



Maud Allan playing the title role in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (ca 1906-1910).

## Allan, Maud (1873-1956)

by Linda Rapp

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In the early years of the twentieth century Maud Allan achieved worldwide renown as the "Salome Dancer" for her stunning performances of the best-known piece in her repertoire, *The Vision of Salome*. She is also remembered for a lawsuit that she brought against a newspaper publisher for alleging that she was a lesbian. Although it was Allan who charged libel, in court her opponent tried to put both her and Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* on trial.

### Early Life and Education

Born Beulah Maud Durrant in 1873 in Toronto, Allan was the daughter of William Allan Durrant, a shoemaker, and Isa (also known as Isabella) Matilda Hutchinson Durrant. Three years later William Durrant moved to San Francisco, where he bounced from job to job, mainly in the shoe manufacturing industry. In 1879 Isabella Durrant followed with their two children, Maud and her brother William Henry Theodore (usually known as Theo).

As a youngster Allan excelled at arts and crafts--carving, clay modeling, sketching and sewing. She also showed talent for music and studied to be a concert pianist. It may be that the dream of a career for Allan on the concert stage was at least as much her mother's as her own, but the young woman showed sufficient promise that her teacher, Eugene Bonelli of the San Francisco Grand Academy of Music, advised her to go to Germany to complete her musical studies.

In February 1895 Allan set off for Berlin, where she was admitted to the Hochschule für Musik. Hardly had she begun her studies, however, when she received the shocking news that her brother had been arrested for murder.

In April the bodies of two young women were discovered in San Francisco's Emmanuel Baptist Church, where Theo Durrant was the assistant Sunday School superintendent. The grisly murders, which were compared to the crimes of Jack the Ripper, received sensational and sometimes speculative coverage in the California press. Over 3,600 potential jurors needed to be examined before twelve could be chosen to hear the case.

On November 1, the jury found Durrant guilty of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to be put to death on February 21, 1896, but appeals of the case caused the execution to be put off three times. Durrant was finally hanged for murder on January 7, 1898.

Throughout this entire period Maud Allan, at her brother's request, remained in Europe. The siblings, who had always been extremely close, kept in frequent contact by letter. Allan held out hope for a reprieve until the very end, and she never stopped asserting her belief in her brother's innocence.

With little money coming from her family in America, Allan needed to work while pursuing her studies. She sometimes gave English lessons but earned little in this way. She had greater success when she joined with

several other people in a corset-making business. (Allan designed, sewed and even modeled the product.) On one occasion she put her drawing skills to use, illustrating a sex manual for women, *Illustriertes Konversations-Lexikon der Frau* (1900).

### **Dancing Career**

Although Allan continued her piano studies as her mother wished, she had become intrigued with the idea of "dancing as an art of poetical and musical expression." A pivotal point in her career came when she met Belgian musician and critic Marcel Rémy, who encouraged her to explore and develop her thoughts on dance and who wrote the music for *The Vision of Salome*, the performance piece for which Allan would become famous.

Allan would always emphasize that she had never taken a dancing lesson and insist that her style of dancing was entirely her own creation. What rankled her especially was to be compared to Isadora Duncan, whom she strongly disliked. While Allan's claims were overstated, she did show great imagination and creativity. These, combined with her unconventional costumes (which she designed and sometimes sewed herself), lent originality to her art. Her musicality and natural grace allowed her to suit her movements to music most effectively. As one reviewer put it, "she simply alchemized a piece of music for you."

Although Allan's repertoire consisted of a wide variety of pieces including Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, Schubert's *Ave Maria*, and Chopin's *Marche funèbre*, it was Rémy's *The Vision of Salome* that made her reputation and earned her the nickname "the Salome Dancer." Her interpretation of the piece was all the more powerful because Rémy had caused her to associate the execution of John the Baptist with that of her own brother, thus evoking an especially passionate performance of this work.

In 1908 Allan went to London and took the city by storm, giving more than 250 performances that year. As a result of her fame, she received the patronage of members of royalty, as well as Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and his wife Margot. Allan developed a close friendship with Margot Asquith, who for many years paid the rent for Allan's luxurious living quarters in the west wing of Holford House, a villa overlooking Regent's Park.

In 1910 Allan left Europe and toured extensively for several years, performing in America, Africa, Asia, and Australia. In 1915 she went to California to spend time with her parents. During that sojourn she played the title role in a silent film called *The Rugmaker's Daughter*. It featured excerpts of three of her dances, including *The Vision of Salome*. No copies of this film are known to survive.

### **"The Cult of the Clitoris" Libel Case**

In 1916 Allan returned to England in hopes of reviving her faltering career. In 1918 she became involved in a bizarre court case in connection with her performance in a production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. The case was a tangled thicket of personal and political animosity, as well as homophobia, anti-Semitism, and war-time hysteria.

Allan sued for libel against an Independent Member of Parliament, Noel Pemberton Billing. In addition to his political career he ran a newspaper called the *Imperialist*, later renamed the *Vigilante*, which he used to promulgate his views that Germany was a thoroughly degenerate country owing to the power of Jews and homosexuals there and that German agents were attempting to weaken the moral fabric of Britain by luring its citizens into vice.

In the January 26, 1918 issue of the *Imperialist*, Billing claimed that the Germans had a "Black Book" containing the names of 47,000 British men and women who were vulnerable to blackmail or had betrayed state secrets because of their "sexual peculiarities." His source for this claim was Captain Harold Spencer, who had been invalidated out of the British Army and British Secret Service for "delusional insanity."

Billing invited a lawsuit from Allan by printing an item in the February 16, 1918 issue of the *Vigilante* headlined "The Cult of the Clitoris." In the brief article he suggested that subscribers to Allan's upcoming private performance of Wilde's *Salome* were likely to be among the 47,000 listed in the "Black Book."

The use of the word *clitoris* was a calculated one by Billing and Spencer. The latter testified that, in the course of searching for a headline "that would only be understood by those whom it should be understood by," he had elicited the word from a village doctor, who had informed him that the clitoris was an "organ that, when unduly excited . . . possessed the most dreadful influence on any woman...." Allan's acknowledgment of knowing the word was presented as evidence of sexual perversion.

Billing further used innuendo by introducing the fact that Allan was the sister of a convicted murderer. His argument was that murder showed evidence of sadism (defined, in the testimony of Spencer, as "the lust for dead bodies"), which Billing alleged was hereditary. He discussed various perversions that he claimed to find in Wilde's *Salome*, implying that a performer willing to depict these might well practice them herself. He also tried to insinuate that Allan had an unusually close friendship with Margot Asquith.

Another witness, Eileen Villiers-Stuart, who claimed to have seen the "Black Book," testified that the names of both Herbert and Margot Asquith were in it (along with that of Charles Darling, the judge presiding in the case).

On the final day of the trial, Billing suddenly claimed that he had never suggested that Allan was a lesbian, only that "she was pandering to those who practised unnatural vice by [her] performance."

Following long and rather confusing instructions from the judge, the jury deliberated for less than an hour and a half before returning a verdict in Billing's favor.

### **Later Years**

After the trial Allan resumed her career, but her popularity soon waned.

For at least ten years, from the late 1920s to 1938, Allan shared the west wing of Holford House with Verna Aldrich, her secretary who became her lover.

Allan lived out her final years in California. A film loosely based on her life, *Salome, Where She Danced*, was directed by Charles Lamont and produced by Walter Wanger in 1951.

Allan died October 7, 1956 at the age of eighty-four.

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