



Variety and Vaudeville

by Gillian Rodger

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From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, a number of popular theatrical forms that included play on gender flourished in Britain, Europe, and the United States. The best known among these styles of theater, and the ones that flourished most in the United States, were minstrelsy, vaudeville (and its precursor, variety), and burlesque. All of these forms featured cross-dressed acts, as well as routines that challenged prevailing gender constructions.

In addition, certain performance specialties featured in some of these theatrical forms were known to attract homosexual performers. One of the difficulties in discussing sexual orientation in reference to performers of this period, however, is that the identity "homosexual" was relatively new and may well have been rejected by those whom we would now identify with this term.

On the other hand, there was a clear recognition by theater folks of this period that some performers were in same-sex or untraditional relationships. This recognition can be seen in snippets of gossip columns in theatrical newspapers that make oblique, usually snide, references to performers' private lives.

Many popular theater forms of the nineteenth century relied heavily on parody, stereotype, and novelty. Cross-gender casting was one way in which serious drama or opera could be parodied. In all-male minstrel companies, cross-dressing was a necessity if female characters were to be included. And in forms such as British pantomime, which relied heavily on illusion and transformation, certain roles were purposely cast cross-gender.

Minstrelsy, burlesque, vaudeville, and variety were highly complex theatrical forms and all contained social commentary in addition to parodies of gender and gender constructions, but these parodies were a significant part of their appeal.

Minstrelsy

Minstrelsy emerged in the Northeastern United States during the 1840s and flourished until almost the end of the century. After the Civil War minstrelsy began to face competition from other popular forms such as burlesque, variety, and musical comedy. As Robert Toll notes, in order to compete with these rival forms a new role emerged within the all-male minstrel company--that of the glamorous female impersonator.

Indeed, in the United States minstrelsy can properly be regarded as the origin of glamor drag, and a number of prominent female impersonators of the earlier twentieth century--Karyl Norman and Julian Eltinge, for example--began their careers in minstrelsy.



Top to bottom:
1) Minstrel performers Rollin Howard (in wench costume) and George Griffin (ca 1855).
2) An advertisement for "Ethiopian Comedian" Dick Parker's act, which included cross-dressing (1867).
3) Minstrel performer Francis Leon as his female persona.
4) Vaudeville sensation Julian Eltinge in costume (left) and in street clothes.

Probably the best known of the early minstrel female impersonators was Francis Leon. Leon billed himself as "The Great Leon" and was featured in burlesque operettas staged by the Leon and Kelly Minstrel Company. Leon, and his business partner Kelly, maintained their troupe for five years, leasing a theater in New York City. Toll notes that by 1882 Leon was the highest paid minstrel performer and one of the most praised.

There were a number of other very successful female impersonators active in minstrelsy in the period, and reviews note that they sang in a believably female range.

The "prima donna" or "wench" role was not the only female role available to male minstrel performers. There was also a comic female role, the "Funny Old Gal," which was often performed by a large actor dressed in old and mismatched clothes.

This role was not unlike the comic cross-dressed roles for men found in burlesque, and similar characters were also found in the Irish comedies of Harrigan and Hart in the 1880s and later. This comic role was essentially parodic and relied on low comedy; these characters could be used to make fun of old women, unattractive women, unmarried women, and women advocating suffrage.

Burlesque

Burlesque is now most often associated with seedy strip shows and low comedy, but in the mid-nineteenth century this theatrical form was associated primarily with parody of high culture through puns, word play, and nonsense.

Burlesque in the United States was transformed by the tour of Lydia Thompson's British Blondes in the late 1860s. This troupe continued to use the standard formulae of burlesque, but they infused the form with sex. The actresses in this predominantly female troupe dressed in scanty costumes that showed their legs to the audience.

Burlesque always included cross-dressed roles in keeping with the topsy-turvy world of this form. The "dame" role of burlesque was not unlike the "Funny Old Gal" role of minstrelsy, except that the costume was less ridiculous. Like the "Funny Old Gal," this role was also often played by a large actor who looked ridiculous in female attire.

One actor who won some fame in these roles was George Fortescue, who weighed well over 200 pounds. British pantomime also provided similar comic female roles for men dressed as women, for example, the three ugly sisters and stepmother in the story of Cinderella.

Burlesque and also pantomime provided women with opportunities to play a number of male roles. Known as the "principal boy" and "second boy" roles, these characters were usually gallant young men who were still innocent to the ways of the world. The actresses who played these roles dressed in short tunics or pants, but retained their feminine curves and exposed the full length of their legs. There was no attempt to be realistically masculine.

Burlesque as it was performed by Lydia Thompson's troupe met fierce opposition in the United States, particularly from moral reformers. The feminist actress Olive Logan was horrified by the form, feeling that burlesque performances degraded theater as a whole. She described burlesque actresses as nude women and likened the troupe managers to pimps.

The role that excited the most opposition was that of the principal boy. Critics were disturbed by watching a woman who was clearly identifiable as such striding, swearing, spitting, and otherwise acting like a man.

Female Minstrel Companies

During the 1880s burlesque and minstrelsy united in the form of female minstrel companies. This hybrid form consisted of a minstrel first part performed by the women of the troupe, sometimes in blackface, sometimes not. A series of variety acts followed in the olio, and the entertainment was concluded by a burlesque.

With the advent of female minstrelsy, the emphasis shifted even more towards sexual display. Companies featured dozens of female performers who provided the audience with a mass display of scantily-clad femininity. In most cases these women took non-speaking roles, performing in the "Amazon chorus" or as a corps de ballet for suggestive dances such as the Can Can.

Female minstrel companies were the forerunners of modern burlesque, with its heavy reliance on the female body and sexually suggestive performance.

Variety and Vaudeville

Variety first emerged in Northeastern cities of the United States in the 1850s in the form of formal and informal entertainment provided in bars. In its earliest days this entertainment consisted mostly of singers hired to entertain the patrons and to lead sing-alongs.

By 1860 it had grown quite elaborate, and large concert saloons provided stage re-enactments of current events, as well as a succession of singers, dancers, and comedians. Patrons were also plied with drinks by "pretty waiter girls" who were hired to serve alcohol.

Authorities, alarmed by the rising number of these establishments, began to enact laws designed to put concert saloons out of business. As a response to changes in the law, and to on-going harassment by the police, managers began to present what came to be known as variety in theaters rather than bars.

Variety was a theatrical form that could and did include almost any kind of act from performing animals to comedians to singers and dancers to one-act plays. It consisted of a series of acts unconnected by a narrative structure and concluded by a one-act play, usually a melodrama or burlesque.

It was considered the lowest class of popular forms, and individual acts rarely attracted much attention from the authorities or moral reformers unless they too obviously transgressed moral standards. Olive Logan considered variety to be a low and vile form of theater, but saw it as less of a threat to decency than burlesque because no one type of act dominated the stage.

A number of the kinds of acts featured on variety bills did challenge gender norms of the period, however. Female impersonators were present on the variety stage, although they were less common here than in minstrelsy or burlesque until the 1890s, when variety had come to be known as vaudeville.

Glamorous female impersonators appeared as solo acts, while the comic "Funny Old Gal" appeared in a number of variations. Comic depictions of women, often spinsters or widows, were common, as was the depiction of ethnic female types. The Russell Brothers, for example, performed a comedy routine as Irish cleaning women, and Harrigan and Hart performed an Irish act in which Tony Hart appeared as a woman.

A number of glamorous female impersonators won fame in vaudeville in the early twentieth century. Among these were Julian Eltinge, Bothwell Browne, Karyl Norman, and Barquette.

Barquette performed an acrobatic and wire walking act in female costume. It was not at all uncommon in the late nineteenth century for young male acrobats to perform dressed as girls--the audience was apparently more appreciative of feats of daring from young women. Barquette was widely known as homosexual, and such was reputed to be the case with many circus acrobats.

Julian Eltinge and Karyl Norman both began their careers in minstrelsy and later moved to vaudeville. Although their sexual orientations are not known, neither man was married.

In nineteenth-century variety there were also acts featuring women dressed in male costume. Sister acts featuring one sister dressed as a girl and the other as a boy were common into the twentieth century. Acts such as the Foy Sisters or the Richmond Sisters sang light sentimental songs in duet. This style of male impersonation was closest to that found in burlesque, with less emphasis on sex appeal and more on sentiment.

Variety also featured realistic male impersonators who sang in a believably male range. These were women who were masculine in appearance and dressed in the height of male fashion. They shared their repertoire and performance style with male performers. Among the most successful of these women were Annie Hindle, Ella Wesner, and Blanche Selwyn.

While these women had largely been forgotten by the end of the century, they were among the highest paid variety performers of the 1870s and 1880s, earning as much as \$200 a week. They depicted a wide range of masculinity in their acts and were extremely popular with all-male working-class audiences because their acts mercilessly parodied middle-class values, while glorying in the excesses of leisure--alcohol, women, and fine fashion.

By the beginning of the twentieth century this style of male impersonation had disappeared and male impersonators were more feminine in appearance and were generally sopranos.

Other kinds of acts in variety also challenged prevailing gender constructions. Among these were acts such as the "double-voiced vocalist." This style of act could be performed by either a man or a woman. The performer was often dressed in a costume that combined male and female clothing--one half male, one half female.

One performer active in the 1870s was Dora Dawron, who sang both soprano and baritone and turned the appropriate side to the audience as she sang. Karyl Norman also performed a double voiced act, alternating between male and female characters and changing costume between songs.

Female strongwomen were also featured on the stage and the audience delighted in watching women do the impossible--lifting weights and furniture and even people. Female multi-instrumentalists also challenged gender norms as young women played instruments usually reserved for men, such as trumpet and saxophone and banjo. Because variety relied heavily on novelty, women performing such unfeminine feats of strength and skill were often very popular.

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About the Author

Gillian Rodger, Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, completed her Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh with a dissertation entitled "Male Impersonation on the North American Variety and Vaudeville Stage, 1868-1939," which received the 1998 Philip Brett Award for exceptional work in the field of queer musicology. Her current work focuses on American popular music and musical theater from the mid-nineteenth century and on gender representation in contemporary popular music and music videos.