



Cabarets and Revues

by Bud Coleman

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Homosexuals have been attracted to cabarets, nightclubs, and coffeehouse performances throughout modern history, even when the acts presented may seem resolutely heterosexual. This may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that theatrical presentations do not contain a fixed set of signs allowing for only one interpretation.

Even though many revues, nightclub acts, and cabaret performances were not created or performed by homosexuals, gay patrons have often found in them a preferable alternative to the "legitimate" theater. Historically, cabarets and revues have been much more likely to mention (or imply) same-sex desire than the "legitimate" theater; perhaps, more importantly, same-sex desire has been less frequently condemned or criticized in cabarets and revues than in most mainstream plays.

In the public mind, homosexuality is often linked with bohemian artistic and theatrical circles. While there is nothing inherently queer about the performative, it is plausible that cabaret and other theatrical entertainments appeal to gay men and lesbians because most of them have been performing much of their lives: convincing people that they are "straight." Having a keen appreciation for performance as a form, many homosexuals have at various times in modern history found a supportive atmosphere in the many theaters, pubs, and cafés located in most major cities.

Variety Shows, Music Hall Entertainment, and Dance Halls

Early in the nineteenth century, many British taverns had a "music room" adjacent to the bar in which entertainment was performed. These variety shows presented singers, dancers, and comedians. In 1850, these entertainment lounges were separated from taverns to appeal to more middle-class, family audiences.

Despite the move, British music hall entertainment still had much to offer non-heterosexual patrons, for it often featured a "best boy" (a woman in a breeches role) and the "dame" (played by a man in drag). The fact that men were playing men, women playing women, men playing women, and women playing men on the same stage allowed for numerous double entendres, comic misconceptions, and sexual layerings.

These same conventions were employed in British pantomime, which began in the 1870s and continues to this day in the form of the English Christmas pantomime.

While the famous dance halls of Paris--such as the Folies Bergères (est. 1869) and the Moulin Rouge (est. 1889)--might seem wholly dedicated to heterosexual titillation, most of the Montmartre halls did their part to expand the sexual continuum. Nude show-girls did not appear until 1910, but female impersonators had been part of the bill since the beginning.



Performer Kaye Ballard (above) was banned from one New York club in the early 1960s because she attracted a large gay following. Portrait by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

One of the most famous was Barbette (Vander Clyde, 1904-1973), an American acrobat who wowed audiences in the 1920s and 1930s as the "jazz-age Botticelli."

American Minstrel Shows

American theatrical sites of same-sex desire in the nineteenth century were also played out in unlikely quarters: minstrel shows. As minstrelsy evolved from a solo act to an evening-length work in the early 1840s, the all-male Caucasian cast members not only performed caricatures of African-Americans, some of the men also played female roles. When actresses joined minstrelsy troupes in the 1890s, they were often called upon to play male roles.

Unlike European revues, American minstrelsy added the topic of race and racialized desire to the performance of gender. While it is true that many of the race and gender illusionists of these various British, French, and American entertainments resorted to the most demeaning and freakish of portrayals, it is also true that these performances not only put same-sexed bodies in romantic situations, but they also occasionally pointed up the cultural construction of gender and race.

Revue

Given the loose structure of a revue, it is much easier (than in a book musical) to insert a same-sex allusion, or even a homosexual character, because such allusions or characters do not have to contribute to the development of an evening-long plot.

For example, Noël Coward's revue *Words and Music* (1932) contained the song "Mad about the Boy," in which a cockney woman, a schoolgirl, a prostitute, and a society lady sing about a handsome male movie star. For the New York production of this revue, Coward added a stanza sung by a businessman describing how he had "vexing dreams" about the boy in question.

In the 1920s and 1930s, queer allusions became a staple of the revues in New York and London. Critic Percy Hammond noted that *The Ritz Revue* (1924) contained so "many references . . . to topics so disorderly that one suspects Kraft-Ebbings [sic] to be hidden among the librettists."

In the West End, *The Gate Revue* (1939) featured the song "All Smart Women Must"--sung by two effeminate men and one lesbian--which warned women that "fairy" fashion designers conspired to make women unattractive to men.

In 1958, an official from the Lord Chamberlain's Office was sent to reassess a drag revue, *We're No Ladies*, appearing in a small London theater. While the script had received a license, the officer found that the audience was "familiar with the phraseology of the perverted," and he suggested closing the show as the venue was likely to become a "focal point for pederasts."

Similarly, due to the oppressive tactics of the police and citizen groups such as the Society for Suppression of Vice, theatrical presentations that ventured into same-sex desire in New York City were routinely closed during the period from 1870 to 1940.

Drag Revues

The most successful gay-themed revues, those which managed to avoid legal entanglements and were financially lucrative, were those featuring drag and theoretically aimed at a heterosexual audience. Notable examples include Finocchio's nightclub, the Jewel Box Revue, and military shows.

Located on Lower Broadway, the West 42nd Street of San Francisco, Finocchio's opened in 1936 with a performing company of sixteen. Run by Marjorie and Joseph Finocchio, it remained a family-owned business

for sixty-three years, until rising rents forced its closure in 1999. Headliners included twenty-seven year veteran Lucian Phelps (a Sophie Tucker expert), drag legend Rae Bourbon, and Don McLean (also known as Lori Shannon), the 6'6" comic who played Archie Bunker's drag queen friend on *All in the Family*.

Other famous clubs featuring drag revues include the Queen Mary in Los Angeles, San Francisco's Black Cat Café (where José Sarria performed camp operas for over forty years, beginning in 1958), New Orleans' My Oh My Club, Miami's Gayla, Seattle's Garden of Allah, Minneapolis' Paradise Club, Hollywood's Garden of Eden, and New York City's Moroccan Village and Club 82 (open until 1978).

The Jewel Box Revue was not only the longest-running gay touring entertainment company (performing continually in the United States, Mexico, and Canada from 1942 to 1975), it also was one of the few racially integrated entertainments in the 1950s.

Begun in 1939 in a Miami gay bar (the Jewel Box), the revue, fashioned by lovers Danny Brown and Doc Benner, was an elaborate entertainment with comic sketches, musical numbers, lavish production numbers, fabulous costumes, but absolutely no lip sync. Eventually playing heterosexual nightclubs, the revue--featuring "Twenty-five Men and a Girl," as it billed itself -- introduced many patrons to female impersonation (both comic and serious) for over thirty years.

Another genre of the drag revue that escaped police harassment was the cross-dressing entertainments common in British and American military units. So popular were they during World War II that they moved to legitimate theaters and they also continued to play for ten years after the end of the war.

Although it can be argued that these revues, with names such as *Misleading Ladies*, *Boys Will Be Girls*, *Forces in Petticoats*, and *Soldiers in Skirts*, were not wholly affirming of same-sex desire, they were nevertheless a far cry from "don't ask, don't tell."

Without the elaborate sets and costumes that were the hallmark of The Jewel Box Revue, British Music Hall, Parisian girlie shows, and Broadway revues, intimate revues in bars and clubs often slipped around decency laws since they lacked the visibility of their more opulent sisters.

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that New York (and many other states) had laws that prohibited homosexuals from congregating in licensed public establishments, which meant that nightspots often paid off the police to remain safe spaces for their gay clientele. In many municipalities these laws were on the books until the 1970s.

Cabarets and Nightclubs

In the 1880s, cabarets that featured solo performers or small revues began to appear in Paris, and by 1900 in Berlin. A showcase for emerging artists, these revues frequently were critical of political and social repression, resulting in a satirical style immortalized in Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories* (which were the source material for the 1966 Kander-Ebb musical *Cabaret*).

Early in the twentieth century, cabarets began to open in New York's Bowery, Greenwich Village, and Harlem districts. Typically, the audience was gayer than the material presented on stage. Historian George Chauncey cites a report in 1920 that "most of the patrons paid more attention to the action of the fairies [in the audience] than to the cabaret performance" on stage at the Hotel Koenig (East Fourth Street near First Avenue).

Prohibition (1920-1933) radically transformed nightclubs and cabarets, as club owners sought out ever more outlandish acts in order to draw in patrons to their now alcohol-less environments. Beginning in Greenwich Village as gay-oriented entertainment for a gay audience, "pansy shows" moved to Times Square nightspots, attracting heterosexual tourists and locals intrigued with homosexual exotica.

While some of the entertainers were gay, others were straight and performed the gender equivalent of blackface, coarsely broadening what they perceived to be the low camp and effeminacy that epitomized the gay male.

Nightspots in Harlem between the wars were a vital component of the Harlem Renaissance as African-American writers and performers energized each other while exploring the possibilities of being black in America. These journeys were often led by lesbians, gay men, and bisexual performers such as Phil Black, Mabel Hampton, George Hanna, Alberta Hunter, Bessie Jackson, Frankie "Half Pint" Jaxon, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Bessie Smith, and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey.

Among the most famous lesbian entertainers to emerge was Gladys Bentley, a large, masculine, dark-skinned woman who performed in a white tuxedo and top hat at Harlem's Clam House and Edmond's Cellar.

White patrons not only "slummed" in Harlem clubs to experience hot jazz, impassioned singing, and sensuous dancing, but also to participate in interracial drag costume balls at the Savoy Ballroom and the Manhattan Casino.

Gay-themed entertainment also found a supportive home in speakeasies, the private clubs that appeared during Prohibition, quasi-legal places where alcohol could be served because they were ostensibly membership-only establishments. Undoubtedly, the transgressive aura of homosexuality was seen as an acceptable element in the netherworld in which speakeasies operated.

Small Bars and Intimate Cabarets

With the repeal of Prohibition and the influx of military personnel to large urban areas during World War II, an enormous number of small bars and cabarets sprang up. The standard bill of fare in a bar or nightclub that provided live entertainment was the female singer. Accompanied by a single piano player or small combo, her material might be all comic, all cry-in-your-beer ballads, or a mixture of the two.

From chic nightclubs to the rankest coffeehouse, the intimate cabaret (fewer than 100 seats), also permitted a wide class range to attend, since admission was often covered by the price of a single drink. Famous New York nightspots that attracted gay customers included the Blue Angel (1943-1964) and the Mafia-owned Bon Soir at 40 West Eighth Street, which ruled New York City's cabaret circuit from 1949 to 1967.

While female impressionists Lynne Carter, T.C. (Thomas Craig) Jones, and Charles Pierce were staples on the cabaret circuit during the 1950s and 1960s, many American cities had ordinances against cross dressing, which obviously directly impacted the inclusion of travesti in revues and cabaret acts.

Thus, openly gay performers who performed flagrantly (or even veiled) gay material were often censored by nervous cabaret owners or through police intervention. Instead of hiring outrageous performers such as Gladys Bentley, post-World War II clubs most often featured a glamorous chanteuse whose set consisted of standards from the golden age of movie musicals.

The absence of gay performers or gay material did not mean that gay audiences abandoned nightclubs, however. Indeed, several performers were particularly known for attracting gay audiences despite the absence of overtly gay material. As the maître d' at New York City's Upstairs at the Downstairs, and Downstairs at the Upstairs told author James Gavin, "I mean, who could have a gayer following than Mabel Mercer? Every old queen with four days to live came to see her."

When Ben Bagley arrived at the same club in 1962, he was told he had free rein to create the types of revues he wanted, with the exception of hiring Kaye Ballard, since according to owner Irving Haber, "she

brings in the fags."

The 1960s

With increasing competition from television, and uncertain how to incorporate the new sexual frankness of the 1960s, many clubs that featured live entertainment began to close. Two women who appeared in the 1960s extended the life of cabaret, not only as a result of their extraordinary talent, but also because of the support of their gay fans.

When Barbra Streisand made her cabaret debut in 1961, the nineteen-year-old performer dealt a death knell to the icy café chanteuse. From 1961 to 1963 she alternated between New York City's Bon Soir and Blue Angel, Chicago's Mister Kelly's, and San Francisco's hungry i.

Bette Midler played at the Downstairs in 1967, and then, in a pathbreaking move that cemented her fame to a gay following, Midler and Barry Manilow played the Continental Baths in 1971.

With eclectic repertoires and undeniably rich voices, these unique women--the "S&M of Cabaret"--revitalized the nightclub act by discarding Hollywood/Vegas glamor for thrift-store clothes. Neither performer was classically beautiful and both were Jewish (Midler channeled her Jewishness via Hawaii and Streisand via Brooklyn), with a brazenchutzpah that found support from gay patrons looking for their own liberation in the midst of the 1960s sexual revolution.

Midler was perhaps the first mainstream performer not only to embrace her gay audience, but also consciously to tailor her act for them. As she told *Newsweek* in 1973, "I was playing to people who are always on the outside looking in."

Post-Stonewall Entertainments

Despite their popularity, the "S&M of Cabaret" could not save the genre. James Gavin estimates that in New York City between 1972 and 1982 almost forty nightclubs and cabarets opened and closed. Arthur Bell of the *Village Voice* dubbed many of them to be part of "the K-Y Circuit," since they depended upon a predominantly gay clientele.

Post-Stonewall entertainments basically divided into three groups, the drag lip-sync revues that became popular in many gay bars, now augmented by drag king shows in some women's bars; comedy clubs; and the return of upscale cabarets.

While standup comedians have been around since minstrelsy and vaudeville, nightspots dedicated completely to standup are a recent occurrence. After Jose's Cabaret and Juice Joint inaugurated Gay Comedy Open Mike Nights in 1990 in San Francisco, other comedy clubs began to open their doors to gay comics.

Openly queer performers such as Rick Burd, Charles Busch, Kate Clinton, Sara Cytron, Frank DeCaro, Ellen DeGeneres, Lea Delaria, Maxine Feldman, Emmett Foster, Marga Gomez, Lisa Kron, Sabrina Matthews, Frank Maya, Steve Moore, Bob Smith, Robin Tyler, Suzanne Westenhoffer, and Karen Williams found humorous ways to incorporate their sexual identity into their acts.

The traditional nightclub refashioned itself in the 1980s and 1990s in elegant (and expensive) rooms such as Café Carlyle, which became a home to Bobby Short and Barbara Cook; joined by the Algonquin Club, the Rainbow Room, and Michael Feinstein's at the Regency, which all sought to return to the swank of legendary New York City nightclubs.

This trend was mirrored on the west coast, at San Francisco's Plush Room (York Hotel) and at Los Angeles'

Cinegrill (Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel) and Jazz Bakery.

Although frequented by a gay clientele, the content in these clubs is in many ways a return to the 1940s with an emphasis on female singers and revues featuring Broadway show tunes. With the rise of gay visibility in film, mainstream theater, television, and in print media, cabarets are no longer one of the few places in which homosexuals can safely meet outside of private homes.

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