hausman, 'Demanding subjectivity: transsexualism, medicine, and the technologies of gender,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, October 1992, vol. 3, pp. 270-1.
- 68 'Once a woman, he weds one', *Times Union*, 11 August 1936.
- 69 "'French fooler" Bambi', *Femme Mimics*, 1963, vol. 1, p. 6.
- 70 Cabaret transvestism had been common in Weimar-era Berlin, and after the Second World War it resurged with considerable energy. The Dutch transvestite Romy Haag opened a club which became a must-see for everyone visiting West Berlin, especially after 1977 when David Bowie was reputed to have fallen in love with her. Many of Haag's girls were fully transsexual, and the emphasis was on sex appeal rather than comedy.
- 71 Coccinelle, *Coccinelle*, Paris, Filipacchi, 1987; A. du Dognon, 'Au revoir, Coccinelle!', *Arcadie 100*, April 1962, pp. 259-60; ; R. Atkinson, 'Sex-change girl weds'; 'Coccinelle the world's sexiest she-man', P. Vence, "'She's a he" says mate', unidentified clippings, Kinsey Institute; 'Ex-man to marry man', *National Graphic*, undated clipping, Kinsey Institute; J. F. Piquot, *La licorne ou lettre ouverte à un jeune travesti*, Paris, La Table Ronde, Régine Deforges, 1974, pp. 188-89. The British courts had already annulled the marriage of April Ashley, a post-operative transsexual, to Arthur Corbett, a biologically male transvestite, ruling that Ashley was male on account of unchanged chromosomal sex. In a later case, two decisions of the European Court of Justice found for the British government against the transsexual Caroline Cossey, who wished to remarry after she had been abandoned by her Orthodox Jewish Italian husband. D. Fallowell and A. Ashley, *April Ashley's Odyssey*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1982.
- 72 E. Amenta, 'The show was illusion . . .'; T. W. Mangan, 'The professional f.i.', *Rhinoceros*, p. 4, undated clippings, Kinsey Institute.
- 73 'Amsterdam's Mme Arthur's', *Drag*, 1973, vol. 4, p. 13.
- 74 D. Farr, 'The great "drag" boom', *People*, undated clipping, Kinsey Institute.
- 75 Gavin, op. cit., pp. 52-6; Timmons, op. cit., pp. 61-2; Willard, op. cit., pp. 72-8. In 1968 Bourbon murdered the owner of a petshop who had sold his dogs, and during a ninety-nine-year jail sentence (served in a men's prison) he died of leukaemia. The ten LPs he made provide a good record of his performance style.
- 76 Gorman, op. cit., pp. 129, 203-4; *Variety*, 21 March 1962, quoted in Drorbraugh, op. cit.
- 77 The Jewel Box finally succumbed in 1975, after a brief run at the Bijou Theatre, NY. B. Coleman, 'Jewel Box Revue: America's longest-running touring drag show', *Theatre History Studies*, 1997, vol. 17, pp. 90-1. By the mid-1970s there were a few all-black drag revues, among them The Guys and Dolls Revue, most of whose six performers, two of them brothers, had become male impersonators by the age of 15. Programme (before 1977) at Kinsey Institute.
- 78 'Charms men view with rapt delight are often kept in drawers at night', unidentified clipping, Kinsey Institute.
- 79 *Drag*, 1975, vol. 5, no. 19, p. 6. Nightclubs in general suffered decline throughout the 1970s, owing to the ascendancy of television; 82 Club was as much the victim of a *déclassé* location, rising costs and a weak advertising policy as it was of homophobia. See 'The "death" of female impersonation at the 82 Club', *Drag*, 1974, vol. 4, no. 126, p. 37.
- 80 Jennifer, 'Professional female impersonation', *Transvestia*, 1966, vol. 37, p. 85.
- 81 E. Newton, *Mother Camp. Female Impersonators in America*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1971, p. 37; the chapter 'Entertainment as deviant work', in *Odd Jobs: The World of Deviant Work*, Prentice-Hall, 1978, is based entirely on Newton.
- 82 Mangan, op. cit.
- 83 Newton, op. cit., p. 8.

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- 84 Holly Brown as told to M. Smith, 'Me? I'm just myself', *Drag Show, Featuring Peter Kenna's Mates and Steve J. Spears' The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin*, Woolhara, Currency Press, 1977, p. 11.
- 85 For a detailed fictional account of how an amateur transvestite tried and failed to make it in show business, see E. Wood Jr., *Drag Trade*, Van Nuys, Triumph News Co, 1967, pp. 136-46.
- 86 'Complete guide to female impersonation', *Female Mimics* (Hollywood), 1973, p. 51; J. County with R. Smith, *Man Enough to Be a Woman*, London, Serpent's Tail, 1995, p. 16.
- 87 County with Smith, op. cit., pp. 96-7, 100, 115, 131. His pre-operative transsexual counsellor, who was himself going through a sex change, never insisted that County follow through, but offered a number of options. This provides an exception to Moe Meyer's insistence that the medical establishment determines gender choices. M. Meyer, 'Unveiling the word: science and narrative in transsexual striptease', in L. Senelick (ed.), *Gender in Performance. The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 1992, pp. 68-85.
- 88 Newton, op. cit., pp. 63-4.
- 89 County, op. cit., p. 167. Angie Stardust settled in Berlin in the mid-1960s, worked at the well-established Chez Nous and lived as a lesbian with a penchant for butch white girls. She appeared in Rosa von Praunheim's film *City of Lost Souls*.
- 90 'Kit Russell's world', *The Female Impersonator*, vol. 5, undated clipping, Kinsey Institute.
- 91 'Drag that isn't a drag', *After Dark*, August 1977, pp. 12-13.
- 92 'Frank Quinn's "Greenwich Village Follies" wows them in Brooklyn', *The Great Female Mimics*, January 1973, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 10-14.
- 93 'All about your Editor', op. cit., p. 25.
- 94 C. Ruperto, 'Vicki Starr', unidentified clipping, Kinsey Institute.
- 95 'Little Egypt', McCord, quoted in D. Krantz, 'The weird whacky world of female impersonators. How to strip for fun & profit', *Close-up*, undated clipping, p. 8, Kinsey Institute.
- 96 According to the pantomime dame Trevor Morton, in R. Baker, 'Art of drag', unidentified clipping, Kinsey Institute.
- 97 'Once a jolly dragman', *London Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 1972, p. 9.
- 98 R. Miller, 'Please excuse him while he puts on a bra', *Nova*, August 1968.
- 99 T. Reay, 'For the price of a pint', *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, 3 October 1969; A. Thorncroft, 'Drag with the beer', *The Times* (London), 15 January 1972, p. 9.
- 100 T. Wilson, 'Find the lady!', op. cit.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 'Song and dance woman', *London Evening Standard*, 28 August 1973, p. 16.
- 103 Farr, op. cit. In Dublin, the carry-all-toting dame, as performed by Jimmy O'Dea or Cecil Sheridan, was the common mode of pub drag, until a young Englishman, Alan Amsby, who had modelled Carnaby Street girls' clothes as 'Miss Pussy', introduced a mod impersonation. Wilson, 'Find the lady!'
- 104 'What a drag', *Newsweek*, 2 July 1973, p. 31; J. Barber, 'When boys cavort about like girls', *London Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 1983, p. 6; 'These legendary women are men', *Sunday Telegraph*, 9 May 1976; F. Wyndham, 'Frantz Salieri and his midnight monsters', *Sunday Times Magazine*, 8 April 1973, pp. 42-51.
- 105 Quoted in Wyndham, op. cit.
- 106 K. Tynan, *The Life of Kenneth Tynan*, New York, William Morrow, 1987, p. 429.
- 107 At a time when American pop music was hymning the joys of indiscriminate sexuality and dressing up, Charles Aznavour issued 'Ce qu'ils disent' (1972), a doleful ballad about a transvestite lip syncher who lives with his mother.
- 108 *Time Out*, quoted in La Grande Eugène programme.

- 109 J. Melville, 'Miss Drag steps out', *New Society*, 18 November 1982, pp. 304–5.
- 110 I. Edwards-Jones, 'A life in the style of Winston', *London Evening Standard*, January 1992, pp. 44–5.
- 111 Sonny Fontaine, 'He is – Miss Transvestite!', *London Sun*, 8 October 1991, p. 27. Miss Kimberley is a mixed race, self-styled 'queer from Detroit', who toured Russia with the Perpetual Motion Co in *The Maids*, opening on the day homosexuality was decriminalized. She formed a 'girl' group the Dis-Gyze, which made a hit in Israel, and moved to London to perform as Madame JoJo before becoming a hostess at Heaven.
- 112 E. Brahms, 'Camp followers', *London Evening Standard*, October 1989.
- 113 D. Ehrenstein, 'A passion for fashion', *Advocate*, 3 December 1990, pp. 68–9. The 'houses' to which contestants belong also provide a surrogate family for those who may be rejected by their own families.
- 114 J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York, Routledge, 1993, pp. 121–40.
- 115 L. Cavendish, 'Unheel thyself', *London Evening Standard*, 9 February 1996, p. 16.
- 116 C. Phillips, 'JoJo is a man', *London Evening Standard*, 9 June 1989, p. 44.
- 117 P. Barron, 'Boys will be bitches', *London Evening Standard*, 3 March 1987, p. 29; C. Sarler, 'Happy campers', *Sunday Times Magazine* (London), 20 May 1990, pp. 22–3.
- 118 B. von Watzdorf, *One of the Boys*, London, André Deutsch, 1995, pp. 38–9. Watzdorf was a woman who performed as a 'drag queen' at Madame JoJo's for a few years and left an intelligent account. See also 'Queen Bea', *Girl about Town*, 1 May 1995, and M. Williams, 'With lowered eyelashes', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 May 1995, p. 27.
- 119 Watzdorf, op. cit., p. 66.
- 120 'There ain't nothing like this dame', *Stage*, 13 May 1991, p. 6.
- 121 M. Carter, 'Camping sight', *London Evening Standard*, July 1991; R. Foss, 'Getting frocked', *What's On*, 4 January 1994, p. 83; L. Gray, 'XXXX-rated Australian', *The Times* (London), 11 February 1994, p. 33; 'Monday nights are a real drag for the boys!', *West End Extra*, 11 February 1994, p. 13; A. Dingle, 'Get back', *Time Out*, 18 November 1994, p. 13.

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Afterword

From dressing up to dressing down

*The drag phenomenon is out of control
– there's a female impersonator on every
street corner in New York. Bums and
blind men with pencils in tin cups are
doing drag. It's got to stop.*

Bruce LaBruce¹

Straight and narrow

Back in 1974, one be-wigged chorine at Finocchio's was already expressing doubts. 'With all the gender-fuck drag going on those days, what we're doing here seems kinda passé. It makes me wonder how much longer we can keep packing them in.'²The answer was, as long as there are blue-haired old ladies. The drag queen has become so assimilated that such acts are now drawn largely for mainstream heterosexual audiences. Whether or not they really get it is beside the point: they flock to these performances as they once poured into sideshow tents. Most current drag is no more subversive than the black-face of minstrelsy, which accounts for its popularity.

The seal was set on this acceptance when the record-breaking French farce *La Cage aux Folles*, which had already spawned three films, was successfully converted into a Broadway musical. Casting a fishy eye on the Tony awarded for this adaptation, Erika Munk pointed out that the cast was made up of

a businessman daddy who knows best; a loving, feminine, vulnerable, overemotional ditsy drag mommy who has to be protected; a conventional shallowly rebellious son

who chooses his girlfriend because she makes his shoulders feel broader; grossly reactionary parents-in-law who are conquered in a flash; and a black maid . . . the female role is maintained in its most conventional forms – minus, of course, such difficulties as discrimination and abortion, and without any daughters who might have to face them.³

With its appeal so baldly exposed, the longevity of the various avatars of *La Cage* (including the belated Hollywood crowd-pleaser *The Birdcage*) is readily explicable.

In all but the last case, it was considered daring (yet commercially expedient) for Georges and Albin, the middle-aged gay couple, to be played by actors of unimpeachably masculine credentials (the *New York Daily News* referred to Gene Barry and George Hearn, the Broadway stars, as 'two such stalwart gentlemen'⁴). Hearn confessed to waking up in the middle of night, in trepidation that he, 'a hard-drinking Irishman', might be exposing 'the female side of [his] nature'; 'after all, I'm very masculine'. Had the part been an ordinary 'homosexual', he would have seen it as simply another acting challenge; but the contaminant of effeminacy was off-putting.

The director Arthur Laurents advised him to 'Go for the pain, the embarrassment, the humiliation' rather than any celebration of androgyny and assigned a girl dancer to coach his movements. Such a direction exposes graphically the roots of Method acting in Freudian psychoanalysis. Once Hearn could regard his task as 'an adventure', an exercise in empathy with a pathological case, he could overcome his resistance to taking 'the psychological step backward in the chain of authority for men to play women'. Although Harvey Fierstein had been hired to 'deepen' the libretto into a story of 'personal acceptance and human dignity', gay liberation was hardly the main concern: the men in the chorus of Cagelles were told by the choreographer, 'You're not here because you're screaming faggots or because you look or move like women.'⁵ Indeed, to prevent the audience from making assumptions about the private lives of the Cagelles, two women were included in the chorus, with off-stage women's voices mixed into the sound. Spectators were encouraged to try and guess the gender of the chorus members, thus turning the whole concept of cross-dressing into a wholesome masquerade (and prompting one reviewer to complain that the men 'were not nearly pretty enough for their dodge . . . [merely] an apotheosis of Harvard Hasty Pudding Show'⁶).

The professional drag community was outraged: why hadn't any of the experienced cross-dressers who had auditioned (like Lynne Carter) been cast? (He was asked instead to coach George Hearn 'to be a clown', since the distinguished Michel Serreault, who had originally created Albin, claimed to have taken the curse off the part by putting a dot of rouge on his nose, this totemic gesture turning the threat of emasculation into a clown act.⁷) These complaints missed the point: if the musical were to lure the general public, it had to be sanitized of any whiff of deviance. Even at the London Palladium where drag traditions were more familiar and the women in the chorus reduced to one, 'straight' casting remained the rule for the leads. The British advertising flyer featured a young man and woman kissing on its centre section, with the two gay lovers divorced to opposite flaps; the only picture of Albin in drag was a tiny shot segregated on the back. Dennis Quilley, playing Albin, assured the world that 'heterosexuals make the very best gays on stage. . . . If you're gay you must be tempted either to stand back and not commit yourself or to go too far and indulge yourself. But I could play it objectively, just as I would say, a murderer.'⁸ The equation of gay transvestite with a murderer as a problem in character creation goes well beyond Serreault's clown act. It sets the drag queen at the far end of the spectrum of antisocial behaviour, and thus refutes the producers' claims to be offering a study in human dignity.

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This neutralization of male-to-female drag was, however, what enabled its ubiquity. Hardly a television chat-show could succeed without a transvestite or transsexual undergoing unabashed scrutiny; hardly a new commercial comedy or romance film could do without its sagacious drag queen or, at the very least, its urbane gay neighbour. Revivals of vaudeville images of glam drag, the comic dame and the male impersonator continued to do well at the box-office. The Mayor of New York City dragged up to accompany Julie Andrews to a banquet for journalists.

Mass culture became pervaded by what was once alternative drag: Joey Arias, backed up by two other transvestites, serves as ringmaster of the Cirque du Soleil. The fashion photography of Mathu Anderson and Zaldy Goco was deployed on behalf of Donna Karan and Shisheida, while mannequins at Bloomingdale's were fashioned to look like RuPaul. Lypsinka was coupled in *People* magazine with his backer Madonna. The kitsch icons of the 1950s that had inspired the Wigstock generation are regularly recycled as standard fare on cable television channels, while the Disney corporation produced a film biography of Ed Wood Jr. The popular restaurant-nightclubs *Lucky Cheng's* in New York's Chinatown and *asiaSF* in San Francisco were frequented less for their fusion cuisine or voodoo décor than for the 'gender illusionists' who wait on customers between stints of lip synching on the bar.⁹

The situation is replicated in every metropolis in Latin America, Europe and the Far East. The trend-spotters' Bible *Nova* pronounced drag to be 'the drug of the 1990s' and Parisian fashion week turned into drag week, with Joey Arias strutting at Thierry Mugler's show. Michou's transvestite cabaret in Montmartre increased in popularity.¹⁰ Dana International, a Yemenite Israeli transsexual originally named Yaron Cohen, won the Eurovision Song Contest. Defending her from his more conservative co-religionists, a rabbinical spokesman for the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain declared that her 'sexuality is totally irrelevant to her ability to sing well or perform on behalf of her country'.¹¹

Those once on the cutting edge found themselves merely part of the baggage train. Sybil Bruncheon hung up his tiara and moved to Hawaii, complaining that 'RuPaul is riding on my coat-tails', a remarkably masculine locution.¹² Glenna Orgasm announced she would burn her wigs and bras as a post-post-feminist gesture. Others tried to detach drag from its earlier conventions. The English stand-up comic Eddie Izzard, a heterosexual transvestite in private life, wears the dowdy garb of a provincial librarian on stage strictly for comfort. He had taken to dresses as a child, went through a phase of shame in his adolescence, but now speaks his stream-of-consciousness monologues in the clothes that make him feel most relaxed. 'They're just clothes – and they are not women's clothes. They're mine', he insists, arguing that men should have the total clothing rights women have had since the 1920s.¹³ Izzard's transvestism has nothing to do with female glamour, shape-shifting, confused sexuality; it is a low-keyed fashion statement, proclaiming an androgyny of the wardrobe in which no garment is off-limits to any gender.

'Gender illusionism' has become the preferred term for what used to be considered drag. Like Izzard's off-the-rack dress-up, it accords with a turn to non-binary, occasional gender switching. Well-read and savvy about the academic debates, the newest performers, like their audiences, claim to be 'down there on a visit' and disavow pigeon-holing labels. When rings of cross-dressing prostitutes were regularly arrested in the Bois de Boulogne, French drag artistes disowned the usual slang *travelo*, which suggested hookers, for *transformiste*.¹⁴ Alan 'Lana' Pillay, a British actor who started out as a teenage 'disco diva' impersonating Eartha Kitt and Shirley Bassey, now insists 'I'm not a transsexual or a transvestite. I'm not a drag artist. Nor a female impersonator.' He describes himself as 'gender ambiguous' or 'beyond gender', and complains that he encounters a bar against such ambiguity in the more conservative branches of the profession.¹⁵

To be 'beyond gender' is the boast of the theatrical cross-dresser, because the eradication of binaries seems to provide a wider range of moods and genres for the performer. Tragedy rather than pathos and exultation rather than campy become possible, a potentiality realized in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. If *La Cage aux Folles* signalled the domestication of homosexual drag in traditional musical comedy, *Hedwig* achieved something more audacious within the format of the rock musical. John Cameron Mitchell had originated the character of Hedwig in 1994 at Squeezebox, a gay music club in New York; in 1998 he and Stephen Trask expanded this warm-up act into a full evening at the Jane Street Theatre, planting Hedwig's life story within the raucous framework of a punk-rock *tour de chant*. Beginning as Hänsel, an East Berlin 'girlyboy' addicted to American pop music, he undergoes an inept sex-change turning him into Hedwig with a 'Barbie-doll crotch' and the 'angry inch' (also the name of the back-up band). Hedwig's emotional life has been turbulent: she resents the teenage soulmate who abandoned her when he became the successful rock star Tommy Gnosis and she prevents her bearded husband, an aspiring cross-dresser (played by a woman) from wearing drag. Her gender identity presents the same questions posed by Kate Bornstein, but without Bornstein's claim of transcendent wisdom (or 'gnosis'). As Hedwig says, she exists 'in the divide between East and West, Slavery and Freedom, Man and Woman, Top and Bottom'; her unresolved enigma speaks of mutilation, frustration and pain.

Like so much current drag performance, *Hedwig* is well apprised of its cultural antecedents. In one song, Hedwig relates Aristophanes' fable of sexual wholeness and disunion from *The Symposium* and applies it to her own situation. The phenomenal success of this show which ran for over two years seems to result as much from this unsentimental knowingness as from a Dionysian energizing of the character's vulnerability. During the frenzied number 'Exquisite Corpse' (an offhand reference to Baudelaire), Hedwig strips off her plumed wig and leather miniskirt to morph into her counterpart/rival Tommy Gnosis, with all the accoutrements of a manic rock spectacular. In its wake, stripped almost naked, her bare bosom smeared with the crushed tomatoes that were her breasts, she is reminiscent of forlorn Ivan the Terrible at the end of his act; but instead of revealing any personal anguish appertaining to the actor, Hedwig remains in character, liberates her husband and repeats the mantra of her finale, 'Lift up your hands' in an upbeat promise of acceptance and change. Unglamorous, unsettling, empowered by her marginality, Hedwig is very much a drag queen for the 1990s.

Crossing the bar

Why should the 1990s suddenly have fixated on transvestism, through the mass media, the fashion world, the music scene, not to mention the press and academic studies? Camille Paglia predictably sees it as a sign of 'sexual crisis', but also a reversion to the pagan priests who worshipped the Great Mother who 'defies victim-centred feminism by asserting the dominance of the woman in the universe'.¹⁶ There is a sharp contradiction in this explanation: the worship of the Great Mother suggests celebration, whereas the notion of sexual crisis echoes Paglia's feminist antagonists who see anxiety in every manifestation of desire.

Some have attributed the current popularity of the drag queen to the AIDS epidemic. When Rupert Everett appeared in the West End as Flora Goforth in a revival of Tennessee Williams' *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, a piece of casting one critic praised for making 'explicit the homo-erotic subtext of so much of [Williams'] work', Everett protested, 'I'm not really in drag because I'm not trying to convince the audience that I'm a woman; I'm trying to convince myself

... I'm a queen with dementia. It's something I've seen happen to people with AIDS, which is a spectre we are trying to raise throughout the part.¹⁷ If drag could be interpreted negatively as the result of AIDS dementia, it could also be adopted positively as a less dangerous expression of outrageousness than attendance at a sex club. As the full-time pursuit of desire grew increasingly lethal, sublimations and surrogates took over. Fantasies were rechannelled into safer conduits. The jester aspect of the drag queen was welcome in plague-time, raising a laugh that wasn't necessarily a rictus.

A more electric tension results from the current acceptance of the ultimate outsider into the gay mainstream; widely employed as disk jockeys and club hostesses by commercial managements, with the rationale that amid the airless cloning of 'muscle queens' the drag queens provide a necessary quantum of femininity and variety. But the drag queens are in danger of becoming the queer equivalent of the birthday-party clown, minus the opportunity to put on a show. The increasing self-referentiality, self-protection and self-consciousness of drag, with its special employment agencies and equipment shops, protects its exponents from the instant discard that faced their predecessors. They insist on being winners. As a result, bell hooks has pointed out, they have allowed themselves to be coopted by the consumer culture, thereby losing much of their subversive and transgressive power. They are also seen as a resurgence of misogyny, essentially making the statement 'Oh well, bitches, if you don't conform to this . . . sort of patriarchally defined femininity, we can find some men who can conform to it.'¹⁸ Oddly enough, the relationship of postmodern drag to biological women is more remote than was that of the Warhol Factory crowd. Candy Darling wanted nothing more than to be perceived as a gorgeous woman; the current term among New York performing drag queens for those of their tribe who project feminine beauty is 'cunty'.

The English journalist Mark Simpson, after half-facetiously suggesting that drag is protective colouration for men in a world increasingly dominated by women, goes on to suggest a less socially determined notion: the human wish to escape the inexorable decrees of nature. Modern technology and medicine seem to be able to elude the once-immutable gender imperatives of biology and anatomy. In an inauthentic and fetishistic age saturated by media images, drag, for all its patent inauthenticity, is expressing an authentic desire. Self-creation and self-imaging through dyneel wigs and gold lamé are a variant of the self-improvement movements, be they pumping iron, eating macrobiotic food, thinking positively or channelling dead celebrities. The android has replaced the androgyne as the ideal.¹⁹

Regaining some of their shamanic prestige, drag queens are now depicted as visitors from another sphere whose sagacity and objectivity are capable of solving the problems of ordinary mortals. This is most blatant in a Hollywood confection like *To Wang Foo, With Love, Julie Newmar*, in which drag queens might be interplanetary automata for all the interest shown in their personal emotions and desires; they serve simply as purveyors of *joie de vivre* to a jerkwater hamlet. The Australian *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* was somewhat more realistic in its admission that rural communities might prove hostile to gender bending and that drag queens have sex drives; but even there the figure of the transsexual played by Terence Stamp was invested with greater authority and elegance than were the two transvestite performers accompanying her. Her greater commitment, through irreversible surgery, conferred status as 'wise woman', somehow superior to her colleagues who could don and doff gender tokens at will. Her world-weariness, born of painful experience, hedged her round with a sense of angelic *noli me tangere*.

Entertaining an angel all too aware

The identification of the sexual heretic with the seraph became a commonplace, obvious in Tony Kushner's dramatic diptych *Angels in America* and the AIDS-infected Hispanic transvestite Angel in the musical *Rent*.²⁰ The latter's celestial essence derives from theatrical convention: dying, like Marguerite Gautier, of a wasting disease, s/he is portrayed by performers with vibrant bodies, perfect teeth and boundless energy. HIV-positive status serves a dramatic shorthand, to invest the character with a special aura of transcendence.

Conferring angelic status on the drag queen and her absolutist partner the transsexual allows them to embrace the cyborg's superhumanity without its technological soullessness. It is a kind of throwback to the heavenly damsels of Mei Lanfang and the Neoplatonic youths of Renaissance painting. But it has a more direct ancestor in the twentieth-century circus and the performances of Barbette.

The Texan Vander Clyde made his debut as one of the Alfareta Sisters, aerial queens on the Orpheum Circuit.²¹ Developing a solo act as Barbette, an exercise in mystification, he became a headliner at the Paris Alhambra and the London Olympia, the darling of the glitterati. Following tried-and-true revue custom, he would make his appearance spotlit in a darkened arena, slowly descending a huge staircase, daintily discarding the fifty pounds of ostrich feathers covering him one



Figure 99 Wilson Jermaine Heredia as Angel and Jesse L. Martin as her boyfriend in the New York Theatre Workshop production of *Rent* by Jonathan Larson. Photo: Joan Marcus. Courtesy New York Theatre Workshop.

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Figure 100 Barbette, bedecked in the traditional ostrich plumes and spangles. Photo: Roger-Viollet, Paris.

by one in 'a sort of floating strip-tease' until he stood isolated in the arena, beautifully naked except for diamonds on his breasts and behind. Sometimes he would precede his trapeze routine with a little strip-tease, removing his elaborate headdress and skirts and evoking wolf-whistles. After a pause, Barbette would perform a few elementary stunts on a tightrope, then scamper cat-like up to the roof to swing on a trapeze, above the spellbound gaze of the silent audience. In true circus tradition there would be a few neatly timed mishaps, miraculous 'saves' at the last second, one by her ankle when her hands would miss the bar and she seemed doomed. This would be met by screams, followed by loud applause as she swung upside-down with fluttering curls, looking helpless and cuddly. After she slid exhausted to the ground in the appropriately named *chute d'ange*, accompanied by persistent applause and the music from *Schéhérazade*, she would be carried to a divan before stepping back into the arena for an endless series of bows. Finally she whipped off her wig to reveal her virile baldness. The applause was cut off as by a knife. Most of the audience, either not in the know or forgetting the truth under the spell of the act, experienced a vague feeling that something 'not quite nice' had taken place.²²

A master of technique, Barbette had such muscular control that in mid-air he could curl up and then stretch out with a bell-like laugh; his poses evoked comparisons with Nijinsky and Isadora

Duncan. Inebriated by the combination of 'masculine' muscles moving like levers beneath the fragile face and golden curls, writers fetched their similes from afar: Judith Erèbe's 'a da Vinci angel restored by Van Dongen', Janet Flanner's 'a new Phaeton deserting the sky', Velona Pilcher's 'Orion straddling the heavens!', Cocteau's 'Apollo of the bandage-makers'. Barquette embodied Cocteau's fondest aesthetic principles: an embodiment of perfect craftsmanship and the transcendence of categories: 'He pleases those who see the woman in him, those who divine the man in him, and others whose soul is stirred by the supernatural sex of beauty.'²³

Other-worldly goods

'The supernatural sex of beauty' was projected by Barquette's unearthly physical skills. In drama, where such recourse is unavailable, the elevation of the gay male transvestite to a heavenly sphere may be a natural sequel to earlier enactments of his martyrdom. Cross-dressing homosexuals from Lanford Wilson's *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964) to the film *Some of My Best Friends Are . . .* (1971) were invariably miserable, self-lacerating and prey to gaybashing. Even the most scintillating wits were stripped of their finery at some climactic moment to reveal a despondent vacuity. Drag was portrayed as a pitiful and ultimately degrading charade. No clear distinction was made between psychological dysfunction and social oppression.

Two plays from Australia demonstrate most clearly the theatrical elevation of drag queen as pathetic victim to drag queen as sublime sage. Stephen J. Spears' monodrama *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* had its première at the Nimrod Theatre Downstairs in Sydney in 1976. A vehicle for a virtuoso actor, it concerns Robert O'Brien, an elocution teacher in Melbourne, a lapsed Catholic who is both a homosexual and a transvestite. In the philistine *faubourg* of Toorak, this outsider 'pervert' represents the last bastion of high culture; in his home-school called 'Shakespeare Speech and Drama', he explains to his students the religious origins of the theatre. But, a true cultural omnivore, he also appreciates the Skyhooks and Mick Jagger (to whose poster he masturbates). O'Brien's profession is suggestive of cultural slippage: he teaches social climbers to lose their suburban vowels and attain posher speech patterns. Owing to a contretemps involving his favourite student, a troubled youth named Benjamin Franklin, his house is stoned by his neighbours, then attacked by police and, in drag, he responds with a shotgun blast. The last act takes place eight years later in a psychiatric ward, where the heavily sedated hero, unable to enunciate, tries to piece together his ruined life. He has entered local mythology as the Transvestite Terror of Toorak, and as he drifts into Mandrax-induced hebetude and possibly death, a radio chat-show broadcasts the ongoing prejudices and hatreds of his fellow-Australians.

Owing in part to the splendid performance by Gordon Chater, the play, based on an actual case, toured all over Australia (except in censor-blighted Queensland), London, San Francisco and New York where it won three Obies. Although its success accompanied a growing number of depictions of gay life on stage, in Australia at least it was regarded as a defiant fillip to the authorities.²⁴ The use of *Elocution* as a political challenge is seen in its first publication, not as a separate playtext, but in a collection that included interviews with transvestites, both performers and private individuals, and an essay on transvestism and the law.²⁵ But while the play established the drag queen as an oppressed minority, it also depicted him as a somewhat futile and ludicrous human being.

In 1992, Michael Gurr's *Sex Diary of an Infidel* went beyond law reform to indict Australian society's ingrown racism. The milieu and the target of Spears' play had been insular: the Australian mentality was rebuked for its suburban small-mindedness, and in that respect *Elocution* had a lot in

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common with Edna Everage's lethal caricatures. Gurr's play ranges along the Pacific rim, from Melbourne to Manila, as it tracks the exploitation of the Third World by sexual tourists and journalists from the West. The corruption, blackmail and emotional manipulation of personal relationships are revealed to be part and parcel of an imperialist Orientalism: in this respect, the play bears some resemblance to Hwang's *M. Butterfly* but is less hysterical and more politically engaged than the American melodrama. In a small but varied cast, the character who draws the greatest attention is Toni, a Filipino transsexual prostitute presented neither as comic relief nor as helpless victim despite the fact that he serves as a symbol for a native people violated by foreigners. His fluctuating sexual relationship with Martin, an Australian photographer and boy-friend of a female reporter, stands for the ambiguity of East/West desire. A seeming equality which develops within the sexual sphere dissolves, however, when Martin returns home to exhibit his photographs while Toni stays put as a member of a despised minority. At a crucial moment, Toni rejects the gender reassignment surgery he had been planning in order to join the New People's Army and demonstrate against Western exploitation. For all the *loucheness* of Toni's milieu, he comes across as the most honest, self-respecting and morally integral of the *dramatis personae*. Gurr's play obviously has its overwrought moments, but much of its impact derives from the location of its moral centre in a cross-dressing male hustler.²⁶

Unlike Song Liling, the transvestite Asian of *M. Butterfly* and the passive target of colonialist lust, Toni abrogates the colonizer's illicit desire. His effeminacy and his 'androgynous silk' clothing conspire to present the well-worn image of the effeminate East, but meanwhile the usual gender binaries are challenged. The list of Toni's sexual services confuses categories of homosexual and heterosexual, and he cannot even be classified as 'cross-dresser' because he professes no stable sartorial norm to be transgressed. He does suffer his instant of martyrdom when, as he undergoes intensified awareness of his penis and hormone-enhanced breasts, his face is seared by the Molotov cocktail he hurls at some Americans. But this constitutes a Genetesque moment of transcendence from prostitute to revolutionary, couched in quasi-religious terms. The Melbourne Playbox revival of 1993 brought out this element by hanging an oversized mobile of Piero della Francesca's seraphs from the ceiling above the stage.²⁷ Toni ends up not as a lamentable, disabled occupant of a hospital bed but as a militant angel, St Michael skewering the dragon of whatever oppresses him.

This change in the theatrical uses of cross-dressing suggests that, as the lines become effaced between the mainstream and the marginal, the cross-dressed actor has to break through to yet another dimension. To maintain the position of privileged outsider, performers are reclaiming their primeval status as shaman without abandoning the concomitant role of prostitute. Having sex with mortals is a practice of fallen angels. From such intercourse mortals can achieve an intimation of divinity. And this peculiar traffic with its mingling of carnality and sanctity will continue to take place in the changing room that is the stage so long as the theatre acknowledges the essential queerness of its nature.

Notes

- 1 B. LaBruce, *The Reluctant Pornographer*, Toronto, Gutter Press, 1997, p. 169.
- 2 *After Dark*, August 1974, p. 53.
- 3 E. Munk, 'Cross left', *Village Voice*, 5 February 1985, p. 91. See also J. M. Clum, *Acting Gay. Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, which applies the same criticism to *Torch Song Trilogy*; H. Tiresias, 'On queens, dreams, gays, Garp, and being different', *TV-Ts Tapestry*, 1984, vol. 2, p. 30.

- 4 D. Watt, 'A très gai "Cage aux folles"', *New York Daily News*, 22 August 1983, p. 37. Barry, TV's Bat Masterson, consulted his wife and three children before he agreed to take the role of Georges.
- 5 L. Bennetts, 'How stars of "La Cage" grew into their roles', *New York Times*, 24 August 1983; R. Reif, 'Acting like a lady', *TV-Ts Tapestry*, 1984, no.44, pp. 65-6, reprinted from *Playbill*; C. Barnes, 'Fun-filled "La Cage" lives up to its fanfare', *New York Post*, 22 August 1983, pp. 21, 24.
- 6 Watt, *op. cit.*
- 7 J. Fabbri and André Sallée (eds), *Clowns & farceurs*, Paris, Bordas, 1982, p. 69.
- 8 B. Hagerty, 'What's a nice boy like you doing in a show like this?', *Sunday*, 27 April 1986. Quilley made quite a career out of impersonating queens, since he created the role of Terri Dennis in *Privates on Parade*.
- 9 N. Kolpas, 'San Francisco in the spotlight', *Bon Appétit*, March 1999, p. 63. Lucky Cheng's gained special notoriety when it appeared on the television show *People's Court* to sue La Maison de Sade for pirating its trademark chocolate high-heeled shoes. B. Harden, 'The night people's court', *New York Times*, 11 March 1999, p. A24.
- 10 D. Stevenson, 'Paris, too, has its outlaw parties', *Taxi*, July 1987, p. 6; I. Phillips, 'Drag queens serve a helping of gay Paris', *European Magazine*, 31 March-6 April 1995, p. 21.
- 11 T. Gross, "'She is an abomination. Even in Sodom there was nothing like it'", *London Evening Standard*, 21 April 1998, p. 23; A. Boshoff, 'Sex-change singer hopes to sway Eurovision voters', *London Daily Telegraph*, 22 April 1998, p. 3; O. Gozani, 'Israel's song win "defeats bigotry"', *London Daily Telegraph*, 11 May 1998, p. 3; D. Sharrock, 'Dana: culture war heroine', *Guardian*, 11 May 1998, p. 3; P. Burston, 'The boy done good', *Time Out*, 1-8 July 1998, pp. 16-18.
- 12 Quoted in *Persona*. Photographs by Susan Brown, interviews by Steven Reinberg, New York, Rizzoli, 1997, p. 52.
- 13 J. Tinker, 'More shows like this? We're ready, Eddie', *London Daily Mail*, 5 February 1993, p. 5; J. Sims, 'Basque country', *MS London*, 3 May 1994, p. 5; C. Spencer, 'The comedian who came out of the wardrobe', *London Evening Standard*, 18 May 1993, p. 14.
- 14 B. Ivry, 'Transvestites aren't funny any more', *European*, 29 July-1 August 1993.
- 15 M. Hay, 'Identity is a major issue for Alan', *Time Out*, 12-19 June 1996, p. 5.
- 16 Quoted in M. Simpson, *It's a Queer World*, London, Vintage, 1996, p. 251.
- 17 C. Spencer, 'Hollywood star's camp role makes the evening drag', *London Daily Telegraph*, 28 October 1997, p. 12; N. de Jongh, 'Everett drags up an appealing performance', *London Evening Standard*, 28 October 1997, p. 10; J. Kingston, 'Nothing like a dame', *The Times* (London), 29 October 1997. Everett, quoted in D. Ehrenstein, *Open Secret. Gay Hollywood 1928-1998*, New York, William Morrow, 1998, pp. 335-6.
- 18 Quoted in J. Fleischer, *The Drag Queens of New York. An Illustrated Field Guide*, New York, Riverhead Boosk, 1996, p. 70.
- 19 Simpson, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-6. See also S. Umland, 'Sexual freaks and stereotypes in recent science fiction and fantasy films: loathing begets androgyny', in D. Palumbo, *Eros in the Mind's Eye. Sexuality and the Fantastic in Art and Film*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. 225-36; W. Safire, 'Android's revenge', *New York Times Magazine*, 15 January 1989. Meanwhile gay superheroes, depicted with typical angelic attributes, are appearing in the online comic book *Queer Nation*; see 'Cyber scene', *InNewsweekly*, 24 February 1999, p. 46.
- 20 Typically, interviewers regularly insisted on the heterosexuality of the actor playing Angel. See e.g. M. Owen, 'An Angel in high heels', *London Evening Standard*, 27 March 1998, p. 30.
- 21 F. Steegmuller, 'A visit to Barbettes' (1966), in J. Cocteau, *Le numéro Barbettes* (first published 1926), Paris, Jacques Damase, 1980, p. 64. In fact, it was common circus practice for adolescent boys to be dressed as girls to make wire and trapeze acts more impressive; see M. Z. Bradley's novel of

- homosexual circus life *The Catch Trap* (1949), which relates the love affair of the Flying Santellis, two male trapeze artists in the American circus world of the 1940s.
- 22 H. Daley, *This Small Cloud. A Personal Memoir*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986, p. 97.
- 23 V. Pilcher, 'A star turn', *Theatre Arts Monthly*, December 1930, p. 1035. See also Steegmuller, op. cit.; R. Bizet, *L'Epoque du music-hall*, Paris, Editions du Capitole, 1927, pp. 129–32; and J. Flanner (Genêt), *Paris Was Yesterday 1925–1939*, ed. I. Drutman, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1979, p. 73; 'In memoriam', *Drag*, 1973, vol. 3, p. 45; C. Clausen, *I Love You Honey, but the Season's Over*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961, pp. 10–11, 25–7, 90–1, 112–14. As the result of a crippling bone affliction, Vander Clyde gave up performing in 1938 and became a highly respected trainer in the American circus; he still dressed androgynously in full-length suede coats, silk gabardine slacks and printed silk ascots. He committed suicide in 1973; his suicide note, regretting the loss of audience affection, is printed in P. Newley's obituary, *Call Boy*, Summer 1994.
- 24 J. West and K. Brisbane in P. Parsons (ed.), *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Sydney, Currency Press, 1995, pp. 133–4, 202–3; L. Senelick, 'The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin,' *Theatre Journal*, October 1979, pp. 409–10.
- 25 *Drag Show, featuring Peter Kenna's Mates and Steve J. Spears' The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin*, Woolhara, Currency Press, 1977, pp. 78–119.
- 26 M. Gurr, *Sex Diary of an Infidel*, Sydney, Currency Press, 1992. It opened at the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne and resembled *Elocution* in receiving a warm welcome from the critics there; it won five out of eight drama categories in the 1992 Green Room Awards, including Best New Australian play
- 27 See H. Gilbert, 'Occidental (sex) tourists: Michael Gurr's *Sex Diary of an Infidel*', and M. Mawson, 'Michael Gurr, *Sex Diary of an Infidel*', in *Australasian Drama Studies*, October 1994, no. 25, pp. 177–87, 196–8.