Daring Dames and Dirty Deeds: Chicago Burlesque, Drag, and Censorship Politics, 1850-1980

Lucas Andrew Bensley
Loyola University of Chicago Graduate School

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/4088
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

“DARING DAMES AND DIRTY DEEDS:”
CHICAGO BURLESQUE, DRAG, AND CENSORSHIP POLITICS,
1850-1980

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

LUCAS BENSLEY

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2024
Copyright by Lucas Bensley, 2024.
All rights reserved
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS OF BURLESQUE AND DRAG, 1850-1895 16

CHAPTER 2: SHIMMYING FORWARD: GROWTH AND CONTROVERSY IN DRAG AND BURLESQUE, 1895 - 1920 49

CHAPTER 3: CENTURY OF NUDITY: BURLESQUE AND DRAG IN JAZZ AGE CHICAGO, 1920 – 1934 90


CHAPTER 5: BUSINESS IS DRAGGING: DRAG’S BOOM AND GAY LIBERATION, 1934 - 1973 166

EPILOGUE 211

BIBLIOGRAPHY 232

VITA 244
INTRODUCTION

Since their origins within nineteenth-century vaudeville, American burlesque and drag artists have challenged, mocked, and skewed conventions of gender, sex and beauty to great applause and controversy. Performers of both art forms use satire and exaggeration in appearance and physicality to challenge social conventions and to surprise audiences in their time. Reactions, depending on the era, were a mix of curiosity, applause and moral repudiation by critics, lawmakers, and social activists. Though the principal methods of performance, programming, and aesthetics changed over time and became quite distinct between the two industries, drag and burlesque served and continues to serve a shared goal of bucking trends in gender and sensual performance for the sake of comedy and titillation. Their ability to provoke was evident as early as the mid-nineteenth century in the reactions of conservative critics who regarded such entertainment as immoral or inartistic. After a busy season of burlesque in New York in 1869, essayist William Dean Howell was unsparing of female burlesquers’ portrayals of male and female characters onstage. “Though they were not like men,” Howell explained, “they were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which was no charm, their grace which put to shame.”

The same would be said of drag performers, then known as female impersonators. Their impressions of famous ladies of the stage and fictional characters within vaudeville and, later, in

---

independent shows dedicated to drag received mixed and varied reception over the years. When Chicago drag and burlesque were seen strictly as means of entertainment and drawing business to the city, they were tolerated. As shows and performers became successful and harder to ignore in the public sphere, however, municipal authorities and members of the public attempted to censor, if not ban, productions and to arrest artists for violating statutes of “decency” onstage. All the while, young men and women would continue to turn to burlesque and drag as easy, entry-level sources of employment; as means of personal expression in exciting art forms on the frontier of permissibility in the American public; and to reinvent themselves in lives of their own design in the Windy City.

Burlesque provided an exaggerated parody of different cultural subjects, such as “higher culture,” drama, and social norms of respectable behavior. From the days in which burlesque was defined by chorus line dancing accompanying vaudeville humor to its contemporary fame for “plumed nudity” and strip tease, burlesque challenged norms and expectations of theater, Victorian modesty, stage movement, acting, and ideas of cultural decency. Burlesque acts were hosted in theaters and cabarets dedicated to other forms of entertainment like vaudeville. However, burlesque became an independent form of entertainment and genre with dedicated venues, performers, and producers. Specialized burlesque venues originated in the first decade of the twentieth century. While some became proper theater houses with enormous stages and marbled décor, others were similar to nineteenth-century concert saloons with smaller performance spaces, little separation from audiences, and a focus on alcohol sales rather than show quality. Regardless of venue, burlesque was not designed for family audiences from the very beginning. Burlesque productions consistently attracted audience attention and controversy by employing performance methods that placed heavy emphasis on the bodies of female
performers. The signature performances of burlesque during the nineteenth century included chorus line dancers in “leg shows,” belly dancing, and nude model artistry. After 1920, burlesque became synonymous with strip tease. While the musical stylings and skit comedy of vaudeville remained a part of burlesque, they ultimately played a supporting role to dances and skits that highlighted the bodies and movements of burlesque performers. In a nutshell, burlesque is a style of performance that challenges, distorts, and even inverts ingrained ideas and standards of art, gender, sexuality, and beauty, albeit with very different means of performance and presentation since its creation in the nineteenth century.

“Daring Dames” examines how burlesque evolved three ways: as an alternative form of entertainment, as a form of cultural production, and an issue of censorship in Chicago from 1850 to 1970. Previous historians have made several attempts to document the history of burlesque in the United States in multiple ways: as a performance akin to vaudeville and cabaret; as a source of mass leisure and culture in cities such as New York; and as an issue of Victorian era politics of censorship and gender. Historians and cultural critics have argued at varying lengths that burlesque artists and productions parodied other works of “higher” culture and standards of gender and behavior while evolving into a genre independent of its roots in vaudeville. Some, however, go as far as to assert that burlesque entered an artistic and popular decline upon separating from vaudeville and shifted in emphasis from comedy to suggestive dance and strip tease.

---

I argue that this shift in the burlesque format and business in Chicago was an adaptation to shifts in cultural mores around public sexuality during the 1920s. Burlesque had long featured women as the stars and figures of attention long before the arrival of pasties and tassels. Urban historians have captured similar attitudes of disdain among municipal authorities in cities such as Boston that attempted to effectively shut down burlesque in defense of Victorian values of family, masculinity, and womanhood. Histories of sex work and urban leisure alike, for instance, have documented how city governments and social reformers pathologized and surveilled forms of mass leisure, such as dance halls, prostitution, and theaters, as potential sources of crime and illegitimate activity. That is not to say that burlesque, as a business or form of cultural production, operated the same way as these forms of leisure. While burlesque comedy and musical performances were a part of vaudeville revues initially and strip tease acts became featured in cabaret, burlesque performers and producers also operated independently in their own dedicated venues as early as 1893 in Chicago. In addition, while social reformers and police in Chicago alleged that burlesque performers in theaters or cabaret venues engaged in prostitution or substance abuse, artists and producers often derided these claims as slanderous in the press. What unites burlesque other practices such as sex work, theater, or other alternative entertainment was how they were perceived as common and alike threats to public health and morality. This study examines how the parodying and flaunting of conventions of gender and

---


sexuality by Chicago burlesque both defined its artistic contributions and legacy, and provoked political and civic backlash in the form of policing and censorship.

This project also seeks to contribute to the historiography of burlesque by exploring how the industry both provided and obstructed opportunities for employment, expression, and representation for people across lines of race, gender, and sexuality. Previous works on burlesque have briefly discussed the compensation of burlesque performers—from the celebrity-status “queens” to the common chorus girl—and even less on the presence and roles of performers of color. Furthermore, histories of women in early burlesque and vaudeville highlight how rural American migrants and European immigrants used stage careers as a source of employment and as a way to negotiate their place in the American city. However, the historical footprint of nonwhite performers and producers is notably stark in the written history of burlesque and vaudeville. While many historians, for instance, have commented on the early influences of minstrelsy on burlesque’s format and the breakout success of adult variety performers such as Josephine Baker, few explore the overall presence or participation of people of color in burlesque. Additionally, only recent works in LGBTQ history—including St. Sukie de la Croix and John D’Emilio’s Chicago Whispers and Jim Elledge’s The Boys of Fairy Town—document

---

5 Most strippers and chorus girls, according to Rachel Shteir, made less than sixty dollars a week and worked as many as seventy to eighty hours a week. Managers also often stiffed performers on their pay if business was slow and performers, for fear of being blacklisted, were discouraged from complaining. Rachel Shteir, Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show (Oxford University Press: New York, 2004), 158-9.


the participation of non-drag performers in burlesque, cabaret, and vaudeville. In providing a historical narrative of burlesque in Chicago, this project also profiles performers across lines of race, gender, and sexuality to demonstrate how these identities were portrayed, exoticized, or contradicted onstage.

I include my analysis and coverage of drag performances in gay bars and cabarets in the twentieth century because these performances had the same artistic purpose and invited the same challenges and opponents within and beyond government. Drag, much like burlesque, had a long history as a featured performance in vaudeville shows, where it was primarily used for comedic effect. In Chicago, many “female impersonator” acts were featured in vaudeville since 1870. Drag, however, gained notoriety and greater skepticism from moral critics as it became associated with gay and queer districts in Bronzeville, River North and other areas. In these neighborhoods, drag artists found immense success and exposure in cabarets and bar venues that catered to overtly gay men and bohemian artists between the 1890 and 1940. During this time, drag artists appropriated the strip tease while also, occasionally, imitating burlesque acts such as Sally Rand’s famous fan dance. In spite of differences in the entertainment styles and audiences expected from Chicago drag and burlesque, both entertainment scenes were deeply interrelated in the way in which they were policed and censored by the city. From 1940 to 1980, burlesque and drag performers and spaces suffered from heightened arrests and interventions of police and municipal authorities. Most gay cabarets and bars, and burlesque venues were forced to close, while those that survived faced continued harassment from police and a lack of legal protection. In short, I include drag performance in this history of Chicago burlesque and censorship politics

---

8 Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 144.
because it also satirizes and challenges standards of gender, behavior, and appearance and provoked moral outrage and municipal policing.

Finally, this study also addresses the growing historiography of the rise and fall of live entertainment. This historical field includes examinations of the development of cultural hierarchies along class lines, the growth and decline of variety entertainment genres, and the role of leisure in urban design itself. One of the most looming and concerning topics of contemporary study has been the decline of live entertainment and its significance to American popular culture. In *Going Out*, historian David Nasaw expresses a common historical argument: early forms of entertainment such as vaudeville were uniquely urban in that they helped create a “common commercial culture” that reached beyond lines of race, class, and gender. The shuttering of such entertainment in the wake of newer media and suburbanization leads Nasaw and others to decry such recent developments in the late twentieth century as causes for the decline of public culture.

I argue that Chicago burlesque relied upon the sort of social mixture of audiences that historian Robert Snyder labels the “voice of the city” and contributed to the public culture of the city before external forces of suburbanization and economic shifts greatly altered its ability to do so in the twentieth century. By documenting the policies of the city’s police, social reform activists, and mayoral administrations regarding burlesque and spaces of drag or queer performance, “Daring Dames” demonstrates how mass entertainment, Chicago politics, urban design and public order were intertwined in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first chapter details the origins of burlesque and drag or “female impersonation” from their roots in vaudevillian variety entertainment and how and why adults turned to live entertainment.

---

9Snyder, *The Voice of the City*. 
entertainment for careers in nineteenth century-Chicago. From 1840 to 1890, burlesque was
mainly a comedic genre that satirized and lampooned “higher” forms of culture and art. Chicago
burlesque stood apart, because women wore increasingly shorter clothing and performed acts
that borrowed from circus and “living theater” genres. At times, the line between burlesque and
circus side shows blurred due to the nature of the acts that became increasingly popular. Troupes
and companies focused on ensemble shows with female line dancers and comedy, including the
likes of Heather Thompson and the British Blondes. “Chicago style” burlesque shows put on by
producers such as Sam T. Jack and David Henderson stamped their styles onto the industry. At
the same time, featured attractions such as “Little Egypt” and other belly dancers, contortionists,
model artists, and figure posers pushed the boundaries of nude and sensual performance onstage
into the 1890s, from the grounds of the Chicago World’s Fair into some of the first dedicated
burlesque theaters in the Loop. Nude and semi-nude figure artists, such as the “well-muscled
Hercules” Eugene Sandow, were a precursor to strip tease in that they appealed to audience
expectations of feminine or masculine beauty and were heavily sexualized in their portrayal
onstage and in show promotions.10 Also featured in these productions were “female
impersonator” artists whose inversions of dress and gender norms were equally viewed as a
curious oddity and helped to establish a space for queer men to perform in the Chicago variety
scene. In short, this period marked the origins of burlesque and drag under the umbrella of
“variety entertainment” with innovations in performance, dance, and humor that would predict
the distinct, though parallel, directions both industries would take professionally and artistically.

10 Elledge, The Boys of Fairy Town, 40.
As the second chapter shows, burlesque and drag productions proliferated as separate genres independent of vaudeville despite many legal and cultural obstacles between 1893 and the 1930s. The “burly-q” became an independent entertainment genre and gained both many venues and much notoriety. Many theaters in the Loop or West Loop districts, particularly along West Madison and North State Street, were founded between 1890 and 1930, taking advantage of the area’s adjacency to shopping, work, and commuter rails. Some gained a reputation for rowdy, drunken audiences, and seedy barroom atmospheres. Others were designed to emulate higher-end mainstream theatres. Higher-end venues also instituted rules of audience behavior and regulations of performances to elevate the reputation of burlesque and made it palatable to “family audiences”—concerns that mirrored those of major burlesque circuits at the time. As early as 1908, however, Chicago burlesque’s early success began sparking opposition in the form of the nascent city Vice Commission and the Juvenile Protective Association: bodies of conservative-minded social reformers who viewed burlesque, drag, and other sources of entertainment as threats to the health and wellbeing of children. As such, they and the city’s police worked to increasingly surveil and cite theaters and performers with charges of putting on “obscene exhibitions” or performances. At the same time, such conservative forces singled out genderqueer female impersonators on and off the burlesque stage for similar violations, leading, in turn, to a backlash and bans against these performances. Drag performances persisted in venues in these neighborhoods, though not without the attention of police and cultural critics who advocated for banning “drag balls” and performers. During this period, police, and social

11 In 1921, according to the New York Clipper, national burlesque circuits and managers had banned suggestive jokes and the hootchie cooch dance because wanted to lower the “moral delinquency of the public” and appeal to broader, family audiences. “Cleaning Up Vaudeville,” New York Clipper, March 30, 1921.
reform organizations—including the Juvenile Protective Association—stepped up investigations, arrests, and forced closures to suppress performers and venues, alike. According to entertainment press such as *Variety* and the *New York Clipper*, burlesque circuits, and producers also increasingly banned performances of the “hoochie cooch” dance and called for kicking drag performances “through the stage door into the gutter, as well.” Such was the effect of this cultural and political backlash that multiple venues of burlesque and drag were forced to close, and Chicago burlesque entered a period of decline.

The third chapter profiles the 1920s and 1930s in Chicago, a time that was arguably a “peak era” for drag and burlesque entertainment in Chicago. These years were characterized by the development of the “striptease,” and iconic performers and performances during the 1933-1934 “Century of Progress” World’s Fair. During the 1920s, strip tease – the act of stripping to nudity or seeming-nudity gradually in time to music – originated and quickly dominated many of the acts featured in Chicago burlesque venues. This, according to some burlesque historians, marked the moment when burlesque decidedly shifted away from its roots in comedy and vaudevillian skits to focus on acts that emphasized nudity and sensuality. Performers such as Sally Rand and others became headlining “burlesque queens” at the Fair and across the city – and who also courted controversy with charges of “obscenity” against them. The Century of Progress fairgrounds became a site where the ongoing conflict between burlesque producers and the mayor’s office contested the right of artists to perform sexual or sensual shows in public. The


simultaneous success of gay cabarets and gender-nonconforming performers on the Fairgrounds and around the city provoked similar charges of public indecency from members of government, law enforcement, and social reform organizations.

The fourth chapter details the decline of burlesque as an industry in the wake of changes in municipal policy and audience demand for live, nude and titillating adult entertainment. Between 1930 and 1980, burlesque was forced out of Chicago’s downtown Loop district. This period witnessed renewed efforts by social conservative groups, law enforcement, and municipal government to surveil and close burlesque venues through targeted arrests and the denial of theater licenses. The mayoral administrations of William Thompson and Richard J. Daley proved vigorous in its prosecution of burlesque performers and venues for hosting “indecent” performances and with targeted regulations designed to shutter burlesque theaters and cabarets around the city. Similar restrictions against female impersonators and other overtly queer performances in gay cabarets and bars citywide were enacted under the same justification of censorship and improving the public image of the city. Journalistic coverage and institutional records that detail how and why the city effectively purged most of its burlesque venues in the downtown area.

Between 1940 and 1970, burlesque performances (if not strictly “striptease” in the traditional sense of the word) persevered in fewer locations with reputations for lower quality shows and alleged mob affiliations. “B-joints” or venues dedicated strictly to stripping or “go-go dancing” survived in Chicago and had their followings but were far less concerned with artistic direction or striptease elements as dedicated burlesque venues of the past. Instead, these venues worked to primarily sell alcohol while objectifying their dancers’ performances to an even
further extent than traditional burlesque. Other theaters formerly dedicated to the strip tease were forced to diversify their content to appeal to changing consumer tastes and demands, including motion pictures. The burlesque scene and the controversy it generated in suburban Calumet City represented a historical moment when burlesque most deviated from its emphasis on artistic performance and satire and the more creative elements of strip tease. The strip club scene at “Cal City” provided both a means of economic survival and professional experience for women who either performed strip tease sets set to Tin Pan Alley or light classical music or would flirt with and encourage customers to buy more drinks as lower-paid “B-Girls.” While strip clubs in Calumet City allowed burlesque artists to put on elaborate acts, some artists of color had to resort to impressions of exoticized stereotypes, such as Japanese Geisha, to secure gigs, though the vast majority performed simple sets derided as unartistic by their peers. Burlesque shows persisted around the country in the form of traveling productions in county fairs. What was left of the scene in Chicago by the 1970s, however, was reduced to exploitative and extractive establishments heavily regulated by the city that focused on overt sexual enticement of customers and drink sales rather than creative elements of tease, costuming, and characterization.

14 Venues such as the 606 Club on 8 Wabash Avenue in the Loop were still hosting striptease acts accompanied by comedians in a tribute to classical burlesque well past the 1960s. However, performers noted that both the venue and the audience prioritized the stripping and nude element of the performance over their artistic expression and thus denied burlesquers the ability to enjoy and make expressive their performances. One performer told the Chicago Tribune in 1949, “Show business isn’t what is used to be…The customers don’t want dancing, they want strippers…A girl who just wants to be an artist has a hard time these days. The customers don’t treat us like we’re human.” Lloyd Wendt, "Four O’Clock Tease!" Chicago Tribune, July 17, 1949.

15 Some of the longest-lasting burlesque venues in the Loop, such as the Rialto and Gem Theatres on State Street, converted to showing primarily adult movies in the 1960s and 1970s as live burlesque and striptease shows generated fewer profits. Scott Newman, “Burlesque Theaters,” Jazz Age Chicago: Urban Leisure from 1893 to 1945, 2004. https://jazzagechicago.wordpress.com/burlesque-theaters/

The fifth chapter examines how drag artists, venues, and productions persisted even as burlesque entered a period of decline between 1933 and 1980. Existing venues and productions were forced to close or relocate due to the same crackdowns and moral policing surrounding burlesque and adult entertainment in the late 1930s. Drag venues and the queer communities they primarily served and represented gradually moved to districts in the Gold Coast, Lincoln Park, Lakeview, and the South Side due to urban redevelopment and police profiling. Newer venues produced by drag artists worked to not just keep drag entertainment alive, but to introduce it to more and more straight audiences. Productions well-regarded supper clubs and dance venues in the South Side, for instance, won general praise from the local press and their communities for their elaborate sets and costuming and talented musical and dance talent, while explicitly queer venues for drag proliferated in the North Side. The actual modern performance style of drag was set in practice in this era, as an emphasis on “glam” (that is, a convincing and regal representation of the opposite gender) in costuming, makeup, and character impersonation; campy, absurdist humor; and musical impressions of famous artists became the playbook of drag in Chicago and nationally going forward.

All the while, however, drag performers had to contend with both internal divisions regarding who could be included in drag; working conditions in their venues; and the omnipresent threat of arrest and harassment by police for violating laws regarding cross-dressing or public displays of intimacy and affection with people of the same sex. Drag performers also had to contend with various obstacles and threats at their places of employ, such as unsafe performance or dressing spaces, harassment from patrons or pedestrians on the street, and even threats of violence, assault, and murder from neighbors or the police. Arrests and raids of drag venues and any businesses patronized by gay men or lesbians were all too common in the 1950s
and 1960s. These police interventions, while purportedly in response to allegations of organized criminal influence and public morality, served to arrest Chicagoans for dressing in drag or for displaying homosexual attraction in public and to out them in public to the detriment of citizens’ professional lives, reputations, and safety. High-profile incidents of such raids against gay businesses and citizens in the 1960s galvanized and motivated gay rights advocacy groups in Chicago to protest and document police interactions with people arrested for “indecent conduct” or cross-dressing. Ultimately, the legal future of the drag industry in Chicago was safeguarded with court decisions and legislation that struck down bans against crossdressing and provided more rights and protections for the broader queer community against discrimination in the public sphere.

The history of burlesque and drag entertainment in Chicago is long and ongoing. This project will not be the final chapter or the complete envelopment of that history. Rather, it intends to demonstrate how both genres and communities of artists emerged from similar roots in variety, comedic entertainment in the nineteenth century and attempted to find their own identity through unique performance styles of gender and sexuality onstage in spite of concerted efforts to censor, if not outright ban, both forms of entertainment. Performers of both drag and burlesque retain the power to provoke by challenging societal standards of behavior and appearance for male and female characters and archetypes. The opportunity to perform in either venture has enabled aspiring artists to begin and pursue careers in show business and to find community amongst people who share their passion for creation and expression. More than a history of their work, their city, and the many ways they have been policed for the way in which they earned a living, “Daring Dames” is a story of how artists attempted to share truths about themselves and their society through carefully curated parody, satire, and exaggeration – truths that earned them
applause and adoration by audiences, and scorn from authorities and critics dedicated to
maintaining a sense of moral order
CHAPTER 1
THE ORIGINS OF CHICAGO BURLESQUE AND DRAG,
1850-1895

American burlesque was more than just tassels and feather fans. For many young women moving to Chicago, the performance was an opportunity for easy employment and an exciting, if risky, life on stage. For promoters and theaters, burlesque was an art form that took on new forms and types of performances to suit the changing tastes of audiences. For moral critics and municipal authorities, however, burlesque was either a public nuisance or a source of moral corruption that threatened the health and values of young men and women and needed to be suppressed and terminated. Burlesque in Chicago was all these things and more. Burlesque was and still is entertainment that challenges “higher” art, that parodies and satirizes everyday life in the city, and that provides entertainment even in times of social upheaval and instability. Just as events in Chicago shaped the business and character of participants in the “burly q,” burlesque left its own mark on the Windy City and its history.

What is burlesque? Previous historians have attempted to answer this very question with studies of American culture and its historical relationship to vaudeville and other genres. The word itself means “parody.” Burlesque indeed began as a parody genre that ridiculed “higher culture” by satirizing operas and plays held in much higher esteem. Nineteenth-century troupes such as Heather Thompson and the British Blondes, gained popularity in Europe and the United
States for parodying ballet and opera, for example. Others argue that burlesque became a separate genre independent of its roots in vaudeville with the greater use of “girlie shows” that hosted satire and comical skits along with chorus lines of increasingly scantily-clad dancers.

Historian Rachel Shteir describes burlesque (particularly strip tease) as a “combination of cool eros and wisecracking bacchanalian humor,” one that makes a “ritual and performance” of undressing in a way that flaunts sexuality against modernity’s “high seriousness.” This was burlesque, Shteir argues, until the teasing element of strip tease was reduced to “exotic dancing” beyond the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Other sources contemporary to the heyday of burlesque have mirrored these arguments in attempting to identify when burlesque as parody turned into burlesque as adult entertainment. A 1940 report on the history of burlesque written for the Works Progress Administration describes the genre as “an unceremonious take-off on a staid original” combined with “tiaraed and plumed nudity.”

The story and meaning of burlesque deserves further elaboration. Burlesque shows provided an exaggerated parody of different cultural subjects, such as “higher culture,” drama, and social norms of respectable behavior. From the days in which burlesque was defined by chorus line dancing accompanying vaudeville humor to its contemporary fame for “plumed

---


3 The same report identified performers and productions of the early nineteenth century as being the moment when burlesque shifted in its original form and format to become more sexual than satirical. On Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, one of the oldest popular burlesque troupes in Europe and the United States, the report argues, “From 1870 on, burlesque in America headed definitely away from its original line. The leg show innovation cleared the way for the two very related faces of twentieth-century burlesque: on the one hand, the glorified, musical revues, which abhorred the title of burlesque for the wrong reason; and on the other hand, the strip-tease theatres on the fringe of the theatrical districts, who adhered to the burlesque title, also for the wrong reason.” See Ettore Nella, *A History of Burlesque*. San Francisco Theatre Research Series (Works Progress Administration, San Francisco Project, 1940), 4; 109.
nudity” and strip tease, burlesque challenged norms and expectations of theater, Victorian modesty, stage movement, acting, and ideas of cultural decency. In Chicago and other cities that hosted mass entertainment, burlesque acts were hosted in theaters and cabarets dedicated to other forms of entertainment like vaudeville. At the same time, however, burlesque was very much an independent form of entertainment and genre with dedicated venues, performers, and producers. Specialized burlesque venues originated beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century. While some became proper theater houses with enormous stages and marbled décor, others were similar to nineteenth-century concert saloons with smaller performance spaces, little separation from audiences, and a focus on alcohol sales rather than show quality. Regardless of venue, burlesque was not designed for family audiences from the very beginning. Burlesque productions consistently attracted audience attention and controversy by employing performance methods that placed heavy emphasis on the bodies of female performers. The signature performances of burlesque during the nineteenth century included chorus line dancers in “leg shows,” belly dancing, and nude model artistry at the turn of the century. Only after the 1920s did burlesque become synonymous with strip tease. While the musical stylings and skit comedy of vaudeville remained a part of burlesque, they ultimately played a supporting role to dances and skits that highlighted the bodies and movements of burlesque performers. In a nutshell, burlesque is a style of performance that challenges, distorts, and even inverts ingrained ideas and standards of art, gender, sexuality, and beauty, albeit with very different means of performance and presentation since its creation in the nineteenth century.

The Rise of Mass Entertainment in Chicago

The state of theater and public amusements in Chicago and the United States in the nineteenth century radically changed in its character and success. American drama and public
performance had long been maligned and greeted with skepticism. Mainstream and theatrical press indicated that the theater-going public of the antebellum era preferred melodrama productions that clearly elucidated moral messages to its audiences while avoiding any scandal or controversy, real or imagined. Indeed, historian David Grimsted argued that public art and stage productions “eschewed the controversial” and instead promoted patriotism and morality in an effort make theater more acceptable to the public. In the second half of the century, however, efforts by theaters and theater audiences to keep public amusements clean were frustrated by changes in public sentiment and demand regarding entertainment. Historian Lawrence Levine claimed that nineteenth-century theaters accommodated the tastes of working-class men whose behavior and tastes conflicted with standards of “highbrow” entertainment and consumption. Theater productions in cities such as New York often witnessed jeering, audience participation, and even outbreaks of violence in the midcentury. In addition, alternative genres of entertainment, such as circus, minstrelsy, and vaudeville emerged to tap into such irreverent audiences with sensational and provocative performances, and ribald comedy. Public entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century was quickly evolving from highbrow theater to offer more varied experiences to mixed audiences.

The first theaters in Chicago were usually short-lived ventures that struggled to compete with variety entertainment and suffered for lack of development in the city. The first local theater company, the Chicago Theater (unrelated to the present-day venue of the same name in downtown Chicago), operated in the Sauganash Hotel and an auction house between 1837 and 1839. Though the Theater found success with plays and comedies, it did not last beyond its 1839 season. Likewise, a handful of other theaters, such as the McVicker’s Theatre – operated by James H. McVicker – and John B. Rice’s theater were founded in 1857 and 1847 respectively, but only McVicker’s would last longer than a decade. Beyond these examples, few if any other theater companies were founded before 1871, as Chicagoans mostly relied on shows and circuses touring from other parts of the country. Minstrel shows enjoyed a bit of success and attention in Chicago during this time. Donniker’s Minstrel Theatre, to name an example, performed “Africanized opera bouffe” with White male actors portraying Black women in blackface, as early as 1864. This performance marked the first recorded time that cross-dressing (or “female impersonation,” as it was then called) was used in a stage show in Chicago. Some minstrel actors, such as Francis Leon, found great success in singing roles as “mulatto Prima Donnas” and garnered praise for their comedic chops from publications such as the Chicago Tribune.

Burlesque, in contrast, arrived in the form of bawdy jokes, satire, and racy dancing in 1869. The first burlesques in the Victorian era were a mix of stage musical and satire entertainment. Early shows lampooned “higher” art forms, literature, and opera with

---


performances by actresses in scant clothing intended to poke fun at gender conventions and norms of etiquette. The 1867 musical production *Black Crook* – one of the earliest musicals and burlesque productions in the United States - was an adaptation of a Faust story featuring troupes of ballet dancers in slim, flesh-colored costumes intended to simulate nude skin. These and other shows originated in English music halls and theaters during the 1850s. However, burlesque troupes and shows began touring the United States when the Lord High Chamberlain (the British government’s chief censor) banned displays of nudity and suggestive poses on stage, forcing burlesque productions to seek audiences in other countries.10

In the United States, these early Victorian burlesque shows cultivated enormous popularity and ticket sales with fewer restrictions in cities such as New York and Chicago. Lydia Thompson’s British Blondes, for instance, likely were the first burlesque company of fame to tour the United States as early as 1868. Thompson was already a successful burlesque performer, having toured Europe between 1856 and 1859, and performed in extravaganzas with the Theater Royal Birkenhead of Liverpool since 1864. Her reputation as a skilled dancer and her performance in the burlesque play *Ixion* received positive reviews in London and prompted invitations from New York City stage managers to make their American debut in 1868. In *Ixion*, the Blondes put on satirical musical skits of Greco-Roman mythology, complete with jigs, jokes laced with double-entendres, and actresses in revealing costumes. Performers’ costumes largely consisted of ballet outfits without the “volumed gauze” material that was traditionally used to cover dancers’ legs. Their ornate productions generated thousands of dollars in revenue in New

York. Advertisements for the Blondes highlighted actresses’ beauty and promised audience “adoration amounting almost to mania.”\textsuperscript{11}

The audiences that frequented the Blondes’ productions were diverse, even by the standard of other burlesque shows of the day. Reports indicated that audiences in shows in Boston and New York, for instance, included “comfortable, middle-aged women” from the suburbs, farm country folks, as well as men of many backgrounds.\textsuperscript{12} Critical reception was mixed, as some critics were more offended than others at the Blondes’ style of humor, dance, and sensuality on stage. Olive Logan, an actress and prolific writer for theatrical publications, disapproved of the show’s language and suggestive humor, as well as the dancers’ use of the “wink, wriggle” and other such moves. Other critics singled out the use of the cancan or high kicks as intentional ploys for displaying more skin on stage.\textsuperscript{13} Nevertheless, those same critics praised how the Blondes used minstrel-style humor to emphasize that they were not to be taken too seriously. Their majority-female cast in male roles and the use of upper-class British accents (even for non-British characters) communicated to critics and audiences that the Blondes were poking fun at the social conventions of their time, rather than trying to overthrow them. In some shows, actresses and chorus girls played soldiers, criminals, kings, and other ancient or contemporary male characters while dancing and playing instruments in tights. While this behavior subverted standards of gender, dress, and appearance in the Victorian era, critics mostly praised these acts of male impersonation as examples of the Blondes’ style of burlesque comedy.


\textsuperscript{12} Banner, \textit{American Beauty}, 122.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
and satire. As theater critic Richard Grant White put it, the Blondes found success in large part because they tapped into an American cultural tradition to “criticize and to derogate from all high pretensions.”

Not every stage critic appreciated the artistic intentions of the Blondes. While some papers such as the *New York Times* favorably reviewed the appearance and performance of Thompson and other women in the cast, others denounced their work as being simply a “nude drama” or “leg business,” because the actresses’ legs were bare during the show.

The Blondes experienced a fast cycle of success and critical backlash in their November 1869 Chicago performance of *Ixion* at Crosby’s Opera House. Reportedly, the audience cheered so heavily for the production that the Blondes put on a dozen encores in a single evening. The press shared Lydia Thompson’s opinion that the Blondes’ burlesque was “harmless” and, for the most part, proper entertainment. Editor William F. Storey of the *Chicago Times*, however, derided the Blondes’ production as “lewd and unnecessary,” and accused the burlesque show of being a “mere vehicle for the exhibition of coarse women and the use of disreputable language unrelieved by any wit or humor.” These comments provoked a violent response. On the evening of February 24, 1870, Thompson and some of her associates ambushed Storey and his wife outside of their home on Wabash Avenue in the Loop, reportedly horsewhipping the editor before quickly leaving the scene in a carriage. Authorities later arrested Thompson, her publicists, and a few other actors in the company, charging and trying the thespians for assault—

---

15 Ibid.
a story that circulated quickly on the pages of the *Chicago Tribune* and other publications.\textsuperscript{16} Ultimately, Thompson and the others paid a fine for their bout of violence and, reportedly, rode away from the courthouse to the cheer of two thousand spectators who had waited outside.

Despite this controversy and the mixed reception, the Blondes received across their career, the troupe established traditions of performance that became standard fare for burlesque shows going forward. In addition to utilizing soubrettes and dancers at the front and center of their programs, they also featured many chorus or “show” girls whose role was to remain in the background and “show” their costumes for the scene or the trending fashions of the stage and public.\textsuperscript{17} Performers not only showcased fashion and costume, but the standards of beauty and bodily form of their day. Many critics, for instance, made note of the casts’ rounded and “radiant” bodies, which were idealized in the beauty standards of the Victorian era.\textsuperscript{18}

In the United States, the Blondes’ reputation for controversy created a cultural backlash and moral panic in the theatrical press. Editorials largely sided against the actions of Thompson and her cohort in assaulting the journalist in Chicago. The editors of the *New York Clipper*, for instance, granted that Story’s criticisms of the Blondes were harsh. Instead, they suggested that Story should have given advice to these “erring sisters of the female persuasion...like a father” and warn them against the “danger of taking cold if they did not put on more clothes.”


\textsuperscript{17} Brenda Foley, *Undressed for Success: Beauty Contestants and Exotic Dancers as Merchants of Morality,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 32.

\textsuperscript{18} Banner, *American Beauty*, 46.
Ultimately, the paper condemned the “pugilistic Blondes” as a threat to the authority of the press to criticize artists.\textsuperscript{19}

Other critics feared that the Blondes and their style of burlesque harmed the reputation of the performing arts. The crass humor and suggestiveness of the British Blondes was interpreted by some as an indication of their lack of personal morality. Olive Logan, herself a professional actress and frequent contributor to the theatrical press, drew lines of distinction between older forms of stage drama and entertainment and the new style of burlesque. For her, burlesque was a “leg show” without any artistic merit and that did not deserve respect or acceptance. As Logan put it:

\begin{quote}
The intention is everything, just as it is in killing. If you intend to kill, you are a murderer, and deserve the murderer’s fate. If you kill in self-defense, and in a just and patriotic cause – like a soldier – you are not blamable but virtuous. In like manner, the scanty drapery of the ballet, for the purpose of art, and art alone, is no offense against good taste or good manners; but if the ballet girl – not for the sake of art, but for the sake of attracting lewd attention – overdoes the scantiness and betrays the immodesty of her mind by her motions or gestures, she commits an offense, and ought to be hissed from the stage which she disgraces.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

In Chicago, voices in the theatrical press expressed similar disdain towards the Blondes and the state of burlesque shows derided as “leg business.” One reviewer for the \textit{Tribune} wrote in February 1870 that the Blondes lacked “any charm or dramatic ability,” with a gross appeal based mainly on costuming, makeup and semi nudity. “There is sometimes a refinement even to indecency,” said the columnist, “but here, the appeal lies, pure and simple, to pruriency.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} “Introductory Overture,” \textit{New York Clipper}, March 5, 1870.


Mass Entertainment After the Chicago Fire, 1871

Entertainment in Chicago was greatly altered with the fire of 1871. Fire broke out and spread from October 8 until October 10. Many structures between Fullerton Avenue in the North and 22nd Street in the South were damaged, if not destroyed, by the blaze. This was a major blow for the city, as many of its densest neighborhoods and business districts were located within or close to the Loop. Former residents of the downtown area migrated further away to the North, West, and South Sides, setting the stage for the growth of many neighborhoods and businesses away from the heart of the city. Most theaters and entertainment venues in the Loop were also displaced, though the influx of aid and speculation aided in the recovery of the entertainment industry and the downtown area. Some businesses, such as Crosby Opera House, were never rebuilt and its owners moved onto other ventures. Others, such as McVicker’s Theater, rebuilt within a year and turned away from the “legitimate drama” towards “combination systems” or cycles of farce comedy, burlesque and melodrama to pursue more popular and immediately profitable forms of entertainment.22 When McVicker’s Theater reopened on August 9, 1872, with a five-act comedic play, the event was heralded by the Chicago Tribune as a marker of the rebuilding of the city. Other theaters, such as the New Adelphi and Columbia, were constructed in the 1880s with regal and expansive theater houses that offered operas and concerts to audiences of thousands, along with luxurious amenities and ornate art.23


23 Ibid, 666.
Newer venues focused more on variety entertainment, including burlesque. Hamlin’s Grand Opera House was constructed on the site of what was Hooley’s Opera House in 1872 and was renovated over the years to convert its billiards hall into a theater space for vaudeville. Another notable addition was David A. Henderson’s Chicago Opera House, opening on Washington and Clark Streets on August 10, 1885. The theater itself was one of the tallest and most fireproof structures in downtown Chicago at the time, due to its use of steel construction and electric lighting. This regal space with a seating capacity of 2,000 opened with a production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but over the course of its management, it featured more and more burlesque productions that were derided as “leg shows.” Theater owner David A. Henderson conceived of the idea of holding “extravaganzas” or musical burlesque shows as a way of attracting business in the summer seasons, when the Chicago public less frequently patronized theaters. Such shows as *Arabian Nights*, *The Crystal Slipper*, and *Sinbad* were musical parodies of classic stories in literature and folklore that featured extravagant costuming, songs by talented librettos and chorus girls in tights and skirts. These productions of early burlesque, much like Lydia Thompson’s British Blondes, were derided as “leg shows” of “showgirls” because, in the eyes of critics, they existed mainly to provide spectacle rather than to produce anything of artistic value.\(^{24}\) Some interpreted moralistic malice in the use of showgirl dancers very early on.

Critics and historians expressed similar concerns for the entertainment industry’s future. A. T. Andreas, a theater historian who authored a history of Chicago from 1871 to 1886, credited combination programs of burlesque, melodrama, and other variety entertainment for bringing a gainful business for theaters and artists and for diversifying stage entertainment. However,

Andreas expressed concern with speculative investment and programming that defined mass entertainment in Chicago after the fire. He criticized “speculative managers” who prioritized shows and genres that they believed would be most profitable. The success of these managers, Andreas argues, enabled them to dictate harsher terms in contracts with venues and to feature more “spectacles” of minstrel shows and burlesque that attract “the worst elements” of society in pursuit of more ticket sales. Andreas likewise expressed worries towards burlesque and other “cheap amusements” that later social activists and public officials repeated. He bemoaned the “feeble hold” of “legitimate drama” on working-class audiences and considered the humor of these shows “rude” and worthy of police intervention. “The [leg show] is set before its public in Chicago with a disgracefully liberal hand,” wrote Andreas. “The State Street theaters, and numerous others in more remote parts of the city, cater to appetites which, in the absence of internal inhibition, ought to be under police control.”

Criticism aside, many of the new theaters that were founded or rebuilt in the fire’s aftermath continued in the vein of burlesque, vaudeville and controversy unabated. Some featured drag performances to satirize ideas of gender and beauty. Hooley’s Opera House had was a venue for minstrel shows. After it was burnt down in the fire in 1871, the Opera House was rebuilt in a new location on Randolph Street and continued to showcase minstrel shows with “songs, jokes, and comic narratives” that alluded to sexual relations between men in male and female blackface roles. Historians of minstrelsy have long documented how female

---


26 Ibid, 662

impersonation and blackface, when used together, dehumanized and eroticized African Americans by invoking stereotypes of sexual prowess and unintelligence. That was no less true with minstrel shows in Chicago. Reviewers in the Tribune noted that Chicago audiences were “inseparably wedded to burnt-cork entertainment” with female impersonators after the Civil War.\(^{28}\) However, in the decades following the fire, accounts from the popular and theatrical press indicated a growing awareness of and suspicion towards cross-dressers beyond the minstrel stage. Queer historians such as Jim Elledge have documented how regional and city newspapers covered sensational stories of the outing and arrests of men who wore women’s clothing in public.\(^{29}\) In this context, some theatrical critics became antagonistic toward female impersonation onstage. Burt Shepherd was a female impersonator who performed regularly at Hooley’s Opera House as a singer. His performance in a show in Kenosha in 1876 received praise from the Chicago Tribune, who wrote “he looked and acted the prima donna to perfection, his flexible voice possible reaching the extreme high notes peculiar to a lady’s voice of a high range.” Not long afterwards, however, he received notably harsher criticism from a female columnist in the Tribune in a review of his performance in a production in 1879. “Burt Shepherd, a female impersonator, opens the second part,” said the reviewer. “We never liked his species, and we cannot say that we take kindly to Mr. Shepherd. Unless it be in broad burlesque, there is something nauseating in seeing a man in petticoats.”\(^{30}\) Like burlesque, drag performance received mixed reviews from critics in its earliest days.


\(^{30}\) St Sukie de la Croix, and John D’Emilio, Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 2012), 64.
Promoters and performers made additional innovations in the Chicago burlesque scene that set precedents for burlesque and variety entertainment nationwide. As many historians have argued, the unique location of Chicago relative to many waterways and growing rail networks enabled increasing waves of migration to the city from other locations on the East Coast. Among those travelers were producers and performers who would take Chicago entertainment toward new directions. One emigrant, Sam T. Jack, had made a name for himself producing burlesque productions in various cities across the United States, such as New York, Philadelphia, and Houston. He had experience producing traveling shows that incorporated elements of honky tonk shows from the South. However, in 1892, he announced the end of his touring productions and plans to remain full-time in residency at the Madison Street Opera House, a venue that quickly became associated with his burlesque productions. In 1891, he opened the “Creole Show,” the first Black burlesque show in the United States, at the Opera House. These productions were unique in that they featured casts composed entirely of black female chorus girls and variety artists. They also steered away from the plantation settings and postbellum Southern themes that had come to define minstrelsy. Programs contained multiple acts, composed of humorous dialogues and scenes between comedians and the “Creole Belles” or chorus girls, followed by performances by singers, dancers, acrobats, and concluding with a burlesque. The closing burlesques were usually themed on Orientalist and racialized tropes intended to play up the exotic nature and appearance of the performing actresses. One burlesque scene, titled “Tropical Revels,” featured scenery and effects intended to emulate Egypt, with “Daughters of the Nile,”
Egyptian pastimes, acrobats, and “fairy-like enchantresses in light and gaudy costumes,” as his biographer later described.\(^{31}\)

Behind the scenes, Jack displayed casual racism with stories of how he bought or took some performers from exotic foreign countries. He also established in the press a reputation for being, in his own words, “an iron-handed disciplinarian” who would not hesitate to fire any performer for breaking his rules, both in his theaters and his touring shows, no matter their talent or contribution to the company. \(^{32}\) Nevertheless, few records expressed frustration or resistance towards Jack among his performers and he is generally credited for helping to bring Black women to the burlesque stage in a way that showcased their beauty.

The success of burlesque shows under Sam T. Jack and others attracted criticism by conservative civic groups already concerned with public amusements in Chicago. One of the first styles of performance to earn the ire and condemnation of conservative citizens were so-called “tableau vivants” or “living pictures.” Artists performing a living picture would dress in period costume to impersonate famous pieces of art or scenes from literature and drama. In the hands of showrunners like Sam T. Jack, living pictures became another opportunity to showcase overt sensuality and nudity on the burlesque stage. Jack’s biographer credited him for being among the first producers to introduce living pictures to Chicago around 1894, when they began to become popular amongst the theater-going public. Aspiring actresses were instructed how to pose and sit for portrayals of classical characters such as Psyche of Greek mythology while wearing flesh-colored tights in selective lighting to simulate nudity. According to one story, a nude model


\(^{32}\) Ibid, 72.
named Viola Mentreuse had misunderstood the rules and posed completely nude her first night as Psyche in 1892. Rather than being immediately shut down, the performance was met with thunderous applause and demands for an encore. Jack and Mentreuse escaped criticism, according to his biographer, because they made it clear it had been an obvious mistake. "The picture," Jack’s biographer wrote, "was a howling success. It was a case of stage realism with a vengeance."\textsuperscript{33} Rather than leading to a seeming crackdown, this wardrobe accident precipitated a spread in the use of living pictures in burlesque and variety shows throughout Chicago. Jack, for his part, reported continued success with the close of the 1892 season and onwards. Demonstrably, he had tapped into a growing demand for a type of burlesque that showcased, rather than hid, the beauty and bodies of its performers. As his biographer put it, "Prudery is perennial. Seekers after notoriety are the same."\textsuperscript{34}

The success of Sam T. Jack and burlesque exhibitions like the living pictures incurred one of the first waves of protest and condemnation against Chicago burlesque. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) spoke against Jack’s shows and burlesque in the press and public meetings. Representatives of the WCTU criticized burlesque and perceived nudity onstage in the language of social reform, public morality, and "decency." Members of the WCTU used direct action to protest burlesque shows, even tearing down billboards advertising burlesque as an act of protest, for which some of their members were arrested for damaging private property.\textsuperscript{35} According to the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, on September 19, 1894, more than a hundred

\textsuperscript{33} O’Neill, \textit{How He Does It}, 252-258.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 258.

\textsuperscript{35} Parker, \textit{Purifying America}, 31.
members of the WCTU met in Willard Hall to hear members' reports of a ballet show by David Henderson’s Chicago Opera House and an untitled burlesque show at Sam T. Jack’s Opera House. Regarding the latter, members L.E. Haggans and Jane E. Zimmerman reported seeing thirteen chorus girls in flesh-colored tights, with bare limbs, who “flung their legs about” while dancing. They demonstrated concern for the audience who, at least for those sitting in the gallery were composed mostly of men. “The whole performance was plainly designed to inflame the passions of the men, who had evidently come in for that very purpose. The influence of the whole place was wholly bad of the lowest and worst badness conceivable.”36 The same members declared it to be their mission to combat this kind of entertainment on behalf of their city. “These are places where moral leprosy is cultivated and spread. We, as representatives of the wives and mothers of the community, owe it to society to make a protest, loud and deep and efficient.”37

Years later, the WCTU regarded female performers in burlesque as victims of male sexuality due to exploitative show elements such as strip tease. From their point of view, WCTU members and leadership regarded women in burlesque as “misguided victims in our social order” and therefore worked to improve their condition by reporting on and building a case for censorship against burlesque productions.”38

They went on to report other scandalous details, such as the short length of straw skirts used in a “Basque dance” scene, as well as the skillful dance and varying levels of undress of the other performers. While the report complemented show and cast overall as “very perfect of its

36 O’Neill, How He Does It, 268.
37 Ibid.
38 Parker, Purifying America, 131-132.
kind,” it maintained that “no decent society or nation can bear the stain of such an exhibition as we saw and not be corrupted to the point of rottenness by it.” As a remedy, they appealed to police to enforce state statutes regarding public decency in shows and exhibitions. They were, however, dismissed out of hand by the Assistant Chief of Police, who reportedly directed the activists to simply attend other shows, instead. The 1881 statute that lay at the heart of their legal argument also banned cross dressing and, for reference, reads as follows:

If any person shall appear in a public place in a state of nudity, or in a dress not belonging to his or her sex, or in an indecent or lewd dress, or shall make any indecent exposure of his or her person or be guilty of any lewd or indecent act or behavior, he shall be subject to a fine of not less than $20 or exceeding $100.

The WCTU meeting closed with the members in attendance voting a resolution to not only compel local and state law enforcement to enforce the state’s decency statutes, but to encourage members of the WCTU and the general public to continue to surveil public amusements. Zimmerman, for her part, declared her belief that women had an important role to play in containing the “moral leprosy” and “public indecency” of burlesque and nudity onstage. “Men have no right to investigate such things,” she asserted before the group. “We have a right to meddle in matters of this kind. Womanhood has a right to demand that the form of woman be covered, just as men would have a right to require that the form of man should be covered before an audience of women.” As for Jack himself, he responded with a $100,000 libel suit against the WCTU and the defense that he was being targeted because he hired a lot of women and paid

---

39 O’Neill, How He Does It, 272.

40 Ibid, 274.

41 Ibid, 274, 276.
them well for their work, much to the chagrin of organizations like the WCTU preferred women to remain in the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{42}

Sam T. Jack would not be the last to court controversy in show business before the century’s end. The organizers of the 1893 Columbian World’s Fair similarly found success and backlash with the performances it chose to exhibit. The fair was intended by its designers to celebrate not just the anniversary of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas, but also the economic and social progress of Chicago and the country. While the main fairgrounds in Jackson Park exhibited neoclassical architecture and exhibitions of modern technology, the Midway Plaisance hosted performers intended to simulate exoticized foreign cultures and countries. One such performer, Fahreda Mazar Spyropoulos (also known as “Fatima”) belly-danced under the stage name of “Little Egypt” as part of “A Street in Cairo,” a walkthrough exhibition of Egyptian culture on the Midway. Fair barkers promised spectators that Little Egypt would shake “like a jar of jelly from your grandmother’s Thanksgiving dinner.”\textsuperscript{43} The director of the Midway, Sol Bloom, likewise promoted Little Egypt and other artists as “ethnological exhibits of “semi-civilized states,”” in a way that invoked stereotypes of exotic non-White cultures. It was Bloom who coined Mazar’s style of belly dancing as the “hoochie cooch,” which was a crude reference to women swaying while intoxicated.\textsuperscript{44}

Little Egypt’s presence at the Fair did not escape notice of the authorities and conservative citizens. Five members of the World’s Fair Committee of 1893 – two of whom

\textsuperscript{42} O’Neill, \textit{How He Does It}, 258.


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 42.
were members of the WCTU – visited the fairgrounds to investigate reports of Little Egypt’s performances and other exhibits of the fairgrounds. Upon finding the “revolting exhibitions,” they reported what they saw to the president of the fair, who had the “conspicuous nuisances” removed for an uncertain amount of time.\textsuperscript{45} They were accompanied at the time by Anthony Comstock of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, who went on to condemn Little Egypt and the hoochie cooch dance as “one of the most outrageous assaults on the sacred dignity of womanhood ever endured in this country” in the press.\textsuperscript{46} These condemnations, however, did not prevent Little Egypt from getting booked for more and more gigs. In 1895, the \textit{National Police Gazette} reported that she and another belly dancer entertained eight New York state legislators at an event in Albany with their “writhing bodies and twitching muscles” to the twanging of a piano, the crashing of cymbals, and strong applause.\textsuperscript{47}

In the long term, such criticisms failed to stop Little Egypt’s dance from becoming a mainstay in burlesque – nor were visitors prevented from taking in the other forms of adult entertainment in Chicago. Publishers and promoters made visitors and city residents aware of the state, scale, and diversity of entertainment venues to be taken in around the time of the Fair. Published guides to entertainment and culture in Chicago, such as the 1892 book \textit{Chicago by Day and Night}, included profiles of the city at large, as well as detailed descriptions of the entertainment at venues such as David Henderson’s Chicago Opera House and Sam T. Jack’s

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{45} Alison M. Parker, \textit{Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933} (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, IL, 1997), 129.


\end{flushleft}
Madison Street Opera House. Both venues of burlesque, among others, promised a “liberal view of the female form divine,” and were not to be missed, according to the guide’s author.48

Meanwhile, burlesque productions began to feature Little Egypt’s character and style of dance as a special feature in their programming. Sam T. Jack hired a dancer named Omeena who performed a similar dance in front of all-male audiences. Theaters in New York City and Washington D.C., among others, featured their own “Little Egyptians” to get in on high demand for hoochie cooch dancers, which came to replace the cancan as the highest profile dance move for female performers in burlesque. Historian Brenda Foley argues that Little Egypt heralded the arrival of other exoticized performer types, such as “Little Africa,” “harem dancers,” and “shimmy shakers” who all performed the cooch dance. Each iteration of the Little Egypt character, Foley argues, were used to represent an Orientalized “Other” that fulfilled White male audiences’ demands for sexually-titillating entertainment without violating Victorian standards of White feminine chastity.49 Such was the popularity and acrimony surrounding the trend that belly dancers were subjected to arrest and litigation for violating indecency or vulgarity statutes.50

Male performers did not face the same condemnation or censorship controversies, with perhaps the only exception being “female impersonators.” While female models came under fire for living pictures, male figure models found success with figure posing and exhibitions of strength and masculinity on the burlesque and variety stage. The “strong man” became a popular

49 Foley, Undressed for Success, 21-22.
50 “Little Egypt Burlesquers at the Bijou,” The Washington Post, January 13, 1901; Shteir, Striptease, 45.
archetype and feature due to the success of men like Eugen Sandow. Originally an immigrant from Germany, Sandow premiered in Chicago in 1893 as a strong man act and figure poser in the guise of Herculean characters from classical literature. Sandow was objectified onstage and in advertisements that focused attention on his body – a familiar experience to female performers in his industry. Promoters at the Trocadero and other theaters loudly advertised the strength and beauty of his muscles and figure. Most salaciously, some barkers and masters of ceremony had even extended offers to show-goers to bid in auction for the chance to “examine” Sandow’s muscles up close backstage. Nevertheless, Sandow’s success on the variety stage illustrated and helped pave the way for the success of other strong men acts and, later, boxing exhibitions as part of the diverse programming of burlesque shows. Even further, some historians have argued that the high public profile of performers like Sandow had helped to establish in the public mind standards of masculine beauty, physical health and appearance that would define fitness culture and cultural depictions of men for years to come.51

By 1895, burlesque in Chicago had established a style and standard of performance to set itself apart from other genres of variety entertainment and that it would continue to add to in the years to come. Burlesque shows followed a format of comedic skits and dialogues with witty humor and double entendres, mixed with vaudevillian menageries of circus performances, exhibitions of femininity (in the way of living picture shows or cootch dances) and masculinity (in the way of prize-fighters, boxers, and strongmen figure-posing), and occasional female impersonator acts that straddled the line between the two. Most burlesque programs in this era, however, remained burlesques or satirical short plays and skits that mocked and sent up “higher

51 Elledge, Boys of Fairy Town, 34-36.
brow” literature, drama, and competing genres. In Chicago, the growth of burlesque was measured in the increasing number of venues dedicated to this new upstart art. Its growing presence caught the attention of conservative social reformers in the public and a city that did not yet consider it to be a threat worth addressing.

Conservative organizations coordinated resistance to early burlesque shows and venues. Private citizen groups such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union established the playbook of declaring moral outrage and associating crude entertainment with moral decay and threats to the family that would be used to justify censoring burlesque shows and prosecuting producers and performers for decades to follow. Indecency statutes on the books against “indecent exhibitions” and dressing outside of one’s assigned gender would be used repeatedly by citizens and law enforcement to suppress and censor both burlesque and drag shows in the twentieth century. Concerns with the image and reputation of burlesque even began to worry employers in the entertainment business by the turn of the century. The lack of oversight over racy writing and performer bookings created concerns that burlesque may be left behind by the entertainment industry. One press agent for the Columbia Amusement Company, which would come to dominate burlesque circuits in the early twentieth century, expressed some of these criticisms of nineteenth-century burlesque in 1915:

They called their shows burlesque, but they were not burlesque at all. They were a conglomeration of filthy dialog, libidinous scenes and licentious songs and dances with cheap, tawdry, garish and scant scenery and costumes. The ‘theatres’ in which they played were invariably located in or near the slum spots in the larger cities and were dirty and unkempt…and allowed to exist without police interference along with the bawdy houses that infested the neighborhoods. No woman ever crossed the thresholds of their

---

doors, and male patronage was confined to shameless degenerates.\textsuperscript{53}

As “libidinous,” “cheap,” and “tawdry” as the costumes, dialog, and content of burlesque shows were by century’s end, these qualities did not make them any less “burlesque.” Quite the contrary. Since its beginnings as satire of art considered on a “higher” level of esteem and quality, burlesque has always been defined by its irreverent nature and willingness to engage with the tastes and outlook of more diverse audiences. Its changes and adaptations, such as “leg shows,” hoochie cooch dances, vaudevillian female impersonation, and circus acts, all represent attempts by artists and producers to maintain burlesque’s relevance to its audience and the broader culture of mass entertainment by the end of the nineteenth century.

\textbf{Life, Work and Leisure in Chicago}

What made the origins and longevity of burlesque in Chicago particularly unique was the confluence of several factors that enabled the success of public entertainment and other industries in the city: geography, economy, and mass migrations to the city. Life and entertainment in Chicago radically changed in the nineteenth century. As the city expanded in territory and economics, so too did work and leisure for visitors and residents. For working-class and “adrift” single women, the city of Chicago provided an uncertain, albeit more promising source of employment and new experiences than what they previously thought possible.

Historian Joanne Meyerowitz documents the waves of migration of women to Chicago and finds that most incoming women were White and raised in other parts of the United States. Single women cited factors such as greater opportunities for more varied employment and higher pay as motivations for seeking residence and work in Chicago – either to support themselves or family

\textsuperscript{53} Zeidman, \textit{American Burlesque Show}, 43.
elsewhere. According to local census records, the female labor force in Chicago increased more than tenfold, from 35,600 to 407,600 between 1880 and 1930.\textsuperscript{54} Men traveling to Chicago after the Civil War cited similar motivations such as work and the opportunity to explore places beyond where they were raised. Unlike men, however, women also reported reasons such as sexual or emotional abuse at home, or the desire for entertainment and personal freedom without interference of parents.\textsuperscript{55} Black women in the South similarly sought travel to and residence in Chicago for reasons of employment and personal liberation from their previous living conditions. Black press publications such as the \textit{Chicago Defender} interviewed many incoming Black Americans who praised and advertised the different opportunities and experiences available to them, partly to spur and encourage even more migration to the urban north.\textsuperscript{56}

What greatly separated men and women in their movement to the city, however, was what awaited them. While choices for employment in Chicago may have been appealing, they were not evenly distributed. In 1880, almost half of the “women adrift” who lived away from family worked in needle trades, such as dressmaking and tailoring. Others worked primarily in service jobs and fewer, still, worked in teaching, sales, and clerical work. The options women had, regardless of race and ethnicity, were limited due to stigma and discrimination against working women. Single women seeking employment bore suspicion of leading an immoral lifestyle for living and working outside a familial home or marriage. Some retail employers explicitly advertised for female employees who “live at home, who are American, and who are


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 5.
respectable” and banned other candidates. Working women also were sexually harassed by employers who viewed them as vulnerable. In addition, most women workers at this time, “adrift” or otherwise, were intentionally paid less than male workers because it was expected that their income would be supplemented by family. Despite these issues, members of the public and the press displayed apathy towards women who complained of their conditions for the crime of living apart from family.\textsuperscript{57}

Single working women also turned to sex work for income – most often, prostitution. The number of women who worked in prostitution in Chicago can be difficult to estimate, due to the itinerant nature of sex work. An 1880 census found that four percent of women of the sampled women listed their occupation as prostitution. Later censuses did not record women who self-identified as such, though one municipal investigation estimated that there were 5,000 sex workers active in Chicago by 1911. Women often cited the lack of livable wages in other trades as a main motivation for engaging in sex work.\textsuperscript{58} Other women worked in “sexual service” jobs that utilized women to entice men to buy goods and services. Examples of these jobs included cocktail waitresses, masseuses, chorus girls, and cabaret dancers. Employers such as cabaret or variety theaters openly advertised for “shapely women” or young girls with “personal charms” who could entice “pleasure seekers” to attend shows and buy drinks.\textsuperscript{59} Interestingly, these jobs paid significantly higher than some of the more-mainstream jobs available to women, at the time. Working women and employers reported wages ranging from twelve to twenty-five dollars a

\textsuperscript{57} Meyerowitz, Women Adrift, 28.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 39.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 40.
week, compared to an average of five or six dollars a week for jobs in manufacturing, in the 1890s. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz has theorized that women in sexual service jobs likely earned higher wages either because their work lied outside of the “family economy” model – that is, employers presumed their employees would not have been supported by their families. This was not an aberration in the experience of the “adrift” women migrating to Chicago. Many cited a desire for jobs and lifestyles that would allow them to stay out late at night, to afford clothes and entertainment, and even for a “life on stage,” according to some social reform investigators. On the flip side, women who lived outside a traditional family model were portrayed as particularly vulnerable to falling into sex work or trafficking due to a lack of support from family or spouses. Articles in the Chicago Tribune and other press during the Victorian era were replete with stories of women who left behind their spouses and “family circles” for “abodes of vice” or brothels.

Where and how women lived in Chicago greatly influenced how they worked and pursued leisure in the Windy City. Earlier housing situations were monitored in such a way that obstructed women’s ability to work or socialize for long hours beyond a regulated, domestic space. In the early nineteenth century, the boarding home, operated by religious institutions, women’s groups, and social reform advocacy groups, was a common source for housing for single women. One such organization, the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), sought out women in Chicago with the goal to “bring them under moral and religious influences”

---

60 Meyerowitz, Women Adrift, 40.

61 Ibid, 18; 40-41.

62 “Sad Death of a Prostitute,” Chicago Tribune, August 4, 1864.
by providing them the “good living and the comforts and blessings of a Christian home” with lower-cost boarding homes. In these boarding homes, institutions like the YWCA provided food and board, as well as services they believed necessary to keep their boarders occupied and cultured – including libraries, music, religious service, and chaperoned visits from male guests.

However, the operations of these homes and the surrogate familial atmospheres they attempted to create were undermined by an overzealous attempt to regulate the lives and socialization of working women. The leadership that operated these homes were preoccupied with maintaining the sexual purity and morality of their boarders by shielding them from the “temptations” of the city. Superintendents of YWCA boarding houses reasoned that, as most of their facilities catered to middle class transplants, that many of their boarders lacked experience with working skills to be able to economically sustain themselves independently, and thus were “helpless” without boarding homes where they could learn and live safely.63 The benevolent messaging of this endeavor was undermined by substandard living conditions in boarding houses as well as discrimination against applicants seeking housing. Public investigators and the press published complaints of cramped and overcrowded living, the “inadequate” and funereal meals and Christian atmosphere, and the utter lack of privacy and opportunity to meet people or make friends outside the home. Such frustrations were best voiced by a letter written by a group of women from a YWCA home to a Chicago newspaper in 1890. These women, who called themselves “the victims of the house,” expressed disdain for the supervision and morally condescending attitude of the home’s atmosphere. “The idea seems to be in circulation,” they argue, “that we...are a collection of ignorant, weak-minded young persons, who have never had

63 “Helpless Young Women,” Chicago Tribune, August 19, 1888.
any advantages, educational or otherwise, and that we are brought here where we will be philanthropically cared for...and may learn something of the ways of civilization.”

Boarding homes that were not directly run by women’s organizations like YWCA were more expensive and discriminating in who they accepted as tenants. The Chicago Tribune reported in 1887 that boarding home board, on average, was more expensive than rent for rooms in privately-owned homes. While the food and service was spotty for all boarding home residents, at best, female tenants, according to the Tribune writer, were charged higher rents than male guests because they were believed to be more likely to complain about conditions to the boarding house mistress. Discrimination was common against single female applicants for boarding house lodging in general, as owners and superintendents believed that male tenants required fewer services and were more likely to make rent payments.

From 1890 onwards, working women gravitated towards apartments and “furnished room districts” where they could live, work, date, and seek entertainment without supervision. Discrimination against women in other housing situations directed a great many to seek out living in independent apartments. The influx of new business and entrepreneurship around the World’s Fair also translated to urban development that afforded more options for living and leisure for single men and women in Chicago. Increased migrations of people to Chicago by the time of the Fair resulted in an increased demand for affordable housing reasonably close to the downtown area. In some districts, elaborate mansions were converted into furnished rooming

---

64 Meyerowitz, Women Adrift, 85.
houses with sub-divided rooms. More often, entrepreneurs instead invested into apartment buildings with studio and small kitchenette units. While not the largest and most furnished of housing options, single bedroom apartments afforded working women the opportunity to work and explore the city at later hours without any of the supervision or regimented lifestyle that came with the boarding homes.

After 1900, “furnished room districts” or areas with concentrations of studio and single bedroom apartments formed in areas to the immediate North, South, and West of the Loop. These districts, populated with either subdivided single family homes or dense “apartment hotels” built from former tenements, held residents of different trades and classes. The districts on the West Side, for instance, housed primarily White service and factory workers, as well as some cooperative housing with working women, while the North Side held predominately White sales and clerical workers, manufacturing workers, and even artists. What united these neighborhoods of working men and women, however, was their reliance on peer networks for mutual reliance and socialization. Female roommates interviewed by the Tribune in 1890 described their lives as difficult, but fulfilling, as they pooled their money earned from domestic and clerical work to move into an apartment out of an expensive boarding house. Together, they were able to turn their apartment into a home with furniture they bought and amenities such as a gas stove oven – comforts that allowed them to host newfound friends. “It costs no more than it did to board,” said one of the women, “and what an unknown delight it is to entertain your

---

67 Meyerowitz, Women Adrift, 76-77
friends in dainty rooms of your own and give them little dinners and lunches at your own
board…I wish more young women would try this.”

For women, life in these districts provided opportunities for extended economic support
and a more vibrant social life with friends and potential lovers. Historians and reports of urban
culture at the turn-of-the-century document how women in Chicago engaged in “treating”
systems of dating, by which they would consent to date or engage in sexual relations with men in
exchange for being entertained in restaurants, theaters, dance halls, and the like. While women
condemned at the time by critics in publications for engaging in what was deemed semi-
prostitution,” many women defended the practice as economically practical in subsequent
interviews. Some former waitresses, for instance, bluntly told social reform investigators in
1912, “If I did not have a man, I could not get along on my wages.” This dating system was not
without inherent risks, as many women reported sexual harassment and regret with this style of
dating. Nevertheless, the introduction of women to work and leisure outside of familial or
boarding homes led to lasting relationships and networks with men and women of common
interests. Waitresses and other working women who lived adjacent to downtown reported
spending time with friends from work, patronizing restaurants, theaters, and cabarets. Some who
worked in newer forms of entertainment in these districts, such as the dance halls, even lived
together, worked out arrangements for dancing with and dating male customers and pooled their

---

68 “Girlish Chums in a Flat,” Chicago Tribune, July 31, 1890.


70 Meyerowitz, Women Adrift, 102.
In short, the heterosocial nature of these districts enabled men and women to live and seek leisure together in many of the new restaurants, theaters, social clubs, and other venues that cropped up from the 1890s onwards to greet them.

In the twentieth century, however, Chicago burlesque artists and managers became victims of their success. The growth of burlesque as a citywide industry with multiple theaters coincided with more frequent clashes with conservative-minded citizen’s groups and municipal agencies eager to see burlesque venues shut down for “indecency.” At the same time, female impersonation or drag followed in burlesque’s footsteps to branch out away from its roots in variety and vaudeville to become both a subculture and an independent genre of entertainment in Bohemian communities in the city’s north and south sides. Burlesque and drag originated in the nineteenth century with one foot planted in their roots in vaudeville and variety entertainment. In the twentieth century, both stood on their own as sources of employment, community, and identity to men and women seeking work in entertainment that accommodated their lives as single, working adults. In the process, these artists would develop innovative performance styles to challenge standards of the appearance and portrayal of gender and sexuality onstage while butting heads with a city determined to uphold its image as a place for business and family.

“Prudery is perennial. Seekers after notoriety are the same.”

---

71 Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*, 107-108

CHAPTER 2

“SHIMMYING FORWARD”

GROWTH AND CONTROVERSY IN DRAG AND BURLESQUE,

1895-1920

In the beginning of the twentieth century, burlesque and female impersonation (later to become known as drag) boomed in popularity and found success both on mainstream stages downtown and in subcultural communities throughout Chicago. Burlesque, for its part, grew into an independent show industry with multiple venues, some independent and others part of the growing national circuit system that regulated member theaters’ content and often dictated the kinds of performances audiences could see. In a city of growing competition among venues, some theater managers and producers sought success and longevity by “cleaning up” the content of their programs, improving or building venues to emulate the upper scale décor and grandeur of mainstream theaters, and by attempting to regulate the behavior and makeup of its audiences. Other venue operators, however, chose to double down on the racy reputation of burlesque by hosting artists in even greater levels of nudity or variety performances intended to provoke sensation and titillation.

Burlesque promoters and performers, regardless of their tactics, fell under the surveillance and condemnation of both municipal authorities and citizens’ organizations dedicated to social reform and stopping suspected “vice” activities that they associated with theaters and cheap amusements catering to young audiences. Female impersonators, for their part, became more visible in this century, as they secured billing and gigs on burlesque and
vaudevillian stages. Cross-dressing, itself, gained new meaning as a lifestyle and subtextual code in queer subcultures and artistic communities that grew as a result of the migration of artists, musicians, and young adults to the city’s north and south sides. In bohemian districts such as Bronzeville and Towertown, female impersonators found a ready demand for their entertainment in cabarets and concert saloons amongst more open-minded, “free love” residents and upper-scale visitors from other districts or out of town “slumming” to observe them. By 1920, however, both burlesque and drag were already targeted for surveillance, arrests and litigation by the city and conservative citizens that viewed both forms of entertainment as blights to public morality and the city’s image. The first few decades of the twentieth century therefore witnessed some of the cycles of popularity, success and cultural backlash that continued to define the history of burlesque and drag in the Windy City.

New Sights and Appetites

The audiences and demand for adult entertainment grew with the continued migration of young adults to Chicago in the early twentieth century. The migration of native-born Black and White Americans, as well as European immigrants, grew alongside the city’s economy in the first decades of the twentieth century, albeit not evenly. Peaks and declines in migration often coincided with periods of economic growth and depression, respectively. 265,000 White Americans migrated into the city between 1890 and 1900, according to a 1933 study of Chicago land values. However, the same report indicated during the economic depression from 1893 to 1897, the city witnessed a decline of migration as workers across demographic lines sought work in other cities.¹ The migration of Americans to Chicago thereafter peaked during and after World

War I, while immigration quotas significantly reduced the number of incoming immigrants. The same 1933 study, for instance, estimated a growth of White native-born residents of 236,257 and 259,158 in the 1910s and 1920s, respectively. African Americans, in comparison, grew in population by 65,000 and 146,000 those same decades. In stark contrast, the population growth of immigrants dropped from hundreds of thousands between 1880 and 1910 to mere tens of thousands thereafter.\(^2\) Harvey Zorbaugh’s sociological study of Chicago’s Near North Side, titled *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929) ascribed the “invasion” of sharecroppers and cotton pickers and their families from the south to their willingness to pay higher rents and live in deteriorated housing abandoned by Italian immigrants. Zorbaugh estimated that eighty-nine percent of Blacks in Chicago were originally from the rural South and that several thousand had already “penetrated” little Sicily, despite efforts by preexisting Sicilian landowners to prevent Blacks from buying property or from attending the same schools as their children. Despite such resistance, the report’s authors concluded that the “peaceful invasion” of Black migrants had been successful, with families and couples occupying rear flat and basement apartments with stove heat, peeling plaster walls, outdoor toilets, and other markers of decay, affording cheap rents with often unskilled and temporary labor. Despite the “peaceful” nature of the settlement of Blacks in the Near North Side and other places, however, reports like this warned that “poverty is extreme and mortality is high.”\(^3\)

The prevalence of “bright light” centers of entertainment on major streets greatly assisted the social life and dating cultures of young working adults in the Near North Side. Clark Street


and Halsted Street were reported to have several dozen saloons, restaurants and cabarets by 1918, which were built by investors in the hopes of profiting from these new waves of migration. In addition, there was the presence of dance halls and even prostitution, which facilitated the growth of a casual sex and “treating” dating culture. The growing presence of resorts for adult entertainment and socializing was not lost on observers, at the time. One sociologist said of the cabaret scene, “Considerable companionship grows up around these resorts, one is struck by the fact that the same people visit and re-visit the same cabaret, time and again.” Reports produced by the city’s Committee of Fifteen (an organization that investigated issues of poverty and “vice”) described cabarets such as the Erie Café and the 606 as “frankly dirty” with young female entertainers encouraged to drink and flirt with customers, who were often a “local patronage from the slum” neighborhoods nearby. The Chicago Vice Commission’s report, titled *The Social Evil* (1911), similarly characterized entertainment spaces such as cabarets and dance halls as spaces where men and women could socialize and have romantic encounters at liberty. Its authors also expressed concerns, however, that such spaces were being used to commit crimes of petty theft, fraud and solicitation of sex workers.

Other reports in 1918, by comparison, noted how the attractions of Halsted Street, including movie theaters, saloons, and dance halls, continued to draw people living in adjacent neighborhoods. The dance halls attracted “lonely and heart-hungry” single men and women who lived in the nearby furnished room district looking to form “intimacies” for the night. Some

---

4 The “slum” in question is likely a reference to the neighboring communities of Italian immigrants derogatively named “Little Hell.” Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, 116-118.


studies alleged that these dance halls also attracted prostitutes looking to solicit single men, as well as gangs and homeless men, the latter of whom would purchase tickets to dance with female “instructors” working at the hall.⁷ Women and men living in these areas attested to how the entertainment and social life in these areas afforded them ample opportunity for dating and social lives, though not without the threat of abuse and harassment that came with unspoken expectations behind dating. Men expressed annoyance with the perceived need to earn enough wages to afford dinner and gifts for prospective dates, while women recounted feeling pressured by economics or their peers into the exchange of sexual favors as “occasional prostitutes,” as the Chicago Vice Commission called it.⁸

For women, life in the near North Side offered the freedom to pursue friendships and sexual relationships that were free, open, and tempestuous. Men and women who lived together and took in boarders to supplement their wages, for instance, would be brought together and split apart by romantic attraction. Friendships between female roommates broke down when one was caught “monkeying around” with a man that the other was attracted to. In other cases, women would move in with men they had only recently met to share the costs of living and just to be in a relationship. “He said that he loved me,” said one woman, “and I was willing not to question too closely.”⁹

These alleged and documented issues of open sexuality and sex work were more greatly associated with the furnished room district in the city’s South Side. This district, stretching from

---

⁷ Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, 120-121.


16th Street in the South Loop down to 35th Street in Bronzeville, housed major parts of the city’s Black community. This area encompassed parts of the “Old Levee” district (what would be considered the South Loop, today), as well as what would eventually become Chicago’s modern Chinatown after 1911 and parts of Bronzeville. The “bright light” centers of this district resided first on State Street and later, by the 1920s, on Thirty-Fifth Street. In both streets, residents and wealthier Chicagoans looking to “slumming” could attend dance halls, movies, saloons, and integrated “Black and tan” cabarets.10

Even in the days of the Old Levee District, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this stretch of State Street hosted performances of drag and a queer community that was outwardly sexual by the standards of the Victorian era. Since 1896, Aldermen of the First Ward Michael “Hinky Dink” Kenna and “Bathhouse” John Coughlin hosted what was called the “First Ward Ball” at an armory building on South Wentworth Avenue in order to raise money for political campaigns and to, allegedly, solicit protection money from the illicit businesses in their district — including prostitutes and gamblers. What was called the “annual underworld orgy” in its years of operation between 1896 and 1908 was also one of the few opportunities men could dress in full drag as “female impersonators” in public without fear of being arrested or harassed. During masquerade ball dancing and marches with “madams, strumpets…harlequins, pan handlers…pimps [and] pan handlers,” among other types, queer men could easily blend with the crowd. Their presence was noted with scorn by social reformers who described the appearance of men in drag at the balls as “unbelievably appalling and nauseating” and worked to have the First

---

10 Ibid, 109-111.
Ward Ball deprived of its liquor license and dissolve by 1908. Coughlin and McKenna, for their part, attempted to resume the balls by agreeing to ban prostitutes and female impersonators from attending in the future. Police threatened to arrest and give a “swift ride to [the police station at] Harrison Street” to “the first male who appears in dresses,” a warning that allegedly deterred men from attending in drag to the 1909 ball.

These setbacks aside, reports by eyewitnesses and social reform organizations indicate that female impersonators continued to have a notable public presence on and off-stage South of the Loop, even as the Levee District was later dissolved. One report by the Vice Commission of documented the presence of men who wore women’s clothing and appeared as female impersonators, both on and off stage at some venues on State Street.

Some of these men impersonate women on the cheap vaudeville stage, in connection with disorderly saloons. Their disguise is so perfect, they are enabled to sit at tables with men between the acts and solicit for drinks the same as prostitutes. Two of these ‘female impersonators’ were recently seen in one of the most notorious saloons…These ‘supposed’ women solicited for drinks, and afterwards invited the men to rooms over the saloon for pervert practices.

The comingling of Black and White people in the South Side district and, later, Bronzeville, provoked concerns and suspicions of prostitution and more liberal sexuality. Before police raids in 1912, an unofficial “vice district” or concentration of brothels had been in this

---


13 *The Social Evil in Chicago*, 297.
area, including houses run by notorious figures such as the Everleigh Sisters.¹⁴ The presence of African Americans and this area’s previous history thus gave rise to a reputation for being a place for soliciting prostitutes and more overt sexuality. The presence of so-called “Black and Tan” cabarets and dance halls were of special concern to the city and social reformers. These leisure resorts earned their name by allowing both black and white audiences to attend shows and to dance together. The potential for interracial sexuality and socialization was taken as a threat to conservative elements of Chicago politics and society. In the context of the racial rioting of 1919, these fears were given voice in the press. Advocates for the city’s Democratic party alleged that these integrated spaces were “a potent breeder of race hatred, which may explore into a race riot at any moment” in their advocacy for the mayoral campaign of Judge William E. Dever in 1923. Upon election, Mayor-elect Dever ordered the closure of ten black and tan venues in Bronzeville and revoked the liquor licenses of others.¹⁵

However, firsthand accounts indicated that men and women in each of the three furnished room districts, Black and White, created casual sexual relationships and engaged in prostitution, as clients and sex workers. In each district, young adults lived only amongst their peers in boarding homes and apartments, free to come and go at all hours and break with social rules of behavior and sexuality without fear of judgment. As one source was quoted saying for a sociological report in 1918, furnished room districts were a place where people went to “get

---

¹⁴ A full history of the Everleigh Sisters and the state of the adult sex trade in Chicago at the turn of the century can be found in Karen Abbot, *Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America’s Soul* (New York: Random House, 2007).

away from their neighbors.” By the 1920s, some eyewitnesses even reported witnessing the growth of gay and lesbian communities in some of these furnished room districts who likewise flourished in the anonymity these neighborhoods afforded. Jazz musicians and residents noted that lesbians frequented many “tea shops and bootleg joints” on the Near-North and South Sides,” where they flirted with potential “women sweethearts” as romantic partners or sex work clients. Reports of dance halls around the city conducted by the Juvenile Protective Association in 1916 that dance halls in each of the furnished room districts (and, indeed, across the city) violated many ordinances surrounding curfews and liquor sales, and hosted not just many single men seeking to “treat” women and ply them with drinks, but solicitation and “masquerade balls” that featured men and women in “indecent” and cross-gendered dress. In other words, Bronzeville and the South State Street district were not uniquely brazen in the amount of opportunities it afforded for casual dating, sex and to dress in drag.

Bronzeville and the “stroll” on 35th Street did nurture a nascent queer community that blossomed later in the twentieth century. The Great Migration of African Americans from the South to Chicago and other cities in the north and west in the turn of the century afforded queer men and women, as well as artists, with the chance to live more openly in new communities that granted them more anonymity and independence. One Tony Jackson, a blues pianist born and raised in New Orleans, reportedly moved to Chicago for both work and personal freedom. His friend and fellow blues musician, Jelly Roll Morton, recounted that “Tony happened to be one of

17 Ibid, 114.
those gentlemens [sic] that a lot of people call them lady or sissy…and that was the cause of him going to Chicago about 1906. He liked the freedom there.”¹⁹ Once in Bronzeville, Jackson reportedly had little trouble finding gigs at many Bronzeville cabarets and juke joints, a scene he played in until dying young in 1921.²⁰

By that time, a stretch of State Street between 26th and 39th Street had become a lucrative and popular “bright light district” for the enjoyment of its residents and those of the South Loop furnished district looking to “slum” with Black establishments and entertainers in Bronzeville and the Near South Side. Also known as “The Stroll,” this stretch hosted many Black and Tan cabarets that either tolerated or hosted patrons and performers dressed in drag. One such venue, the Plantation Café, was investigated by social reform organizations because it allowed men to dance together. An investigative article published by Variety in 1926 described the Café as a “paradise” where men in drag could “parade their clothes, mingle with the white element that doesn’t seem to care, and rub elbows companionably with daring youngsters and portly commercial men who loudly explain that they are there slumming.”²¹ Outside of the venues, queer men dressed in drag openly during parties or masquerade balls for holidays such as Halloween or New Year’s Eve. On these occasions, men dressed as women so long as they included themed elements (such as ghost or witch costuming) to justify their appearance. Like the balls Hinky Dink and Bathhouse John, these masquerade balls of the early twentieth century were operated and patronized by sponsoring organizations. The North Shore Men’s Club, which

¹⁹ Elledge, The Boys of Fairy Town, 99.
²⁰ Ibid, 100.
²¹ Hal, “Plantation,” Variety, April 1926; Elledge, The Boys of Fairy Town, 103.
was headquartered in Bronzeville, sponsored its first masquerade ball in 1911 and held contests in subsequent balls for “the best female impersonator.” Families were even advertised to and encouraged to bring their children “to see the funny sights.”

A sociology student at the University of Chicago, Myles Vollmer, observed some of the drag balls that took place in New Year’s Eve in Bronzeville and remarked upon the diversity of its attendants and the outward dress and behavior of attendees wearing drag:

Physically, all types are there. Homosexuals thin and wasted, others slender and with womanish curves, others overfed and lustfully fat… There is a preponderance of Jews and the Latin Nationalities, although homosexuality is no respecter of races. Many of the men are of Polish blood. Negros mingle freely with whites. There seemingly is not race distinction between them… The picture is repeated over and over – colorful evening gowns, satin slippers, French heels, silken hose, gracefully displayed, tiaras, feathered fans, flashing jewelry, - all gliding about the Hall. Gliding is the only name for it, no woman could be more graceful… The “girls” move about swaying their shoulders, rolling their hips, and the only clue to their masculinity is their heavier skeletal frames, or occasionally a more masculine featured face.

In the South Side, hobbyist and professional dancers discovered the “shimmy,” a move that was soon appropriated for burlesque performance. How it came to be adopted by burlesque performers is likewise unclear, but it at least became known by artists by the time of the First World War – in particular, one Mae West. West, born in 1890 in New York, had worked in vaudeville since she was fourteen-years-old and oscillated between musical vaudeville, male impersonation, and burlesque throughout her stage career. She earned a reputation for putting on risqué performances in vaudeville and burlesque, where she often performed industry standards

22 Elledge, The Boys of Fairy Town, 104.

23 Myles Vollmer, “The New Year’s Eve Drag,” Box 98, Folder 11, Burgess Papers, Special Collections Research Center, The Regenstein Library, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
like the hoochy cooch and, later, fan dances. West stood out amongst her peers, however, by appropriating dance styles and expressions of gender from both female impersonators and communities of color. Reportedly, she was inspired by the performances of Bert Savoy (with whom she worked for years in New York) and adapted his stage female characters’ mannerisms, including elaborate dresses, outlandish feathered hats, “leisurely, leering glances” at male audience members, and double entendres, all to make her character seem more daring and feminine.\textsuperscript{24} She also appropriated and brought to the stage dance moves that were, in her time, were rooted in African American dance stylings and traditions, such as the “Grizzly Bear” and the “Turkey Trot” – moves that were better known in working-class dance halls and unseen on stage. During a visit to Chicago in 1914, however, Mae West reportedly encountered the Shimmy for the first time at a dance hall in the South Side and was immediately taken by it. In her own words, she immediately began to perform the shimmy for shows.

\begin{quote}
We went to the Elite Number One and the colored couples on the dance floor were doing the ‘shimmy-shawobble…’ They got up from the tables, got out to the dance floor, and stood in one spot with hardly any movement of the feet, and just shook their shoulders, torsos and pelvises. We thought it was funny and were terribly amused by it. But there was a naked aching sensual agony about it, too. The next day on stage at the matinee, the other actors were standing in the wings watching my act. I always did a dance for an encore. Then, inspired by the night before, during the dance music I suddenly stood still and started to shake in a kidding way, for the benefit of the actors in the wings backstage, recalling to them what we had seen the night before at the Elite Number One. The theater began to hum.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} Leider, Emily Worth, \textit{Becoming Mae West} (United States: Da Capo Press, 2000), 122-123.

West, for her part, continued to perform the shimmy both in vaudeville and on Broadway in plays she wrote, such as Sex, in which she combined the shimmy with elements of striptease, such as the use of removable shoulder straps on a dress. If her account is to be believed, it can be said that Chicago helped to contribute another distinctive dance move that would come to define burlesque performance, after the hoochy cooch. It would not be the last.

On the Near North Side, another neighborhood arose due to the adjacency of furnished room districts and the influx of young, single working people, artists, and queer subcultures. This district, called “Towertown,” sprung up after the 1893 World’s Fair when studios and institutions like the Academy of Fine Arts were founded to attract visiting artists to stay to work and live in Chicago. Here, like in other furnished room districts, large mansions and houses were subdivided into small apartments with few furnishings and amenities, as well as studios for writer and painters. The cheaper rent and location of (named for its proximity to the Old Water Tower on Michigan Avenue to its east) made it an attractive place to live for professional and studying artists. Many students of music, dance, and stage theater with schools such as the Art Institute lived and worked here during their education. The Three Arts Club was founded by patron supporters of the arts as a more supervised dorm living situation for arts students in the neighboring Gold Coast. However, sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh indicated that many aspiring artists chose to live in Towertown for opportunities to socialize with other young adults like them and to gain direct work experience in entertainment.

The majority of these students…live in furnished rooms in Towertown, eking out an existence as ushers in the theaters, ‘supers’ at the opera, singing for women’s clubs, dancing at movie palaces, or modeling. They mingle with bohemia at its studio parties and many evanescent little theaters – the Jack and Jill Players, the Impertinent Players, the Studio Players, Neo Arlimusc
[sic], and a score of others which are scattered about the ‘village.’

In fact, by the 1920s, women proved to be some of the most entrepreneurial members of this community, as they owned and rented out most of the tea rooms, art galleries, and studios in the “village.” By this time, too, women had increasingly been employed as ushers in mainstream and burlesque theaters downtown in order to enhance venues’ reputations for being safe and hospitable for female patrons.

Towertown became renowned for its spaces of entertainment and reputation for hosting artists, intellectuals, and discussions and exhibitions of radical ideas of politics and culture. Here, like the other furnished room districts in and adjacent to the downtown area, young adults took solace in the anonymity of being surrounding by transplants like them and felt free to pursue casual romantic relationships and friendships with new and interesting acquaintances. This was especially true for queer men, whose presence and motivations for living in Towertown did not escape mention by observers, at the time. Chicago sociologist Walter Reckless remarked in his studies of Towertown that many homosexual men frequented the “tearooms” and studios, as the apartments, with their “anonymous living conditions” provided residents with a “secret habitat of vice.” Accounts from residents living in Towertown at the time likewise noted the presence of


27 “Women as Theater Ushers: Manager Sam T. Jack to Introduce an Innovation in His Playhouse,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 1893.


“homos” both living in and visiting the neighborhood and frequenting cabarets and bars with the reputation of hosting “the best-known fairies and lesbians in Chicago.”

The neighborhood had a reputation for hosting and embracing ideas of “free love” and individualism that colored the kind of entertainment and nightlife it had to offer. Many bars and cabarets doubled as meeting places for many groups of people on the margins of society at the turn of the century: including political radicals, homosexual patrons, critical artists, and drag artists or female impersonators. One such venue, the Dill Pickle Club, was founded in 1916 and hosted dances, debates, masquerade balls, and other attractions at its location at 18 Tooker Alley and Dearborn Street. The Dill Pickle’s opening in 1916 adjacent to Washington Square Park was reportedly christened with a “dance on the bran dusted pavement” outside of its doors with artists, intellectuals and other “society folk” such as Carl Sandburg and Margaret Sanger performing or in attendance. The Dill Pickle continued to play host to debates and discussions with political and cultural radicals, as well as exhibitions and performances by artists considered to be on the fringes of society, at the time. Lectures titled “The Third Sex” and “Will Amazonic Women Usurp Men’s Sphere?” challenged norms of binary gender identity and the role of men and women in society, reportedly to eager applause by audiences. Journalistic coverage indicated that the Dill Pickle was a friendly venue and atmosphere to queer men and women, as well as drag entertainers, as early as the 1920s. Reports by the Tribune detailed “harem dancing…by men in women’s costumes” and “hard boiled girls” after both a boxing exhibition

---

32 De la Croix, Chicago Whispers, 65.
and a reading of the poem “The Lawyers Know Too Much” by Carl Sandburg. Even though policemen (and policewomen) threatened to shut down such congregations and the building was almost sold off, the Dill Pickle would continue to enjoy business and support from artists and patrons determined to keep it open with generous donations and continued attendance. As one Tribune writer put it in 1920, “The Dill Picklers are having the time of their lives.”

Other cabarets and bars in Towertown similarly played host to female impersonators, among other forms of entertainment. The Wind Blew Inn, located on 116 East Ohio Avenue, opened in 1920 and proved to have a much shorter though no less controversial life than the Dill Pickle. The Inn became the target of appeals for closure and arrests by the Juvenile Protective Association (JPA), which was irked by the fact that the Inn and other cabarets in Towertown were advertised in student publications at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and the School of the Art Institute. In the eyes of the JPA, these locations were simply too attractive and tempting to youths to be left standing. In 1922, police arrested Inn patrons and forced the Inn to close in response to complaints about the alleged activities. In the morning of February 12, 1922, police responded to reports of loud music, liquor sales in violation of the Volstead Act, and public disturbances coming from the club by forcing it to close and arresting forty people. Those arrested included the Inn’s owners, circus performer Lillian Colley, her partner Virginia Harrison, and male students from Northwestern University. Colley reportedly


34 Heap, Slumming, 68.
was enraged by the arrests and raid, threatening police by saying, “Just wait until I tell Mayor Thompson on you fellows. He will let me open up again, he’s my friend.”

Later attempts by police to force the Wind Blew Inn to comply with a municipal law for 1:00 A.M. curfews transpired into a case that, for a while, restricted the ability of the police and the Mayor to shut down or restrict cabarets around the city. On March 5, after police again forced the Wind Blew Inn to close just weeks before, First Assistant Corporation Counsel James W. Breen held that the chief of police could not invoke the mayor’s power to give and revoke licenses to places of public entertainment to regulate cabarets like the Wind Blew Inn. In a similar case regarding the Sunset Café in Bronzeville, Breen ruled that the Mayor could not revoke the licenses of any cabaret that did not outwardly violate the terms of their performance license. These twin developments signaled a victory for cabarets across the city but arrived too late to save the Wind Blew Inn, which was severely damaged by a fire in April that forced its owners to sell the property later that year.

Other cabarets in Towertown proved to have more staying power and hosted female impersonators with the freedom that the Wind Blew Inn’s legal victories afforded. The Green Mask was one such place, opened and managed by one Agnes “Bunny” Weiner – a former burlesque performer and chorus girl – and her partner Beryl Boughton. The establishment reportedly escaped the attention of police because upstairs allegedly was a brothel operated by a Greek Syndicate that bribed police not to investigate the building. Like the Dill Pickle Club, the

35 “Cops Blow in the Wind Blew Inn; Blow out with Forty,” Chicago Tribune, February 12, 1922.
36 “Can’t Enforce 1 O’Clock Order,” Chicago Tribune, March 5, 1922.
37 “Hobohemia’s Temple Burns,” Chicago Tribune, April 22, 1922.
Green Mask was a safe space for artists, the expression of radical ideas of love and politics, and a convenient venue in which entertainers performed and socialized. Poet Kenneth Rexroth described the décor, atmosphere and visitors of the Green Mask in detail:

The place was a hangout for bonafide artists, writers, musicians, and people from show business...After the shows the place filled up with headliners from the Follies and the Orpheum Circuit as well as people from the burlesque shows...So in a couple of years I met everybody in show business and in music who was of the slightest importance, and in addition the great female impersonators Bert Savoy, Julian Eltinge, who was not supposed to be gay but who had huge natural breasts, and Carole Normand, “The Creole Fashion Plate.”

The lifespan of the Green Mask, like the Wind Blew Inn, was short lived due to the ire it raised with local police. In 1922, police raided the Green Mask and arrested sixteen people in response to reports of noise complaints and disorderly conduct. The tea room was later raided once more in 1923 in response to obscene poetry that was read by George Lexington. Historians John D’Emilio and Sukie de la Croix argue that Towertown’s appeal and role as a host for free-spirited artists and radicalism declined after 1923, with the exception of the Dill Pickle Club which continued to do business and find a place in the queer community into the 1930s. Whether or not Towertown declined in the way and time described, the residents and workers in the Loop and Near North Side continued to find diversion, leisure and casual romance in the furnished room districts in the furnished room districts to the North, West and South sides of the Loop. Some of these areas, including the expanse of South State Street toward the Black

38 De la Croix, Chicago Whispers, 62.
39 Ibid, 64.
40 De la Croix, Chicago Whispers, 64.
Belt, Clark Street, and the Dill Pickle Club, later played a role in hosting some of the first successful venues for drag independent of vaudeville and other forms of entertainment, as well as safe spaces for queer men and women to congregate as they became more visible in the so-called “Pansy Craze” of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

**Burlesque Grows as an Industry**

While new neighborhoods of working men, women and artists took root in Chicago, burlesque, female impersonation, and adult entertainment, in general, continued to expand into citywide businesses from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Burlesque theatres grew in Chicago off the growing demand for suggestive performances such as cooch dancing and Salomes at the turn of the century. Press coverage by publications such as the *Chicago Tribune* indicate that theaters offered burlesque productions as part of wider programs in vaudeville and variety entertainment as early as 1870. In the first decade of the twentieth century, more and more theatres in the Loop district began to feature dedicated burlesque productions with circus performers, singers, chorus line dancers, and comedy. Two clusters of theatres formed downtown, one along State Street between Van Buren and Polk Street, the other near West Madison and Halsted Street. The Loop was ideal for the theater operators for its cheaper land prices and proximity to working men and visitors arriving by train. Many theaters did not hesitate to embrace burlesque acts featuring women, front and center. The Empire Theatre, for instance, opened in 1907 with a seating capacity of 1,450 and featured chorus girl line dances in scant clothing. Others, like the Hopkins Theater, attempted to attract business by offering low

---


42 Ibid.
prices and amateur talent nights that invited heckling, insults and food thrown by the audience.\(^{43}\)

The number of theaters in Chicago grew due in part to the growth of the “circuit” system that defined burlesque as a business in the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Two separate “wheels” or circuits were founded at the close of the nineteenth century: The Empire Circuit founded in 1897 (also known as the Western Circuit) and the Columbia Circuit founded in 1902 (also known as the Eastern Circuit). In practice, both organizations operated similarly to their counterparts in vaudeville and Broadway theater by operating multiple theaters across different cities, primarily on the East coast and the Midwest, in order to guarantee more employment for touring burlesque artists and to control the type of performances included in burlesque productions. This system was designed to offer steadier employment and a greater guarantee of pay and gigs by rotating different productions and shows between venues, city to city, for seasons lasting as long as ten months. In so doing, this arrangement, as burlesque historian Irving Zeidman puts it, prevented burlesque troops from being “totally dependent on the whims and resources of the company manager” and from becoming “stranded without funds in some remote exile.”\(^ {44}\)

According to historian Rachel Shteir, the Empire Circuit had a reputation for presenting “rougher” burlesque with more adult content in venues that resembled honky tonks and concert saloons, rather than bonafide theaters. Venues such as the Folly in Chicago, for instance, fit this mold as a venue that hosted burlesque shows since 1904 and was

\(^{43}\) The theater would later attempt to rebrand itself as the State-Congress Theater in 1919 and attempted to offer “high end” vaudeville acts in the hopes of attracting more female audience members. Unfortunately, it suffered from lack of business because women were unwilling to venture south away from department stores to the State-Congress' area adjacent to saloons, pool halls, and other businesses that did not cater to women. The theater ultimately resumed showing only burlesque acts and closed in 1933. Ibid.

infamous for “amateur talent nights” that saw crowds of raucous men cheer, heckle, and throw rotten eggs and dead chickens at variety performers and dancers on the stage.

In contrast, the Columbia Circuit marketed its venues as providing “cleaned up” burlesque to attract family audiences. To that end, the heads of the Columbia Circuit later issued rules banning certain performances, such as cooch dancing, from being featured in their venues. In Chicago, however, member-theaters such as the Trocadero and the Alhambra Theater, continued to feature burlesque dancers who used suggestive dancing and flirtatious dialogue typical of burlesque shows, at the time.45 Indeed, the Columbia Circuit eventually won out, absorbing the venues and productions of the Empire Circuit, such that it controlled an estimated eighty-one theaters and seventy-three shows between New York and Omaha by 1914. The Columbia continued to chiefly identify with cleaner “approved burlesque” devoid of suggestive dancing in the way of the hoochie cooch and shimmy, but also created a subsidiary circuit called the American Wheel that provided “standard burlesque” in the way of “coochers” and “oriental dancers.” Despite this demarcation, Chicago theaters that were under the Columbia Circuit, such as the Trocadero, invited controversy in the early twentieth century by continuing to feature nude cooch and “muscle” dancers in violation of the Circuit’s rules.

Some burlesque theaters and producers went to great lengths to try to represent burlesque as a legitimate and respectable art form for broader audiences. The Star & Garter Theater of 815 W. Madison Street was created with the goal of elevating burlesque as a legitimate theatrical experience. The Star & Garter opened in 1908 in a lavish, stylized building, complete with leather upholstered seats, a smoking room, a ladies’ parlor, marbled décor, and a seating capacity

---

45 Newman, “Burlesque Theaters.”
just short of 2,000. *Variety* lauded the Star & Garter as “a marvel in beauty and architecture.”*46 Charging admission from fifteen to seventy-five cents, the managing theatrical circuit, Hyde & Beyman, provided entertainment with more tame content than what was offered by their competitors. All female dance groups such as the Transatlantic Burlesquers and the Jersey Lilies performed alongside vaudevillian comedians such as Lester Allen and Dave Marion aka “Snuffy, the Cabman.” The managers of the house reviewed each act and disallowed performances that were considered too risqué. One commentator in the local press offered, “Each traveling company is warned before beginning an engagement which kind will be tolerated. If the character of the theater demands a censored variety, a reasonably clean and inoffensive musical farce results. If the ‘lid’ is lifted the comedians and their women assistants are permitted to go as far as the police will permit.”*47

The Columbia burlesque circuit’s censorship committee circulated amongst theaters throughout the country to ensure that its franchise holders adhere to rules concerning costuming, performance, and content, or risk losing their franchise. A *Chicago Tribune* writer compared these efforts to the work done to raise variety shows to “high class vaudeville” years before.*48 The Star & Garter directly appealed and advertised to family audiences. Ads ran by the theater offered discounted prices to women and bragged that “10,000 women attend our shows weekly in 1921.”*49 Such practices were common practice for theaters in the early twentieth century. As other historians have argued, theater houses in many cities attempted to reform their reputations

*46* Newman, “Burlesque Theaters.”

*47* Ibid.

*48* “Burlesque Managed like a Big League,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 10, 1911.

*49* Neither that article nor other articles published in 1921 offer statistics to verify or challenge that claim.
as male-dominated, unsafe environments to attract more diverse audiences, and to avoid confrontation with moral critics and the law. In other parts of the country, big names in burlesque, such as Millie de Leon, likewise bucked the Circuit’s censor rules repeatedly by dancing and stripping off their garters. In short, despite the attempt of the Circuit systems to contain and control burlesque, theaters in Chicago continued to experiment with riskier entertainment styles in competition to attract audiences.

The breakout success of new trends in female performance and nudity onstage inspired imitation and adaptation by both burlesque and female impersonator artists and producers. After Oscar Wilde published his short-play Salome in 1892, many burlesque companies in Chicago, New York, and other cities took to parodying it. While burlesques had satirized operas and other products of “higher art” in the past, their adaptations of Salome touched off a cultural craze that the press labeled “Salomania.” In one scene in the play, the title character performs the “Dance of the Seven Veils” in front of the Biblical King Herod and slowly removes the veils until they are naked or in flesh-colored underclothing. Salome, therefore, was an easy source of inspiration for parodic shows and acts featuring nude female dancers imitating the character. Not long after Wilde’s play was released, an entire school for teaching Salome dance was created at Ziegfeld’s theater in New York to produce and train performers for the circuits.

Theatrical press at the time noted similarities between Salome and the “unforgotten [belly] dancers” of Chicago’s World Fair. Like Little Egypt, many theater producers and managers sought to catch the trend and feature their own version of Salome, often promoting the

novelty as “part art and part cooch.” Depending on the performer, Salome’s character emphasized either her beauty and grace onstage, or a more liberal sense of sexuality and power. One Millie de Leon, for instance, often performed Salome’s “Dance of the Seven Veils” in many shows on the Columbia Wheel circuit, where she gained a reputation for flouting rules of decency and censorship by flinging garters out to the audience. Leon, who was declared to be the first “burlesque queen” of her day, went as far as to claim that she was the “originator of this peculiar style of dance” (in spite of the long cultural history of belly dance that predated Salome) and that she could outperform any other dancer for “any amount of money.” Other performers, such as Eva Tanguay, reportedly climaxied their “Dance of the Seven Veils” with a dramatic flourish, such as pouring champagne on themselves or removing their trousers.

White women were not the only ones to perform the “Dance of the Seven Veils” on the variety or mainstream stage. One Aida Overton Walker of New York, for example, was the first Black women to perform as Salome on a public stage in 1912 at the Paradise Roof Garden in New York. Critics praised Walker for her choreography and restraint in humanizing a character that vaudeville and burlesque artists had the tendency to portray as cartoonishly violent or sexual. As one Boston review of her act put it,

She gives an original conception of the role, which differs in many respects from that of the other dancers who are appearing in New York. She does not handle the gruesome head, she does not rely solely on the movements of the body, and her dress is not quite so conspicuous by its absence…One phase of her art is notable in the fact that she acts the role of “Salome” as well as dances it. Her face is unusually mobile and she expresses through its muscles the

---


emotions which the body is also interpreting, thus making the character of the biblical dancer lifelike. The poetry of motion is exemplified in this dance by Miss Walker.53

Walker’s serious-minded performance of *Salome* was the standard rather than the rule for *Salome* in burlesque and vaudeville. Like Little Egypt, the “foreign” and “oriental” nature attributed to the sexuality of Salome, as well as the gendered taboo of her character’s violence against masculinity, was a chief draw for burlesque producers and audiences. It also attracted imitation by female impersonators on the vaudeville circuit, who were featured in greater number in the first decades of the twentieth century. One such performer was Julian Eltinge, nicknamed the “Sheath Gown Girl” and a “Lady Man” in the Chicago press. Eltinge was a celebrity in the variety scene at the time, commanding billing at venues such as the Auditorium and multiple profile pieces in publications like the *Chicago Tribune*. In a series of articles, Eltinge divulged how he prepared acts for the stage, from costuming and makeup to the performance itself. He shared in an interview, for instance, that he was inspired by the latest styles shared in French fashion journals and had tailors custom make or adjust pieces to fit his frame. He also identified himself as unique among vaudeville female impersonators, in that he chose to use grease paint makeup and powder to better imitate female characters, whereas his peers often chose to go without. For a performer with his level of success and exposure, Eltinge proved more approachable than stars with his profile in offering advice to up and coming performers. When asked if he wore special kinds of clothing for his performances, he responded, “I wear any old thing. This talk about people’s having to wear special kinds of expensive corsets is all nonsense. I never pay more than $1.50 for mine and I find that they give me a much better figure than some

of the high-priced casings I’ve had. There’s a hint for the poor working girl.” Eltinge did confide that has felt discomfort wearing women’s clothing in public in Chicago – at times, feeling like “the fat man or the missing link at a circus” in dressing rooms in front of staff. Eltinge was not an exception. Female impersonators were commonly featured in vaudeville and variety shows in Chicago and elsewhere, as opposed to occupying a separate, independent genre. In fact, other impersonators in Chicago influenced the performance styles of burlesque dancers who found inspiration in the way actors in drag performed and exaggerated femininity on stage.

Bert Savoy was another impersonator star who toured through Chicago many times in the 1910s. Savoy could be seen often in the company of Eltinge and other friends in vaudeville and burlesque in Towertown when he was not performing with productions like the Ziegfeld Follies. On stage and in queer spaces such as the Green Mask in Towertown, Savoy performed alongside his rumored lover Jay Brennan as a vaudeville character couple, with Savoy portraying the wife or girlfriend character, telling dirty jokes and singing songs with his partner. Savoy dressed in ornate gowns and played a “loud, comedic, love-starved tart” famous for his line “you must come over.” Reportedly, Mae West, herself a legend in burlesque, reportedly drew inspiration from Savoy and other impersonators in the way she walked suggestively across a stage and portrayed flirty women similar to some of Savoy’s characters. In such ways, female impersonators had a quite visible presence and role to play in vaudeville in the first decades of the twentieth century. Drag performances also cropped up in queer communities and social spaces. The Seven Arts Club, a social club of lectures, entertainment and communal gathering for artists and thinkers in Towertown, was created in 1916 and hosted drag performances in its

54“Lady Man Daintily Confides that Lacing is Disagreeable,” Chicago Tribune, May 2, 1909; “How a Man Makes Himself a Beautiful Woman,” Chicago Tribune, September 27, 1908.
programming. This Club was one of the earliest “points of entry to the homosexual underground” in Towertown and others like it would become more visible and outwardly queer in identity in the coming “Pansy Craze” of the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{55} In that time, female impersonators or drag artists began to exclusively perform in queer venues dedicated to their genre and community, thereby taking drag out of the big tent of vaudeville and establishing it as an independent genre and subculture.

**Harsh Critics: Censorship and Policing by the City and Citizens**

Theaters that ignored such concerns and featured nude dancing, belly dance and *Salome* acts provoked some of the first documented attempts by the city to censor or shut down burlesque venues and performers. At the turn of the century, the safety and wellbeing of women was a vocal concern of religious figures and social reformers. Religious leaders in the city sermonized that male-dominated spaces like theaters corrupted young men and women and called for curfew laws to be put into effect. “It is impossible for a moral theater to exist,” said one Baptist preacher in 1907.\textsuperscript{56} In that spirit, civic organizations surveilled and reported venues and performers to city authorities for indecent performances or behavior. In 1908, the *Chicago Tribune* itself led a moral crusade of sorts against the Trocadero, Empire and Folly theaters downtown, due to their featuring of *Salome* dances. The *Tribune* singled out one of the Trocadero’s performers, a “muscle dancer” named Chooceeta, for her scantily clad performances. The *Tribune* lambasted Chooceeta, the Trocadero and other theaters, comparing their entertainment to Little Egypt of the 1893 World’s Fair. “The climax of their [the theatres’]

\textsuperscript{55} Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 64.

\textsuperscript{56} “Preacher Tells Why Girls Fall: He Blames Theaters, Dances, and Various Other Popular Amusements. *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 1907.
temerity,” asserted the Tribune’s editors, “has come in the presentation of dances that have resulted from fifteen years’ degeneration and exaggeration of the famous midway of the world’s fair.” The Tribune pledged not to accept any money or offers from these theatres to advertise their programs.57

In the summer of 1893, Tribune reporters repeatedly returned to venues like the Trocadero to report on the conduct of the audience and the performers. When they visited the theater in June, for instance, reporters recounted seeing audience members smoking indoors and drunk in public. Physical comedians and chorus acts, they claimed, served as a setup for the main attraction: Chooceeta, dancing Salome’s “Dance of the Seven Veils,” wearing nothing but gold beads. The audience of adult men and even teenagers, the reporters claimed, left soon after, to buy bottles of beer, nude pictures of Chooceeta and souvenir garters.58 Reports of similar performances at the turn of the century reveal that burlesque performers openly pantomimed and evoked sexuality with minimal reveals of parts of their body without necessarily resorting to stripping every time. One high profile example was Millie De Leon, who very often violated rules of censorship issued by the burlesque circuits, such as neglecting to wear tights or throwing souvenir garters out into the audience. The overt sexuality in her performance was noted by contemporaries in the theatrical press. A 1915 review of one of her performances in Philadelphia by the North American newspaper vividly illustrated her performance style as follows:

> Millie de Leon became unspeakably frank. From knee to neck she was convulsive. Every muscle became eloquent of primitive emotion. Amid groans, cat calls and howls of approval from the audience. She stopped. Standing suddenly erect, with a deft

57 “Shocking Shows Pass All Limits: "Burlesque" at Trocadero and Folly to Be Eradicated in the Interest of Public Morals,” Chicago Tribune, July 1, 1908.

58 “Shocking Shows Pass All Limits,” Chicago Tribune, June 1, 1908.
movement she revealed her nude right leg from knee almost to waist. A strut to the right, a long stride back, and the abdominal ‘dance’ was resumed. The large pink rose in her belt nodded confusedly, and her hands clasped and unclasped spasmodically under the strain of the stimulated emotion. Streaked and sweaty, her face took on the aspect of epilepsy. She bit her lips, rolled her eyes, pulled fiercely at great handfuls of her black, curly hair. Indescribably noises and loud suggestions mingled in the hot breath of the audience.\textsuperscript{59}

Despite her high profile and top billing, Leon reported being stiffed on pay promised to her in Chicago and other cities while struggling to repay debt. “I am a hardworking girl who has wiggle twice daily all week for your amusement,” she told to an audience in Chicago in 1911, “and now when the management has all the wiggles I had, they refuse to pay me my salary.”\textsuperscript{60} Records of the pervasiveness of how often managers and venues stole pay from performers is scant and hard to find, due to their clandestine nature. Stories such as Leon’s, however, indicate that such troubles existed between artists and producers and venue operators – issues that even the biggest names in burlesque were not immune from.

The \textit{Tribune’s} investigations prompted litigation and arrests by the city. Just a day after the first \textit{Tribune’s} reports, police warned theater managers of five different Loop venues to cease hosting “indecent acts” or their amusement licenses would be revoked.\textsuperscript{61} The presence of police at theaters had a chilling effect on producers, who toned down the raciness of their

\textsuperscript{59} Zeidman, \textit{American Burlesque Show}, 16.

\textsuperscript{60} Zeidman, \textit{American Burlesque Show}, 15.

programming. Both the Trocadero and the Folly—a lesser-known venue that hosted drop-in variety acts—reportedly purged their venues of risqué acts within days. Meanwhile, female performers seized the opportunity to protest unsafe working conditions in venues such as the Folly, including the lack of private entrances or dressing rooms. As for Chooceeta, she and her manager were summoned to municipal court to answer charges of "performing and exhibiting an improper representation in public.” She defended her performances as art and argued that they did not offend public morality.

My dance is an art. It has meant many years of hard study and harder work. I can see no reason to object to it...All over the country I have danced before mixed audiences—audiences composed of men, women, and children—and there has never been a murmur of complaint. I am at a loss to understand why my dance is called wicked and immoral now.

The case against Chooceeta ended with the performer pleading guilty, paying a fine, and swearing, alongside her manager, to not repeat her performances. Despite her promise, Chooceeta was arrested again in late August for performing a Salome act at the Empire theater. This was only one of many investigations and prosecutions of burlesque performers in 1908. Around the time of Chooceeta’s second arrest, Sergeant Charles E. O’Donnell, head of the city

---


64 “Show Managers Now Face Arrest.”

65 “City the Victor; Dancer is Guilty: Municipal Power to Censor Burlesque Productions Is Demonstrated in Court,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1908.

66 Reportedly, the manager at the Trocadero had removed similar condemned performances from their programming and warned Chooceeta to only perform Spanish dancing, but the Empire manager enticed her to perform her controversial muscle dance at his venue. “Chooceeta Again in Law’s Clutch: Improper Dancer Is Arrested After Giving Performance at Theater on the West Side,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 1908.
police’s theater bureau, issued an edict banning all “objectionable features” or suggestive dancing, including Salomes. In other words, the city effectively banned any stage choreography or performances that could be perceived as sexual in nature and, in their eyes, served no storytelling purpose.67

The police were not alone in investigating burlesque. Religious leaders and civic organizations reported burlesque theaters for performances that, in their eyes, were corrupting public morality and good taste. Pastors denounced what they saw as indecency and demanded that police take action to enforce laws barring burlesque shows.68 In spite of this, theater critics and columnists asserted that, by 1909, Chicago burlesque had become “cleaner” and more “wholesome” by utilizing safe humor, higher quality performers, and the growing attendance of women in downtown venues such as the Star & Garter.69

Citizens’ advocacy groups saw things quite differently. The Juvenile Protective Association (JPA) was one such organization that surveilled and reported on burlesque in Chicago for decades. The JPA was the product of a 1909 merger between the Juvenile Court Committee—which created the first juvenile court in Chicago—and the Juvenile Protection League, which focused on juvenile delinquency. The new organization sought to prevent crimes committed against and by youth by reporting on spaces and businesses they suspected of exploiting or corrupting children. The JPA investigated dance halls, cheap theaters, and other public amusements that young Chicagoans patronized or worked in. Under the leadership of


President Louise de Bowen, the JPA published multiple reports on the selling of alcohol to minors and the employment of children at dance halls and cheap “five and ten cent theaters.” They suspected that public amusements like burlesque theaters would tempt the children of lower-income families into a life of crime and danger. As the introduction to one of the JPA’s reports put it, the “bright lights and open doors of cheap theatres and pleasure resorts urge a constant invitation upon the girls and boys whose dreary home surroundings drive them into the streets for recreation and amusements.”

The JPA’s early investigations into public amusements were unique in the way they perceived crime and immorality in burlesque and live entertainment. In its early years, the JPA and its investigative members became greatly concerned with lewd performances and potential prostitution amongst female performers in burlesque venues and cabaret bars. In 1909, one Lillian Ann Pfeiffer of the JPA reported to the police’s theater bureau after witnessing a matinee with semi-nude female dancers at the Alhambra Theater. “It was as revolting and indecent as can be imagined,” Pfeiffer said, “and there were dozens of young girls in the theater to witness the thing.” The JPA and other women’s clubs in the city reported multiple theaters to the police for performances that violated the city’s indecency laws. Consequently, many theaters were forced under injunction to either avoid booking banned acts or to forfeit their licenses.

---

70 “Five and Ten Cent Theaters,” Juvenile Protective Association records [Box 10, Folders 132-139], Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

71 Juvenile Protective Association records [Box 10, Folder 137], Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.


73 “May Shut the Cort Theater: Police Find Orders to Eliminate Indecency Are Disobeyed.” Chicago Tribune, May 12, 1910.
The presence of young Chicagoans at places of entertainment was a constant concern for this organization. For example, the JPA investigated “Five and Ten Cent Theatres” to document the enticement of children into shows and the employment of “young girl” dancers. Their efforts were closely mirrored by municipal government drives to clean up public amusements. In 1909, the city formed a Censorship Bureau, staffed, and led by the Police Department. The Bureau, in its first year of activity, removed hundreds of films from circulation for displays of violence and raised the price of theater licenses from $100 to $200, which had the effect of reducing the number of cheap theaters.\textsuperscript{74} The JPA, however, wanted to go even further. One JPA proposal to the city prescribed banning permits for “immoral or obscene pictures or exhibitions or for those that portray any riotous, disorderly, or other unlawful scene, or that tend to disturb the public peace.”\textsuperscript{75} Furthermore, they called upon Chicago to enforce the state’s “indecency” statute that, to their mind, expressly forbade adult entertainment like burlesque. The exact statute read as follows:

> If any person shall appear in a public place in a state of nudity, or in a dress not belonging to his or her sex, or in an indecent or lewd dress, or shall make any indecent exposure of his or her person or be guilty of any lewd or indecent act or behavior, he shall be subject to a fine of not less than $20 or exceeding $100.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{74} The JPA estimated that this drove down the number of Five and Ten Cent theaters from 425 to 298 in 1910. Bowen, Louise de Koven “Five and Ten Center Theaters,” 1911.

\textsuperscript{75} The JPA further clarified its definition of “obscene” in the same report, which was largely in line with the State of Illinois’ legal definition. “By obscene is meant something that is offensive to chastity, decency or delicacy; expressing or presenting to the mind or view something that delicacy and purity forbid to be exposed. Obscenity is such an indecency as is calculated to promote the violation of the law and the general corruption of morals; it is conduct, tending to corrupt the public morals by its indecency or lewdness…or what is calculated to excite impure desires.” Juvenile Protective Association records [Box 10, Folder 138], Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

\textsuperscript{76} M. J. O’Neill. \textit{How He Does It: Sam T Jack, Twenty Years a King in the Realm of Burlesque} (1895), 272.
The JPA was not the only civic organization that investigated and reported burlesque and theater venues for “indecent” performances in the early twentieth century. The Illinois Vigilance Association, founded in 1908, similarly sought to enforce moral purity in the city’s public sphere. While their advocacy surrounding burlesque was not as well-documented in the press or organizational records, they directly engaged with the JPA’s narrative that burlesque was inherently obscene and damaging to public morals. Ministers who served as investigators for the Association sued burlesque productions in the Loop for obscene jokes and performances.77 At the National Conference of Social Work, William Burgess, the director of the Association, maligned burlesque shows as “displays of fleshly debauch of semi-nudeness, more repulsively lewd than the naked form can ever be…employed chiefly as setting for sensual song, filthy story, dialogue, or action, all of which it is libel to call “comedy.”78

Meanwhile, both social reformers and municipal authorities reported the presence of female impersonators on and off stage and expressed alarm at their perceived threat to public morality and health. In 1909, two touring vaudevillian actors of the Duncan Clark’s Female Minstrels Troupe were arrested for allegedly performing a striptease at the Riverview Amusement Park in what is now Lane Tech College Prep in Roscoe Village. The two female impersonators, named Quincy de Lang and George Quinn, were charged with “conducting an objectionable performance.” Reportedly, their performance had been surveilled and reported to police by A.B. Farwell, president of the Chicago Law and Order League, who had attempted, unsuccessfully, to have police intervene to shut down similar exhibitions at the First Ward drag

77“Minister Sues Burlesque Show,” Chicago Tribune, April 13, 1919.
ball for years. Farwell’s compatriots at the League had been surveilling the Riverview Park and
other amusement parks in the city that summer for any entertainment that, in their view, was
objectionable or stood to threaten the moral character of young adults. Members of the League
observed Quinn and De Lang perform at the Riverview for a month and expressed fears that the
twenty-year-old artists “artfully dressed in women’s clothing” would become a “menace to the
morals of young men.”79 This was a familiar fear expressed by reports by other organizations
that were alarmed by the ambiguous nature of female impersonators and the presence of young
men in places where they performed. A 1911 report by the Vice Commission of Chicago, for
instance, claimed that female impersonators of “the cheap vaudeville stage” and “disorderly
saloons” are so convincing in their appearance that they are allowed to sit with male patrons in
between acts and “solicit for drinks the same as prostitutes.”80

Ironically, in the case of Quinn and De Lang, attention surrounding their case let off as
both Farwell and the press focused on the arrest and subsequent trial of one Bertha Faulk, a
figure poser and dancer nicknamed the “bare bronze beauty.” What’s more, the prosecutors of
their case neglected to even invoke the “decency statute” in their charges of putting on an
obscene exhibition – charges that they were eventually acquitted for. Bertha Faulk, a twenty-
five-year-old German immigrant, defended herself against charges that her dancing at the White
City amusement park was vulgar and indecent. She openly testified that her costume consisted of
just bronze body paint, as well as “a waistband, one or two yards of veiling, and a small string of
beads,” but maintained that her dress and cooch dancing were artistically motivated and had

79 Elledge, *Boys of Fairy Town*, 53-54; “Attractions Go Into Court Today."

80 *The Social Evil*, 297.
never caused any controversy when she performed in Europe. Farwell, for his part, testified that
the White City had shamelessly promoted hoochie cooch shows and dances with barkers openly
advertising the scant costumes of performers and promising that they would keep the show going
until “police back up the wagon and take us away.”

Fortunately for Faulk, an all-male jury
found in her favor, maintaining that her performance was “nothing if not morally elevating and
decent in every sense of the word.”

Women’s organizations in Chicago shared this opinion and worked to shut down multiple
burlesque venues in the Loop in 1916. The Women’s Church Federation was one such
organization. On February 19, 1916, members of the Federation delivered affidavits to the
Chicago police department alleging that many theaters in the Loop were violating the city’s
ordinances against indecent performances. In response, the police forced many theaters to shut
their doors temporarily, including the Trocadero, the Gem, and even the Chicago Theater.

Mayor William Hale Thompson mandated that the owners of these theaters secure the consent of
the Morals Committee of the Federation before they could reopen. When the owners of the Gem
and the Chicago pleaded their case with the committee, one of its members assured them,
“If…you run decent places without lewdness, we shall not interfere with legitimate business. But
we will be on the watch, always.” The theater owners were desperate to reopen their businesses.
Some claimed they could not help but host “indecent” programs, as they had been sued by

---


82 Elledge, *Boys of Fairy Town*, 57.

83 “Women’s Fight Closes Gaudy Theater Row: Seven Lower State Houses Shut by Police, but Two Escape the
‘Lid,’” *Chicago Tribune*, February 20, 1916.
chorus girls and feature dancers in the past for not allowing them to perform. The American Theater on South State Street and Harrison was one of the theaters permanently shut down because of these investigations. The American had the distinction of being one of the few theaters in early twentieth century Chicago to be owned by a woman: Maud H. Frazier, a wealthy socialite active in local women’s clubs and social reform groups. After members of the Federation charged the American theater with hosting indecent performances, Frazier defender her “respectable little theater,” claiming it had secured the approval of other women’s groups less than a month ago. Nevertheless, the Federation accused the American of hosting nude, “muscle” girl dances similar to belly dance and Salome. As a result, Mayor William Hale Thompson revoked the American’s license and ordered it shut down.

Other advocate groups investigated cabaret bars and dance halls for potential prostitution and “White slavery.” Teams of women from the Anti-Saloon League and the Political Equity League investigated cabarets in the Loop and the Levee District. They discovered bars that served alcohol well beyond curfew, and chorus girls who socialized with patrons and plied them with drinks. Women in this campaign had expressed concerns in the past about the treatment and character of female performers working in cabaret or burlesque. One of them, Guy Blanchard of the Political Equity League, had speculated in her investigations of the Gem Theater that the female performers were “drug fiends” and of questionable character. Her

---


85 “Women’s Fight Closes Gaudy Theater Row: Seven Lower State Houses Shut by Police, but Two Escape the ‘Lid,’” Chicago Tribune, February 20, 1916.

comments incited a direct response from Genevieve Jackson, one of the dancers at the Gem. Jackson denied Blanchard’s allegations about drug use and defended the character and motivations of her fellow performers as a legitimate source of employment and income:

> The girls who dance at the Gem theater work there and do the dances they do because by doing so they can make a living. I don’t think that it is any more respectable to work for $6 a week in a department store and starve than to work down here dancing and get enough money to live decently.\(^\text{87}\)

Such was the zeal of the social reform activists that they targeted headlining-acts for prosecution and legal action. One such performer was burlesquer Mae Mills, who performed with the Follies of Pleasure Company at the Gayety Theater in the Loop. In the Fall of 1916, Mrs. J.G. Boor of the Women’s Church Federation was among many who complained and brought Mill’s act to the attention of the police with first-hand reports. “She threw her clothes, which were only tinsel drapery, clear over her head,” Boor reported to the police. “She went through the motions of the hoochie cooch muscle dance. It is simply too vile for description.”\(^\text{88}\)

In November, the Federation pushed police to ban Maud Allan, a well-known Salome performer who toured the United States, from performing in the city.\(^\text{89}\) In spite of these efforts, both members of the Federation and the theatrical press indicated that their complaints and charges were not always met with a response by the city. The *New York Clipper* cited Federation members’ complaints that the mayor’s office and the police simply passed on their reports.

---

\(^\text{87}\) “Gem Theater Girl Dancer Answers Woman Accuser: Miss Genevieve Jackson Says She and Her Associates Are Not Drug Fiends and Work Hard,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 1, 1916.


downwards to other jurisdictions.\textsuperscript{90} Even when cases were brought before the city’s courts, members of the judiciary and the public did not seem to prioritize the concerns of these social reformers or seemed to favor the performers. Mae Mills, for instance, was asked to demonstrate her “walking the dog” routine in court, which reportedly prompted cries of “Whoopee!” from members of the upper galleries and a smile from the judge, who ultimately dismissed the charges.\textsuperscript{91}

Social reform groups like the JPA also were subject to criticism for overreach or perceived hypocrisy behind their campaigns. The \textit{Chicago Defender}, for instance, criticized the JPA’s efforts to surveil “Black and tan” bars in the South Side and took great issue with its portrayal of mixed-race audiences and the “exploitation” of White women by Black bar owners. These efforts to combat an imagined sex trafficking of White women, with no equal regard for crime against Black women, smacked of hypocrisy and racism to the \textit{Defender}. “Save the White girl—to hell with all others,” said one \textit{Defender} columnist in sarcasm. “White Americans: quit advertising your hypocrisy. Girls will be girls.”\textsuperscript{92}

This is not to say that the JPA were antithetic to the concerns of African Americans in Chicago. In their own way, they sought to improve conditions for Black Chicagoans. One report composed by the JPA in 1913, for instance, acknowledged such issues as employment discrimination, bans against Black members by labor unions, and even systemic racism in the city’s justice system, while heaping praise on the rise of a Black middle class. However, the

\textsuperscript{90} “Police Kid Reformers,” \textit{The New York Clipper}, October 14, 1916.

\textsuperscript{91} At the time of writing, no additional articles were found that indicated the outcome of this case. “Court Smiles on Walkin’ the Dog: Burlesque ‘Queen’ Dances Before Judge to Disprove Indecency Charge,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, October 18, 1916.

\textsuperscript{92} “Girls are Girls: Miss Binford, Don’t Be Shocked,” \textit{Chicago Defender}, February 9, 1924.
same report expressed fears that life in “broken families” (that is, where fathers are absent or mothers are working outside the home), alienation by society at large, and the prevalence of “low” and dangerous commercial amusements would drive Black men towards criminal behavior.

Perhaps the greatest factor of all is the difficulty which all colored people have in finding employment; and after an ambitious boy has been refused employment again and again in the larger mercantile and industrial establishments and comes to the conclusion that there is no use in trying to get a decent job, he is in a very dangerous state of mind. Idle and discouraged, his neighborhood environments vicious, such a boy quickly shows the first symptoms of delinquency and the remedial agencies which should be prompt in his case are the very weakest at this point.93

The author of the report concluded that the first step in assisting and improving the Black community and social mobility is to cease generalizing “against the negro” so as not to “affix criminality to his race.” Arguments like those posed by the Defender, however, indicate that even the JPA fell short of its own standards in terms of not pathologizing the Black community in pursuit of its own agenda.

The early decades of the twentieth century were a time of both expansion and opposition for both drag and burlesque. Burlesque shows and venues grew in number following the 1893 World’s Fair, boasting productions with increasingly elaborate venues, costuming, show concepts, and programming. The performances in these shows were diversified with imitations of and inspirations by innovations such as the Orientalist aesthetics of Salome; the Shimmy; and more audacious displays of nudity or semi nudity in the form of figure posing and “living

---

pictures.” All the while, female impersonation or drag increased in public profile as performers were regularly featured in variety programming as well as, increasingly, in bars and venues dedicated to the growing queer community in Chicago’s Near North and South Sides. The increase in migration of single, working men and women, as well as of artists, musicians, and queer people, left its mark on drag and burlesque, as these new residents would navigate stage venues and cabarets to take in these forms of leisure as audience members or as performers seeking to supplement their incomes. Conservative organizations dedicated to social reform, however, scrutinized and targeted mainstream stage theaters and queer-associated bars as potential locations of crime or behavior that they believed endangered the public health and morality of young Chicagoans. The public presence of burlesque and drag, and the conservative backlash and ire they inspired, would only continue to grow in the age of Prohibition of Jazz between 1920 and 1934 – an age some historians of burlesque have deemed the “Golden Age of Striptease.” There, the performance styles and aesthetics associated with burlesque and drag, respectively, were created in Chicago – features that would become the lasting standard for how both genres were performed onstage.
CHAPTER 3
“CENTURY OF NUDITY”
BURLESQUE AND DRAG IN JAZZ AGE CHICAGO,
1920-1934

Chicago burlesque and drag entertainment changed drastically in style and business in the years spanning the end of World War I and the 1933-1934 World’s Fair. The burlesque industry struggled to achieve its previous success and popularity due to censorship enforced by the city and by cautious producers and circuit managers seeking to avoid police scrutiny. A rise in public demand for more audacious and risqué forms of entertainment during Prohibition, however, enabled performers and producers to resume featuring forms of striptease and partial nudity. New innovations in production design, costuming, and prop usage gave form to what is now considered “classical” burlesque performance. Artists’ use of striptease with costuming pieces and props such as G-strings, pasties, and feather fans helped them to achieve fame and careers as burlesque “queens” or headliners who remained iconic in the burlesque community into the twenty-first century.

At the same time, drag (known as “female impersonation” then) persevered on stage shows and found queer audiences in spaces more open to new expressions of gender and sexuality. Both drag performers and Chicagoans who cross-dressed in their personal lives found gigs, community, and entertainment in artist studios, tea rooms, bars and cabarets in gay enclaves in the Black Belt in the South Side and Towertown in the Near North Side. While both media continued to receive scrutiny from city government and conservative citizen’s organizations,
especially during the World’s Fair seasons in 1933-1934, drag and burlesque artists enjoyed tremendous success and exposure in Prohibition-era Chicago.

Burlesque performers and producers endured struggles early into the 1920s. Theaters and cabarets lost a crucial revenue stream with the banning of alcohol sales under Prohibition. In addition, the raids and closures of burlesque theaters in the 1910s pressured many producers to switch to safer programming. Some, such as the Star & Garter, put burlesque shows on hiatus during the 1920s.¹ The theater, rather than reinvesting in different approaches to burlesque, cut ties with its burlesque producers and instead hosted boxing and wrestling exhibitions that were marketed towards Italian, Polish, and other immigrant communities in Chicago. The Star & Garter maintained its pugilistic programming and abstained from burlesque productions from 1922 until 1927.²

The Star & Garter was not an isolated case for burlesque in Chicago or around the country. The New York Clipper noted that burlesque house managers nationwide banned suggestive jokes and pelvic grinding dances because they did not wish to “cater to the moral delinquency of the public” and risk hurting their reputation and broader appeal.³ Violations of these rules forced national burlesque circuits to assign special agents to investigate and report venues that violated their regulations. As early as 1918, the New York Clipper reported that the American Circuit revamped its censorship committee to enforce its rules more strictly. Whereas before, censors circulated among theaters at appointed times, they would now be on the road


constantly between cities like New York, St. Louis, and Chicago to monitor shows. This was done to prevent venue managers from “cutting out anything they thought the censors would not look upon in favor” and to witness shows as they are normally carried out. Civic groups were also pressuring burlesque theaters and cabarets to clean up their act. In New York, for instance, the City’s Committee of Fourteen investigated Minsky’s theaters and venues associated with the Mutual Wheel of burlesque as early as 1920 on suspicion of providing indecent performances and “commercialized vice.” Meanwhile, in New Orleans, the Storyville red light district and its venues for jazz and burlesque was shut down by city authorities in 1920 to protect the health and morals of returning servicemen. For American mass entertainment, censorship was the rule at the turn of the century, with the only difference being the extent to which laws and regulations were enforced in each city.

Chicago theaters were particularly hit hard by both regulations and economic misfortune. The city’s Council Committee on Buildings forced many theaters in the Loop district to close temporarily, citing dangerous wiring and heating systems that created fire hazards - concerns that stemmed from the controversy surrounding the fire at the Iroquois Theater in 1908. The Committee singled out the Star & Garter theater for praise, as their investigators found that it was in full compliance with fire and health ordinances and in “better condition than any of the leading loop theatres.” In the Loop District, declining box office revenue forced venues such as

---


the Rialto Theater to experiment with a variety of entertainment styles, such as vaudeville and motion pictures, to attract wider audiences. Theaters such as the Trocadero had survived police and press investigations of “indecent” shows in the 1910s. Owner I.M. Weingarten bailed out burlesque dancers multiple times and paid their fines as the cost of doing business. However, in the early 1920s, the Trocadero management changed their shows to maintain attendance amidst a decline in business, installing a dime museum and indoor zoo to exhibit “freaks and different things from all parts of the world.” The Trocadero closed its doors and was sold for $190,000 in 1922.7

Changes in the national burlesque industry also affected venue operations and showings in Chicago. In the early 1920s, the American Burlesque Circuit lost business to its main competitor, the Columbia Amusement Company, which stood to become the only remaining circuit for the country. Member theaters of the American Circuit in Chicago broke their contracts with them and refused to put on further American shows due to their declining ticket sales and concerns with the solvency of the American system. The New York Clipper reported in December 1921 that the managers of the Haymarket Theater refused to allow Frank Damsel’s “Pacemakers” to open their performance for the American Circuit, despite being booked and all the cast and crew ready for opening night. The managers claimed that the shows were “not fit for the public” and that the Haymarket was to go into stock burlesque shows instead – that is, in-house, non-circuit shows. Representatives of the American responded with threats of litigation to compel the Haymarket to fulfill its contract, as well as a $500,000 suit against the Columbia Amusement Company over accusations that it had persuaded the managers at the Haymarket to

---

7 Al Chase, “Old Trocadero Theater Sold for $190,000,” Chicago Tribune, June 14, 1922.
break their contracts with American to ruin their business. Columbia had the advantage of greater sales by running “cleaner” shows that appealed to family audiences. The American was forced to dissolve due to bankruptcy, leading to the Columbia installing the new Mutual Wheel to manage the Western Circuit while it concentrated its attention and resources on the Eastern Circuit. According to historian Robert Allen, the Columbia dominated bookings and business in American burlesque with thirty-eight regular shows and a total property value of $20 million in 1923. The enterprise maintained a policy of cleaner burlesque that excluded nudity or the removal of tights until a slow season in 1925.

Critics and censorial figures within the burlesque industry praised Chicago producers for pursuing “cleaner” burlesque, compared to others such as New York. Theatrical and general news publications drew comparisons between the burlesque scenes of different cities in the early 1920s. One critic of the Chicago Journal, for example, praised the Chicago burlesque scene in September of 1920 for elevating itself to the level of other, more mainstream stage entertainment genres and for its production values:

The showmen who build and tour the burlesque entertainments that visit the Columbia and Star and Garter theatres in this city are doing much better by their patrons than of old. The scenery with which the burlesque stage is adorned nowadays compares favorably with that shown in standard playhouses and the costumes, which are still keeping, as is right, to the designs and tints most favored by burlesque audiences, are of a richness undreamed of by the old-time burlesquer…The burlesque stage is one of the most reliable sources of talent for the more pretentious musical comedy of the standard theatre. An earlier generation called burlesque entertainment a ‘leg show’ and it was and is that. But the bold and costly revues of the major theatre and the girl and

---

music acts in the varieties have so far outraced burlesque in the matter of [feminine] curvilinear display that a burlesque show, nowadays, must be more than merely proof that the female of the species is a bipod.\(^9\)

New York, by comparison, garnered criticism in the same era for productions that crossed lines of censorship and “good taste.” New York had a long-established scene for burlesque and variety. By this time, its most successful productions consisted of revues and “extravaganzas” put on by companies like the Minsky brothers that had a reputation for exhibiting bold and risqué performances. The Minskys, for instance, featured “exotic Oriental dancers” allegedly clad with far fewer beads than other burlesque dancers of their day, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. One editor in 1929 remarked that New York burlesque fell short of higher-brow stage entertainment and retained the crassness of older generations of burlesque. “I frequently have heard it said that all the rough fun…had been taken out of burlesque since it began to imitate higher priced musical comedies and revues,” said the critic. “That is not true. It is still pretty awful.”\(^{10}\)

The Ziegfield Follies were among the most popular burlesque productions in New York in the 1920s and 1930s. This company combined burlesque humor and sexuality with musical revue show stylings. Female performers sang and danced to mark transitions between comedic scenes and headlining acts of striptease or semi-nude figure posing. Members of the press covered the Follies’ show in detailed reviews. According to the *Chicago Tribune* reviewer, Burns Mantle, a 1931 show began with a number called “The Spirit of Follies,” which featured burlesque dancer Faith Bacon being hoisted up center stage by a giant prop hand, posing “free of


\(^{10}\) “Fewer Beads Now Worn by Dancing Gals,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 1, 1929.
covering,” only to be followed by a “parade” of eighty beautiful chorus girls and the song stylings of a New York night club singer. The exposition of these performers and others risked bad press or complaints from concerned citizens, but Ziegfeld stood by the show. “What the people want in a revue is flesh and beauty, pictures and smoking-room stories,” Ziegfeld told the Tribune. “I’ll stake my reputation on that!”

Houses of “clean burlesque” in Chicago had other concerns offstage that censorship alone could not resolve. Issues of relations with labor unions and conditions were a particular source of conflict. On August 31, 1921, two bombs detonated at the Columbia and Star & Garter Theaters, injuring five men and causing minor damage to both venues. A note was left at the Columbia, alleging that the venues had been “unfair” to organized labor. The New York Clipper alleged that the local stagehands or painters’ unions may had been involved, citing a threat by a union representative that burlesque houses in Chicago would “never open as open shop theatres.” Both venues reopened within a week and the incident provoked multiple venues to up their security for the near future.

On a national scale, the burlesque industry was not heavily unionized and had little engagement with theatrical labor organizations. Burlesque artists complained that they were not invited to become members of or collaborate with unions of entertainers and industrial workers. One New York chorus girl was interviewed by the Clipper after a strike by Equity actor members took place in the city without any participation from burlesquers in 1920. “Burlesque chorus girls did not join the Equity at the time of the strike,” the anonymous source said. “It

11 Burns Mantle, “Ziegfeld’s New Show Outdoes All His Others,” Chicago Tribune, July 12, 1931.
wasn’t because the strike did not affect us or because we were blind to the privileges an Equity contract gives one. It was for this reason: We were never led to believe we were wanted. Equity had some of its members canvassing the musical, vaudeville, and dramatic houses to get the entire companies of those theatres to join, but they never came near us.”

Chicago was poised to become a center for bolder burlesque and adult entertainment due to having looser laws of censorship and its ability to attract new residents in search of employment. While Chicago always was a site of emigration for single, working adults, it became a “dogcatcher” for burlesque talent leaving other cities such as New York and New Orleans due to heightened regulation. Local stock burlesque theaters included more nude or provocative performers to set themselves apart from circuit venues with more stringent rules. Stock burlesque shows reportedly gained larger audiences and revenue than the Columbia Circuit by being more open to acts with bare legs, “cootch dancing,” and sexually explicit jokes. Even as Billboard criticized these shows and producers for “polluting” public morals, they met a public demand for more explicit and audacious entertainment. Performers moving to Chicago from cities with more stringent censorship rules were therefore able to find employment in these stock shows and have greater agency over what they performed onstage. Chicago textile producers also helped the burlesque industry by supplying costuming designed to showcase more of the performers’ bodies in these shows. The G-string became an industry standard for an undergarment and part of the performers’ final reveal during the 1920s and 1930s. Some of the


14 “Loop Burlesques Mainly Nudes,” Zit’s Theatrical Newspaper, April 15, 1936.

largest producers of G-strings and other parts of burlesque costuming were in Chicago. Companies like the New York Costume Company in the Loop sold “standard issue” G-strings for a dollar, but were also known for making embellished, custom pieces for additional fees. Harry Bosen, the Company’s owner, made a custom G-string with fox eyes that would light up when the stripper danced. Some performers in drag and burlesque also made and sold G-strings, other costuming, and props, while others relied on the costuming departments of certain venues.\textsuperscript{16}

The introduction of jazz to Chicago also greatly impacted the style of Chicago burlesque in the long term. Historian William Howland Kenney estimates that most of Chicago’s Black jazz musicians arrived between 1917 and 1921 and that half of them came from New Orleans, alone. Musicians had long traveled between Chicago and the South on tour with vaudeville troupes, minstrel shows, or on dedicated jazz tours. Economics and greater freedom in public life motivated many to move to the Windy City permanently. Kenney claims that New Orleans musicians earned between $1.50 and $2.50 plus tips per engagement between 1916 and 1919, whereas South Side cabarets in Chicago paid an average $40 per week plus tips.\textsuperscript{17} Blues Pianist Tony Jackson, among other musicians who moved to the South Side in this period, said he “liked his freedom in Chicago” and opportunities for rent parties, casual sexual relationships and friendships - especially for men who left family behind to settle in Chicago, alone.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{18} OutHistory, “Tony Jackson;” \textit{Chicago Jazz}, 15.
The onset of Prohibition did little to diminish the demand for jazz music in Chicago. The upbeat and fast-paced music of Tin Pan Alley and, later, big band jazz lent itself to venues of both professional and public dancing. While working in Chicago, musicians from the South modified their style to better fit the audiences and venues in the Windy City. Kenney argues that many of the conventions and social institutions of New Orleans jazz, in particular (such as drop-in, improvised sets) were mostly left behind as musicians and bands embraced “urban sophistication” in the “structured world of nightclub entertainment.” This sort of regulation carried across in the dress and professional behavior of musicians. Lead singers and instrumentalists wore the latest fashions with tall hats, suits, and tuxedos. Band leaders fined and disciplined member musicians for being late to gigs, unclean dress, or for acting too casually during sets. Black and tan cabarets in the Black Belt that allowed interracial audiences especially tested this standard of cosmopolitan professionalism put onto Black entertainers. Many White Chicagoans “slummed” to these types of venues to experience the “suggestive songs” and “improper” dancing of jazz. This concerned conservative citizens’ groups who believed that such interracial spaces harbored crime or encouraged sexual behavior that endangered public health or morality. Investigators with the Juvenile Protective Association tried but failed on multiple occasions to prove that black and tans were operating as sites of prostitution or the trafficking of White women.

Black women performed on mainstream burlesque stages and in the clubs and jazz venues of Chicago’s Black Belt. A common show format during the 1920s were “half and half”

19 Kenny, Chicago Jazz, 37.
shows, which featured white performers in the first act and black artists in the second. According to the *Chicago Defender*, this style was popularized by Jimmy Cooper’s Revue, a production that earned some of the highest ticket revenues on the Columbia burlesque circuit. Considering the Revue’s success, more than half of shows in the Columbia Circuit integrated “race specialties” or performers in their shows and fewer programs embraced fully non-White casts or “half and half” programming.21 The Chicago Theater on 614 S. State Street hosted “black and white” productions with two halves consisting of all Black and all White performers, respectively. In the Black half, strip teasers would strip in either solo acts or skits involving comedians in blackface. Observers who reported these shows to the Juvenile Protective Association both complemented and criticized the talent of the Black dancers. In 1934, one unnamed JPA member reported multiple “prolonged” striptease acts involving the artists singing and dancing while removing clothes down to their bare breasts on and off stage. While the eyewitness ultimately condemned the shimmying and hip shaking of the Black performers, they couldn’t help but to also praise them for their talent. “It was almost unbelievable how some of the girls would twist, writhe, and shake back and forth, and sidewise the middle of their bodies to the great satisfaction of the crowd,” said the observer. They want on to say that even cabaret dancers in the city’s South Side could not compare to the dancers at the Chicago.22

Most Black female performers in this era were chorus girls who performed in cabaret venues. In Chicago, many worked in cafes in floor shows in the Black Belt and were well-

---

21 “Race Talent Given a Change in Burlesque,” *Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1925.

22 “Chicago Theater Report,” August 9, 1934, Juvenile Protective Association Records, Folder 89: Century of Progress – Conditions in Chicago Correspondence, Special Collections and University Archives, the University of Illinois at Chicago.
received in the local press. The Grand Terrace Café (later known as the Sunset) was a very popular and successful black-and-tan bar on 35th Street in the Black Belt. The Café, which was in operation between the 1920s and 1940s, helped propel the careers of many Black performers who went on to perform in burlesque and variety productions worldwide. The Café’s programming regularly included jazz musicians – locals such as pianist Earl Hines and special guest headliners like Louis Armstrong.\textsuperscript{23} The Café was a center for entertainment and celebration for the community in Bronzeville. Its venue often hosted communal events, such as holiday parties and the annual election of a “mayor” of Bronzeville by the \textit{Chicago Defender}.\textsuperscript{24} One “shake dancer” known simply as Valda headlined some of these special events at the Café and went on to acclaimed shows at other cabarets in Bronzeville, such as the Cabin Inn and Club DeLisa.\textsuperscript{25}

Others found international fame. One Café shake dancer, Elizabeth Kelly, left in 1934 to join the “Blackbirds” revue in London, an all-Black production that left behind plantation-styled minstrel shows for programs focused on fast-paced, jazzy choreography. Even in London, though, shows such as this carried over racial caricatures and tropes of orientalism. Kelly performed as a “Carib girl from Martinique.” Such was her talent, however, that the \textit{Defender} boasted “the Londoners are falling for her hook, line, and sinker.”\textsuperscript{26} Black productions and cabaret entertainment that was lauded for being regal, elegant, and entertaining by the Black


\textsuperscript{24} “5,000 Attend Bud’s Big Turkey Party,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, November 26, 1932.

\textsuperscript{25} “’I’se a Muggin’ at the De Lisa Is New Show,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, May 16, 1936.

Chicago community were rejected by White reviewers for not playing into racial stereotypes. One *Chicago Herald* writer, Ashton Stevens, criticized an all-Black for seeming too White in its style and character design. “Where we used to have barbarians, we now have barbers,” said Stevens. “There is too much so-called politeness, too much platitudinous refinement and not enough of the racy and the razor-edged. There is, in a word, too much ‘art’ and not enough Africa.”

Burlesque shows and performers imitated and appropriated Black styles of dance and music to highlight the sensuality of bodies on stage. Following the end of World War I, Tin Pan Alley music surged in popularity on the burlesque stage. Soubrettes sung songs that emphasized a “good girl” nature lyrically, but undercut with added double entendre, short skirts, and suggestive movements. One of the most popular pieces of music appropriated for burlesque numbers was Irving Berlin’s 1918 “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody.” This song soundtracked many dances and influenced productions such as Minsky’s Ziegfeld Follies in New York, which appropriated the slogan “Glorifying the American Girl” from its lyrics. Other songs on the burlesque stage referenced big revue shows on Broadway, such as “You Were Meant For Me,” “Ah, Sweet Life,” and “Yes, We Have No Bananas.” Jazz, however, quickly became the musical standard accompanying burlesque numbers. In New Orleans, musicians such as Jelly Roll Morton witnessed female performers dancing in the nude to jazz numbers that accommodated faster-paced choreography. The pianist Tony Jackson, Morton recalled, “would dig up one of his fast speed tunes, and one of the girls would dance on a little narrow stage.

---

27 Ashton Stevens, *Chicago Herald*, March 31, 1924.

completely nude. Yes, they danced absolutely stripped, but in New Orleans the naked dance was a real art.29 According to historian Rachel Shteir, strippers and stripteasers gravitated towards jazz over ragtime and Tin Pan Alley music due to the “wild” and erotic nature of the music. Songs such as Duke Ellington’s “The Mooch” (1928) featured rougher sounds of brass and “cries,” vacillating from clarinets and woodwinds to piano to create tension and rhythm. Five-piece “strip bands” with pianos, cornets, trombones, clarinets and drums became mainstays in burlesque spaces, providing brassy notes and “razzmatazz” to which stripteasers danced. Such was the popularity of larger jazz bands that venues included more striptease numbers in productions to pair with the music in the late 1920s and early 1930s.30

The onstage striptease itself emerged from accident and improvisation. According to Ann Corio, a headlining burlesque performer during this era, a performer executed a strip tease for the first time one night in 1928. Hinda Wassau, also known as the “Blonde Bombshell,” entered a shimmy contest at either the Haymarket or the State-Congress Theater.31 Reportedly, Wassau had planned to finish her number and swiftly change offstage from her first outfit into a slimmer dress she was wearing underneath. However, the outer outfit, according to Corio, snagged and hung halfway off Wassau’s body during the performance until she ripped it off in frustration at the song’s climax. Her strip generated enormous applause from the audience. The theater’s stage managers were initially worried that the city’s vice squads or reformists would retaliate. Later,


31 The exact location differs according to secondary sources from the 1950s. Both theaters hosted shimmy contests, but the press did not mention Wassau or her stripping incident at this time. Shteir, *Striptease*, 367.
however, they promoted Wassau to a regular headlining role and had her perform a variation of her striptease each night.\footnote{Stories of Wassau’s first striptease emerged in the 1960s in articles offering a retrospective history of burlesque and Ann Corio’s \textit{This Was Burlesque}, a history of the genre that went on to become a touring Broadway play. Unfortunately, Wassau’s performance was not mentioned in the press in 1928. Ann Corio, \textit{This Was Burlesque} (Michigan: Madison Square Press, 1968), 73. Eventually, Wassau moved on to New York, where she was signed on to perform in speakeasy venues and more conventional theaters. Publications like \textit{Variety} went on to praise her performances and “highfalutin” personality she evoked. Shteir, Rachel, \textit{Striptease}, 111.}

Whether Wassau was truly the first to “discover” the striptease or not, striptease surged in popularity and became the signature acts for burlesque productions in the late 1920s. Though they share similar names, strip tease and stripping differed in terms of intention and pace. Strip tease acts generally involved performers beginning with a full outfit and removing elements, on or offstage, with routines of sashaying and flirting with members of the audience. Teasers worked to “sustain suspense,” as Chicago journalist Jack Lait put it. A stripper, by comparison, would strip gradually with more intention on the act of disrobing and less attention towards teasing, flirting, or otherwise interacting with the audience. In both acts, though, artists would traditionally strip down to their “union suits” at the conclusion or, in some cases, reveal one or both breasts, depending on local regulations.\footnote{Rachel Shteir, \textit{Striptease}, 79-80.}

Pasties also became a mainstay in burlesque during this time. Burlesque artists utilized pasties to skirt censorship laws while accentuating performers’ bodies as much as possible. Histories of burlesque credit burlesque producer Earl Carroll of New York for inventing or popularizing the use of pasties in his ornate production called the Earl Carroll Vanities as early as 1923.\footnote{Brenda Foley, \textit{Undressed for Success: Beauty Contestants and Exotic Dancers as Merchants of Morality} (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 143.} Some pasties were designed to bare resemblance to feminine nudity as a mocking
gesture towards law enforcement and censorship rules. Burlesque artist Dixie Evans recalled how performers tested the line between coverage and nudity with the way they modified their G-strings and pasties: “A lot of girls liked to use moleskin for pasties and put rouge on the end so it looks like your real breasts. Sometimes we’d get a couple of hairnets, whatever color we were down there, wad them up and sew them on the outside of the G-string. It kept the cops on their toes.”

No doubt aided by the implementation of G-strings, pasties, and lively jazz music, the burlesque industry grew in scale and profit in the late 1920s. By 1928, an estimated five hundred people worked in the burlesque industry in Chicago. Ads in the *Chicago Tribune* for shows such as the “Midnight Shambles” at the Star & Garter and the “Red-Hot Midnight Jamboree” at the Haymarket, promised “hundreds of girls, hopping jazz music, and other attractions.” Because venues scheduled their most risqué shows around midnight, patrons migrated from one theater to another on State Street in the Loop for consecutive shows. One particularly successful venue was the Rialto Theater. Open since 1917, the Rialto had originally been a vaudeville house and hosted variety entertainment before its owners decided to focus on burlesque. By 1927, the Rialto was hosting rotating revues of chorus girl groups such as “Babes in Toyland.” Like the Star & Garter, the Rialto received acclaim for its upper-scale decor, such as an ornate marble lobby and a rose and gold color scheme. Another “lower-brow” venue was the State-Congress Theater. The State-Congress was originally known as the Folly and had operated as a burlesque theater from 1895 to the mid-1910s, when it closed due to a decline in business. The State-

---

35 Brenda Foley, *Undressed for Success*, 143-144.

Congress opened on November 22, 1919, with managers intent to attract audiences of women to elevate the venue’s reputation and better guarantee higher attendance. To do so, however, the managers of the State-Congress shifted away from burlesque to “high-grade continuous vaudeville” and partnered with department stores to sell discounted tickets to female shoppers. This strategy had limited success, as women were less likely to venture south of Van Buren past a stretch of State Street that contained saloons, pool halls, and all male-rooming houses. Women, at this time, reported unwanted harassment and advances made by men in such male-dominated spaces in Chicago. As such, the State-Congress eventually had to return to burlesque programming to attract male audiences.\(^{37}\) For some venues, the old wisdom of cleaning up productions to appeal to wider audiences without burlesque no longer made economic sense.

Headlining performers enjoyed material benefits and exposure of which chorus girls and other lesser performers could only dream. Performers such as Ann Corio, Ada Leonard, and Mary Sunde became headlining acts in productions at the Rialto and the Star & Garter. Sunde was an entrepreneurial performer who headlined as the “Blonde Venus” at the Star & Garter. Born in Norway but raised in Racine, Wisconsin, Sunde pursued a career onstage even before adulthood. According to her parents, she dreamed of a stage career even as a child. Sunde began her career in vaudeville and burlesque at age 17 with a stock burlesque company in Milwaukee.\(^{38}\) Though it is unclear when Sunde relocated to Chicago, she was advertised in burlesque productions as early as 1931 by the *Chicago Tribune*. By the time of the Century of Progress in 1933, Sunde was the headliner at the Star & Garter, where she was promoted as both an exotic

\(^{37}\) Newman, “Burlesque Theaters,” *Jazz Age Chicago*.

\(^{38}\) “Blonde Venus from Racine a Hit on Stage,” *Racine Journal Times Sunday Bulletin*, September 24, 1933.
blonde beauty and a wholesome, American dream girl who “lives to sew, cook and keep house.” Onstage, Mary Sunde won audiences over with a bubbly personality and gimmicks such as popping open bottles of champagne and throwing the cork into the audience.

Others, like Chicagoan Ada Leonard, tried to distinguish themselves from their peers with subtlety in the way that they strip teased. In an interview with the Chicago Tribune in 1937, Leonard explained her technique as “I don’t give them any more than I have to.” “The audience never sees me unfasten anything,” she explained. “I do all of that behind a cape, or a curtain,” ending with a “flash” of her chest. High earning performers like Leonard were deemed “stripteasers” rather than strippers, in that they would motion and mime towards undressing but would never completely remove their layers of costuming, unlike strippers that strip down to G-strings and pasties. As sociologist David Dressler put it in a 1937 study of burlesque as a cultural phenomenon, the stripteaser “is always about to undress, but she never completely fulfills the promise of her eyes and hips.”

Headliners earned decent pay even during the Depression years. Sunde, for her part, earned at least $100 a week at the Star & Garter, while others such as Corio could make thousands within a single week, on occasion. Success, however, was not evenly distributed amongst aspiring burlesquers. Most strippers and chorus girls made less than sixty dollars a week and worked as many as seventy to eighty hours a week. Managers also stiffed...


40 Shteir, Striptease, 126.


43 “Blonde Venus from Racine a Hit on Stage;” Shteir, Striptease, 158-159.
performers on their pay if business was slow. Performers often did not voice complaints about their pay or working conditions, as they feared being blacklisted in retaliation.44

The resurgence of Chicago burlesque was not without opposition. The proliferation of strip tease acts particularly invited police interventions on the charge of indecency. In March 1931, both the Empress Theater and the Rialto were raided by police and ordered to cancel shows and issue refunds on the charge of hosting “an indecent performance.” Unnamed police vowed to local press such as the Tribune to “clean up” theaters in the Loop as a motivation, though higher-ranking officers rarely were reached for comment on the subject.45 All in all, police raids of burlesque venues, when measured with press coverage, was less compared to previous decades. As such, the Chicago burlesque industry enjoyed a surge of growth and business with its innovations of revealing costuming and jazz styled music and choreography that appealed to its Prohibition-era audience.

“Pansy Craze:” Queer Community and Drag in the South and North Sides

At the same time, drag or “female impersonation” grew in exposure both downtown and in the South Side. Towertown and the Black Belt both received many new migrants because of the “pansy craze”: a period of greater visibility and artistic production by the queer community in cities like Chicago in the interwar period.46 Entertainment and safe spaces for queer Chicagoans proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s. In Towertown, venues such as the Dill Pickle

44 Shteir, Striptease, 158-159.
Club and the newer K-9 Club gained a reputation in the local press and travel guides for being “eccentric” and “odd” places to witness men in drag and “perverted” homosexual men.47 Men from Chicago during this era reported a trend of gay men seeking other men at shows in Towertown or the Loop, at this time. In the 1920s, one Alexander Stahl attended a show at a “burlesque house” south of the Loop, where he met a man in the audience. The two of them struck up a friendly conversation and continued their evening at another burlesque show in the Loop. Afterwards, the man invited Stahl to his apartment in Towertown with the offer of lodging and dinner for the night. The man, however, made a sexual advance on Stahl that he swiftly declined. Stahl threatened to leave, only for the man to counter-offer to take Stahl to a show in the neighborhood.48 Stahl’s experience was not uncommon, as burlesque shows were used in this era as a “cruising” spot for gay men to covertly meet one another. The use of burlesque venues benefitted this as many shows attracted single men to attend, where they could sit and socialize with one another with discretion during the programs. Otherwise, gay men also gathered in private parties in studios and apartments in Towertown, where they could dance, kiss, and even dress in drag in privacy.

Men and women forged lasting relationships and social networks though private and public gatherings in Towertown that enabled them to mutually aid each other during the heights of the Great Depression and provide community to many who left their families behind to live in Chicago.49 In neighbor’s studios and apartments, gay Chicagoans openly danced with and flirted

---


48 Ibid, 102.

with one another, and even experimented with crossdressing in drag. Gay men interviewed by sociologists at the University of Chicago shared stories of attending “drag parties” in which men cross-dressed to dance and flirt with others in artists’ apartments. Notably, interviewees drew a distinction between professional “female impersonators” who attended such parties in higher quality dress and makeup often before or after a show, and “belles” or out gay men who dressed in drag as a hobby.50 Both were welcomed with open arms in queer-friendly spaces in Tower Town.

Drag performers continued to find a place in both mainstream theaters and queer-friendly spaces. Publications such as Variety noted an increase in the number of “pansy parlors” (that is, bars and cabarets that catered to gay men) in both the North and South Sides. The article’s author derisively alleged that “all have waitresses who are lads in gal’s clothing.”51 Other publications noted the presence of female impersonators in stage shows in the North Side with less condemnation and more praise for their performance. The New York Clipper, for instance, praised female impersonators in Chicago during this era for having “remarkably cultivated” singing voices and “exceptionally clever” choreography, and even praised them for their ability to fool audiences on their gender identity.52

In the years leading to the Century of Progress Exposition of 1933-34, venues for female impersonation grew in popularity and were well attended. Like the earlier wave of migration and economic boom surrounding the Columbian Exposition of 1893, investors anticipated a growth

50 “As Told to Me by Mr. B,” Ernest Watson Burgess Papers Box 98, Folder 4: “Homosexuality Interviews”, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

51 Elledge, The Boys of Fairy Town, 147.

52 “Chicago Show Reviews,” New York Clipper, February 1, 1922.
in demand for entertainment for incoming emigrants and tourists. As a result, impresarios in the cabaret scene created new venues and enticed high-profile performers from out-of-state to bookings in Chicago. Karyl Norman of New York fame was booked in 1932, an event that a reviewer heralded as a promise of expansion for female drag shows “on a large scale.” Norman, known as the “Creole Fashion Plate,” began his stage career singing soprano as a child on vaudeville stages in Boston to support his family. As he grew older, however, he pivoted to singing in drag and earned acclaim for his convincing and beautiful soprano voice.53 Norman became a headlining act on the vaudeville circuit impersonating famous female stage characters and celebrities, and traveled to Chicago for shows in the Loop as early as 1922, according to the Chicago Tribune.54 While he was booked on major vaudeville stages in the Loop, he also performed in smaller cabaret bars to critical acclaim. As one reviewer for the Chicago American put it, “Female impersonations in night life have been confined mostly to the smaller spots on the near North Side, but Norman’s engagement at the Kentucky club is probably a forerunner of this form of entertainment on a larger scale.”55

This prediction was already being realized elsewhere. Drag and queer culture also boomed in the city’s Black Belt in the South Side. African Americans continued to migrate into Chicago’s South Side well into the 1920s, including gay men and lesbian women seeking community and relationships. As such, the “pansy craze” was felt in the Black Belt just as much, if not more than, in the North Side. Unique to the South Side at this time were drag venues and

54 “Amusements,” Chicago Tribune, August 7, 1922.
55 “He Thrills ‘Em as a Brunette or Blonde,” Chicago American, April 1, 1932.
balls that spotlighted female impersonation as an independent genre with its own audience.

Though drag balls had fallen out of favor in the old Levee district since they were banned in 1909, organizers and sponsors brought them back to the Stroll in the 1920s. These balls hosted many female impersonators as performers and attendants on Halloween and New Year’s Eve in the guise of costumed parties. According to observers, the balls were well-attended by a diverse crowd and were overtly gay. Myles Vollmer, a University of Chicago sociology student, reported what he saw in a 1924 paper after a ball in the Stroll:

Physically, all types are there. Homosexuals thin and wasted, others slender and with womanish curves, others overfed and lustfully fat…There is a preponderance of Jews and the Latin Nationalities, although homosexuality is no respecter of races. Many of the men are of Polish blood. Negros mingle freely with whites. There seemingly is not race distinction between them…The picture is repeated over and over – colorful evening gowns, satin slippers, French heels, silken hose, gracefully displayed, tiaras, feathered fans, flashing jewelry, - all gliding about the Hall. Gliding is the only name for it, no woman could be more graceful. Trains are carefully help up by curled and manicured fingers…The ‘girls’ move about swaying their shoulders, rolling their hips, and the only clue to their masculinity is their heavier skeletal frames, or occasionally a more masculine featured face.’

While these balls directly violated the city’s statute against cross-dressing and “indecent” exhibitions, city officials sanctioned them. In fact, police, both in uniform and plain clothes, were dispatched to oversee these balls, much like their counterparts in New York. As Myles Vollmer put it, these balls were “the one occasion when official Chicago put its approval on the public appearance of its intermediate sex.”

56 Myles Vollmer, “The New Year’s Eve Drag,” Box 98, Folder 11, Burgess Papers, Special Collections Research Center, The Regenstein Library, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

57 Chaucer, Gay New York, 294-295.
These balls were not without an element of danger, however. Vollmer reported that blackmailers attended balls to “prey” upon men they caught dancing with other men who were still closeted and would pay to keep their sexuality secret. In addition, attendees wearing drag were arrested for trying to use restrooms assigned to the gender they were impersonating. Thus, even though the New Years and Halloween drag balls in the South Side were intended to be the few times when gay and trans men could “be themselves” in public, as Vollmer put it, there were limits and consequences to doing so if they ran afoul of police or people who intended them harm. 58 These accounts also indicated a double standard that drag artists contended with during and after the “Pansy Craze” of the 1920s and 1930s. Female impersonation or drag was seemingly tolerated by mainstream society so long as it seemed to be entirely a theatrical technique of entertainment by actors in vaudeville and stage theaters in the Loop. Drag as an expression of queer gender identity or homosexuality, however, was something to be limited to special occasions or private parties away from the public eye, and not without the threat of legal or extralegal punishment.

Cabarets in the northern stretch of the Black Belt (what would later be called Bronzeville) also hired and featured drag performers as headlining stars. At cabarets such as the Plantation Café or the Pleasure Inn, female impersonators sang versions of popular songs, flirted with the audience, and told jokes. Like burlesque, drag shows such as these appealed to aspiring performers as a lucrative source of income compared to other forms of employment. One Lorenzo Banyard, also known by his impersonator stage name “Nance Kelly,” reported making ten dollars a show, three shows a week. By comparison, he only made twelve dollars a week.

58 Myles Vollmer, “The New Year’s Eve Drag,” Box 98, Folder 11, Burgess Papers, Special Collections Research Center, The Regenstein Library, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
working as a dishwasher at a local YMCA. Performers like Kelly shared the stage with musical talents such as Jelly Roll Morton, Gab Calloway, and Fats Waller in cafes and cabarets along the Stroll. Some achieved celebrity status, earning bookings across the city and the country.

One such artist was Sepia Gloria Swanson, whose legal name was Walter Winston. Winston was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1906, but his family moved to Chicago to escape the racism of the Jim Crow-era South. After graduating high school, Winston started appearing in drag under the stage name Sepia Gloria Swanson in queer speakeasies and cabarets. Swanson first gained popularity as a hostess and singer in a speakeasy before moving to the Pleasure Inn in 1929. Swanson was well known for his more risqué renditions of Fat’s Waller’s “Squeeze Me” and Sophie Tucker’s “One of the These Days,” which drew sold-out crowds at the Pleasure Inn and other venues. Such was Swanson’s popularity that he was booked regularly in theaters in Detroit and New York. He eventually opened his own cabaret on 35th Street in Chicago. The success of performers like Swanson set a high standard for female impersonator artists hoping to get booked at cafes and cabarets in Chicago. According to fans and critics of the drag scene, it was not enough to simply look the part. Performers had to work the crowd and possess performance skills outside of makeup and costuming. As one entertainment reviewer put it, many performers “can dress and look the part,” but many seemed to “have no stage ability” or could either sing or dance, but not both. “It really requires a combination of dance and song to win a place in one of these floor shows.”

59 Elledge, The Boys of Fairy Town, 143.

60 Elledge, The Boys of Fairy Town, 143-144.

61 “Female Impersonators Rule Many Floor Shows,” Chicago Defender, September 11, 1936.
A Century of Nudity: Burlesque and Drag during the World’s Fair, 1933-1934

Both drag and burlesque surged in activity and popularity during the Century of Progress Fair in 1933. The Fair was conceived as an opportunity to both celebrate the economic and cultural advancements of Chicago and the country while attracting business during the Great Depression. Like the Columbian Exposition years prior, the Century of Progress featured exhibits and structures championing modern architecture and technology, as well as a Midway area to provide public entertainment and spectacle. The Lakefront east of the South Loop (between 11th and 35th Street) served as fairground to structures such as the General Motors Pavilion and the Hall of Science—testimonies to the achievements of the national economy even during economic downturn.62 Other sections of the fair directly on the Lakefront offered food and entertainment not unlike the Midway Plaisance at the Columbian Exposition years before. The Streets of Paris, as well as multiple Indian and Japanese villages and pavilions, were homages of their themed country of origin, offering fairgoers spaces to dine, relax, and take in exotic dance and music. The fact that the city relaxed its ban against low-alcohol beer sales that same year made for good business, as well.

What the Fair’s organizers did not count on, however, was the arrival of Sally Rand. Her road to burlesque fame was by no means a direct one. Born Harriet Helen Beck in rural Missouri, Rand found her start and her stage name with a traveling stock company in the 1920s. She starred in multiple silent films during that decade but suffered from a slight lisp that effectively ruined her chances at a career in movies once motion pictures adapted sound. Still, Rand supported herself and continued pursuing a career in performance, first with a vaudeville musical

revue and then, in 1932, as an exotic dancer with the Paramount Club in Chicago. At the Paramount, Rand claimed to have improvised the topless fan dance that would define her career—an act that quickly made her a headliner there.\(^{63}\)

Rand was ambitious and eager for greater exposure. The Century of Progress Fair, with its innumerable crowds, seemed like an obvious opportunity for Rand to bring her act and burlesque, itself, to a wider audience. “The quickest way to get ahead in any industry,” Rand later said, “is to present the product to the largest possible number of persons.”\(^{64}\) Lacking a formal invitation, Rand conspired with her agent to crash the Fair’s preopening party on May 27, 1933, with a publicity stunt that was sure to grab their attention. Smuggling herself through the Fair’s back entrance on a boat, Rand entered the Streets of Paris and mounted the mainstage atop a white horse, wearing nothing but a white velvet cape, a blond wig, and a floral ankle band in a tribute to Lady Godiva. The crowd of sponsors and Fair organizers were shocked and then applauded enthusiastically, even as Rand was arrested by police for obscenity. In what, in retrospect, seemed like a prelude of events to come, Rand did not remain in custody for long. An attorney representing the exposition expedited her release. Rather than criticizing her, the Streets of Paris hired Rand the next day as their headlining act at the Café de la Paix’s floor show. This was a moment of pride for Rand. Not only did her Lady Godiva stunt land her a job, but her ability to keep performing in the nude, according to Rand, gave her the opportunity to make a statement against high society during the time of the Depression. Performing naked in front of

---

63 There has been much debate between historians and burlesque aficionados as to whether Rand was truly the first to conceive of the naked (or semi-naked) fan dance routine. Faith Bacon, another burlesque performer during this era, claimed that Rand had stolen the act from her for years—a claim that led to much in-fighting and litigation between the two. Leslie Zemeckis recounts this tale and provides a biography of both starlets’ lives in her book, *Feuding Fan Dancers*.

rich audiences, Rand would later say, felt akin to saying, “How dare you have a dress of a thousand-dollar bills when people are hungry?”

Rand was among many artists who performed in the nude on the Midway that summer. Publications and film footage captured just some of the many acts that visited the Midway for easy money and testing the limits of censorship and cultural taste. Firsthand accounts reported female rhumba dancers and contortionists, as well as nude models posing for portraits. One visiting act named “Hot Cha San”—an Asian-American burlesque performer—covered herself in gold paint or lacquer and posed as the “Golden Girl of Lido Pool” on the Midway. In addition, she performed dance routines in a see-through negligee that elicited generous applause from male spectators. Another burlesquer, Joan Warner of California (nicknamed a “poetess of motion”) performed her own fan dance routine dedicated to the “madness” of the World’s Fair, on top of regular appearances at clubs in Chicago. Spectators had their pick of carnival entertainment, such as Siamese twins and other human exhibits at the Living Wonders Freak show, reminiscent of the Midway Plaisance in 1893. And there was Sally Rand, herself, as the star attraction of the floor show at the Streets of Paris’ café. Years after the fair, visitors still remembered the impression her looks and performance made on them. Many cited a sense of optimism and buoyancy watching Rand dance with her fans and, later, an iconic bubble act that she debuted there. “With all the grace of a woodland nymph,” John Van Gilder of Knoxville, Tennessee recalled, “she…played with and tossed into the air her transparent soap bubble.

---


66 “A Century of Nudity, in which Chicago Convinces the Courts that Art should be Untrammeled,” *Century of Progress Fair, 1933*, Chicago History Museum Research Center, Chicago, IL.

Somehow, one felt as though secretly watching some little woodland creature at play in the moonlight.” Another spectator, Donald Richie of Lima, Ohio, reminisced about Sally Rand and associated her act with the optimism that inspired the Fair:

“My mother…hurried me past the packed pavilion, but I managed to see one of the pictures out front, and there Sally had turned around, fan dropped, and was showing her big peach-colored bottom. I felt I had seen something of importance…it was part of the Century of Progress, and I was happy to be part of it too, to have seen the future in Sally’s bare bottom.”

Not everyone was happy to see Rand and other artists bare it all at the Fair. Older generations of performers and moralists became aware of the performances and condemned the hosting of future performances of this kind. Little Egypt herself, then in her sixties and recreating her Streets of Cairo show at the Fair’s Oriental Village, told a reporter that her dances at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 had never been as revealing as the “nonchalant young things of 1933.” Women active in social reform efforts in Chicago took legal action to get the courts to ban nude or sexual performances on the Midway. Mary Belle Spencer, an attorney, took offense at some of the entertainment she witnessed and tried to force the city’s courts to pass an injunction against “lewd and lascivious dances.” Instead, Superior Court Judge Joseph B. David dismissed Spencer’s complaints out of hand. Though the Judge disclosed that he was no fan of the Fair and would not likely attend, he had little sympathy for those who wanted to censor nude artistic performance. Joking that “lots of people in this community would want to put pants on horses,” David went on to conclude in favor of the Midway’s organizers and artists:

---


69 Ibid, 7.

70 Ibid, 12.
If the officials of a Century of Progress want to encourage art or if a woman wiggles about with a fan, it is not the business of this court...If you ask me, they [Fair visitors] are just a lot of boobs to come out to see a woman wiggle with a fan or without fig leaves. But we have the boobs, and we have a right to cater to them.  

Female impersonators inside and out of the fair likewise attempted to exploit the new masses arriving to Chicago for the fair for the sake of profit and publicity. Few were allowed to perform on the fairgrounds, themselves. One notable exception was Half Pint Jaxon. Jaxon performed as a singer and female impersonator since 1919 in the Black Belt to popular and critical acclaim. He was well known for writing his own songs, as well as parody versions of popular songs that included sexual innuendos about men. Before the fair, Jaxon had headlined in venues such as the Plantation Café on the South Side and at posher clubs on the North Side, while also being featured regularly on local radio broadcasts on the WWJD channel from the Palmer House beginning in 1933. His falsetto voice, performance of male and female roles in songs, and renditions of songs like “My Daddy Rocks Me” made him well known on the music scene in Chicago. Such was his fame that he was the only African American, let alone queer female impersonator, to be hired for the opening night ceremonies for the World’s Fair on May 27, 1933, the same night Rand made her debut as Lady Godiva. Aside from Jaxon, however, there is no mention of notable female impersonator or drag performances on the fairgrounds aside from one theater later shut down by police in subsequent attempts to censor the performers.

Meanwhile, venues for female impersonation or drag also profited from the influx of travelers to the city for the fair in 1933 and 1934. Many venues in districts adjacent to the

71 “Let the Boobs Look, Judge’s Idea on Nudes,” Chicago Tribune, July 19, 1933; “A Century of Nudity.”
72 Elledge, The Boys of Fairy Town, 160-166.
World’s Fairgrounds, especially in Towertown and the Stroll, reported packed houses that remained busy until venues closed well after midnight. This included some such as the K-9 Club, despite their reputation as being a place where people could encounter “perverts.” “During the World’s Fair,” said a nightlife critic for the Chicago American, “the k-9 never had a night without a capacity crowd, and most evenings, the spot did a sell-out volume from opening time until the boys and girls of the show were dismissed for the night – long after 5 a.m.” The K-9 was even able to run entire revues of female impersonators and were advertised in Midwestern press such as the Sheboygan Journal. Some venues opened during the Fair to capitalize on the incoming out-of-town visitors. Two such venues were the Annex Buffet on 2840 South State Street and the Cabin Inn (or Cozy Cabin Inn) on 3119 Cottage Grove Avenue. The former venue offered fried chicken and entertainment in an open-air garden and featured tenured, high-profile performers such as Sepia Mae West, who ran his own revue titled The Gay Nineties before he moved to the Cabin Inn.

The Cabin Inn, on the other hand, opened in 1934 and seemed to attract controversy by design. The Cabin had Sepia Mae West as its headliner and talent director, under whom the Cabin would add many more female impersonators to their roster. Not long after the fair, however, the Cabin Inn would be forced to close temporarily. In 1935, the Cabin hosted a double wedding, one between a “midget dancer” and their partner, and a same-sex wedding between female impersonators Jean Acker and Vernon Long. Police raided this wedding and forced the club to close for a time. The Cabin Inn reopened and continued to host entertainment well into

---

73 Heap, Slumming, 88.

the 1940s. Queer cabarets and venues were well-attended and overt in their identity during the Fair’s proceedings. A University of Chicago student’s account of the Bally Hoo Café at 1942 N. Halsted Street, for instance, illustrated a typical show and attendance of similar venues in the Near North Side on September 24, 1933. About “100 queer people [were] in the café…[with a] hostess dressed in masculine attired,” said the student, who also noted much conversation in falsetto voices among men dancing in drag and lesbians in the audience. The same venue also hosted a drag competition that awarded the winner with a bottle of gin.

Drag venues owed much success in this time to the crowds and excitement generated by the nearby Century of Progress Fair. Some female impersonators found success by imitating or seeking inspiration from high-profile burlesque performers featured at the Fair. One drag performer, Gilda Grey, drew a lot of crowds to a variety of venues before she became a full-time hostess at the Cabin Inn. There, she became very well known for her rendition of Sally Rand’s feather fan dances. Members of the Juvenile Protective Association (JPA) argued that the Fair’s proceedings emboldened displays of drag and homosexuality in queer establishments around the city. Venues such as the Picardy Club in the Black Belt attracted crowds from the fairgrounds seeking to “slum” or see sights of queer performances. The JPA alleged that such saloons or taverns “amused” patrons with “spectacles of perversion…including not only impersonators in

75 St. Sukie, *Chicago Whispers*, 146-147.


77 Beemyn, *Creating a Place for Ourselves*, 104.

78 Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 144.
the floor shows, but also ‘male hostesses’ employed to sit and drink with patrons.” Drag floor shows such as this were well-attended in other venues like the Bally Hoo Café in Lincoln Park during the fair, where audiences saw drag performers strip tease out of paper dresses and sing songs with strong references to their genitals, to great applause. Queer neighborhoods and culture became tourist attractions for fairgoers. During the 1933-1934 Fair season, guided tours were allegedly organized for people seeking entertainment and even hookups with homosexuals at venues in both the Black Belt and Towertown. In fact, a banner was hung by a tourism group over the intersection of Chicago and Clark, marking the boundary of Towertown, declaring, “Welcome all to a Century of Progress, International Exposition, Chicago, 1933.” Ironically, warnings that bars, venues and “pansy parlors” in these districts hosted queer people and “perversions” became a large source of appeal for curious visitors. One Chicagoan woman allegedly told a social worker “She intended to go to a nightclub called the ‘Canine Club’…[where] you couldn’t go to a toilet without meeting some man or woman following you in [and where] many of the men wear women’s clothes.” The woman made it clear that planned to find “a pervert and have a sexual experience with one of them.

**Backlash and Censorship, from the Fairgrounds to the City, 1933-1934**

Burlesquers and other artists were doing well at the Century of Progress and Fair officials seemed happy to look the other way while enjoying the revenue these stars attracted. Restrictions

---


80 Bally Hoo Café report, November 22, 1933, Erwin Watson Burgess Papers, Box 98, Folder 3, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

81 Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town*, 144-145.

84 Ibid 147; Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Box 98, Folder 2.
against nudity were seldom enforced on the Streets of Paris against nude figure model studios and dancers. Agents worked within and outside the fair to monitor and police the entertainment on the Century of Progress fairgrounds. The Council of Social Agencies of Chicago, for instance, monitored all the entertainment at the fair and its advisory committee was chaired by Jessie Binford, the Juvenile Protective Association’s executive director. From this position, Binford released reports criticizing the fair’s sideshows and dance halls as “indecent and very offensive” to public sensitivities and called for more stringent regulations. Martha McGrew, the assistant to the fair’s general manager, ultimately forced the elimination of some dance venues and enacted a 1:30 A.M. curfew to prevent drunk people from loitering around in the fairgrounds.83 The Fair’s general manager Lenox Lohr, for his part, stated openly to the press that he saw no issue with hosting nude performances at the fair and did not agree with having police stationed to monitor them. Considering Mary Belle Spencer’s court case, however, on July 21, Lohr and other fair officials met and devised additional policies intended to make the fair safer and cleaner. On top of keeping in place the curfew, the Fair’s managers implemented a three-point coverage decree for female performers—that is, they were required to cover both breasts and their “loins”—and a rule that their acts were not to be “lewd or obscene.”84 In spite of these efforts, the burlesquers and other nude artists remained on the Midway and openly defied or mocked the new regulations. Some proprietors had their dancers wear long red underwear and full-length flannel drawers to mock the fair’s attention to coverage. Others simply carried on in the nude. The

83 Ganz, The 1933 Chicago World's Fair, 22.

burlesquers, dancers, and models were unfazed by these attempts to censor or ban their art, and the fair officials did not adequately enforce them.

To moral critics such as the JPA, this lack of enforcement seemed a cynical ploy to profit from lewd attractions. “The way to make money,” Jessie Binford remarked, “is to show a naked woman. The rest is a struggle over the point of permissible nudity.”85 A report to the JPA’s Board of Directors by Binford further detailed how performers, barkers and other participants in the entertainment on the Midway outwardly violated censorship rules issued by Fair officials. Barkers for exhibits at the Midway and various “Villages” representing other countries promised attendees that their models were “undraped and unashamed” and wore “nothing but a smile.” Reportedly, the performances lived up to these advertisements even more-so in the Fair’s second season in 1934. “There has been no effort to enforce the rule of the ‘3-point-coverage’…as far as the village floor shows and cabaret shows are concerned,” Binford stated bluntly. Multiple fan dancers in the Streets of Paris, the Moulin Rouge exhibit, the Italian Village, and others performed topless. In her opinion, these exhibitions only grew bolder as they competed to attract larger crowds:

It is the trend toward the sensational and the flamboyant…From the outset of the Fair, they [the Villages] have sought to out-do each other in the ballyhoo at the gate, notorious nude ‘stars’ within, and a determination to outrage good taste and common decency in the peep shows that line their streets. Conditions are worse at the present time than they were last year or last month because in such a competition they are bound to be. The only way to sensationalize is to go beyond what was previously thought to be the bounds of permissibility.

85 Ganz, The 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, 24.
The main problem confronting the censors at the Fair, Binford argued, was the lack of hands and staff to adequately enforce the rules. She reported that, while the recommendations of the JPA were politely received by Fair officials, they were repeatedly told that there simply were not enough censors to be always present at all shows during the Fair’s operation. Demand for burlesque, in other words, was outstripping the attention and abilities of the censors.  

The JPA and Binford did not stop their criticisms at the fairgrounds. Using their members as observers, the JPA compiled reports of burlesque and female impersonation shows to build a case that the Fair was having a corrosive effect on the public morals and censorship laws of the city. The JPA noted that the burlesque scene grew bolder and cruder in the wake of the Century of Progress. “It would seem that the influence of the floorshows and peepshows at a Century of Progress,” said one report in the summer of 1934, “has been felt by these theaters, giving them a new conception of nudity.” The JPA reported to Commissioner Allman of the Chicago police, for instance, that venues such as the Star & Garter regularly featured women who wore nothing but G-strings and skits of a “smutty and indecent nature.” For example, Ada Leonard, then a regular headliner at the Star & Garter, was reported dancing with and tossing into the air a transparent shawl to reveal her breasts for brief moments. Despite this, the JPA noted that similar offerings at higher-production venues like the Star & Garter were a marked improvement over past burly offerings, in that they did not feature profanity or sexually overt comedy. Others, such as the Gem Theater, were noted as having a more diverse audience (in terms of race and class), young people—including minors—in attendance, and more crude material without apparent artistic creativity.

---

86 “Report on the Century of Progress,” August 1, 1934, Juvenile Protective Association Records, University of Illinois-Chicago, Box 5, Folder 90.
Though the level of criticism differed from venue to venue, the JPA were consistently concerned with the attendance of young people, whose morals, they feared, would continue to be corrupted. Some of their complaints yielded direct responses from the police. In December of 1934, Commissioner James Allman, after investigating some of the JPA’s reports, successfully advised the mayor to cancel the theater license of the Star & Garter for featuring nude and indecent performances. Ironically, the JPA’s reports indicated that the Star & Garter’s temporary closure had unintended consequences. They claimed that the burlesque shows along South State Street became “more objectionable” because, after the closure of the Star & Garter on the West Loop, they amped up the nudity and suggestiveness of their shows to attract that theater’s dejected audiences. Indeed, a report in December of 1934 argued that the closure of the Star & Garter only served to benefit its competitors, who absorbed many of the performers and audiences.87

Ironically, the JPA’s documentation in favor of censoring and banning burlesque entertainment provides some of the most detailed accounts of the shows from this era. Reports in 1934 offered a detailed description of the state and content of burlesque programs around the city. Burlesque performances, Binford explained in one report, were distinguished by price and the type of crowd they attracted. “One was the rather expensive show…patronized by a fast, loose, ready-spending crowd who dress well and travel in care or taxicabs, the other, very cheap entertainment…catering to the poor classes.” Differences in production value and talent aside, the lineup of acts tended to be homogeneous for burlesque shows in Chicago during the 1930s. As Binford describes,

87 “Rialto Theater report,” December 1, 1934, Juvenile Protective Association Records, University of Illinois-Chicago, Box 5, Folder 90.
Large tableaus of girls are posed, entirely nude except for gee-strings; a condition which rarely occurred in the past. Dancers in almost all the shows remove their brassieres and expose their unclad breasts – just before leaving the stage in the smaller shows, but freely and without the least concealment in the most expensive burlesque. The skits and dialogue depend largely upon sexual intercourse or perverted intercourse. Perverted homosexual relations are the butt of much burlesque comedy…Female performers express lascivious sexual excitement by rolling or shaking the pelvis, while the men clasp or rub the garments covering their genitals.88

At times, the language of the JPA’s surveillance reports of shows mirrored that of amateur critics. Their level of criticism or praise depended on the amount of material they objected to in shows. Some, such as the Chicago Theater on 614 S. State Street, achieved praise for some performances in which their interracial cast of Black and White dancers performed no strip tease and instead wore brassieres and other coverings. Programs at the Chicago and other venues that focused more on skit comedy – even with Blackface acts – and avoided jokes of “sexual perversion” tended to receive praise as being among the “cleanest burlesque” JPA members reported seeing.

Praise shifted to scorn between reports of multiple shows at the same venues. The Star & Garter, for instance, was praised for a showing of the “Midnight Shambles” show on February 10, 1934, that had covered dancers, humor based on wordplay, and an emphasis on choreography more than sexual enticement. “I do not see how burlesque could be much better, on the whole, than at this performance,” said the JPA reported. “Morally, I believe it was superior to some of the movie musical comedies.”89 During the height of the Fair’s season that summer, another

88 Jessie L. Binford, “Burlesque Shows in Chicago during the Summer of 1934,” Juvenile Protective Association Papers, University of Illinois-Chicago, Box 9, Folder 89.

89 Juvenile Protective Association Records, University of Illinois-Chicago, Box 5, Folder 91.
report at the Midnight Shambles show reported that dancers such as Ada Leonard, Mary Sunde, and others in the cast stripped down to their G-strings.\textsuperscript{90} Still, other venues attracted criticism by the JPA not just for content, but for the perceived quality of the shows. Their reporters noted that shows at the Rialto Theater, the Gem and others where stripteasers did not display any dancing were received coolly by their audiences. Indeed, while the JPA regularly complained against lewd dancing in public entertainment, its reporters at times excused some burlesque shows for featuring “shimmy-shake” dancing in the place of full nudity to keep its audience entertained. Other venues featuring “peep holes” and arcades of dubious quality and dishonest advertisement likewise had a bad reputation amongst showgoers.\textsuperscript{91} Though its members drew distinctions between burlesque shows that they found of greater or lower respectability, the position of the organization on burlesque remained constant: that it was a threat to the city’s image and reputation that needed to be cleaned up.

Pressure to clean up the fair’s entertainment mounted later that summer when then-Mayor Edward Joseph Kelly visited the Century of Progress and was shocked by what he saw. On July 31, Kelly and a State’s Attorney took a tour of some of the sites on the Midway, including the Oriental Village, Streets of Paris, and Old Mexico, among others. Interestingly, Kelly singled out for praise Hot Cha San’s dance as a nude, golden statue as beautiful and artistic, but lambasted the overall offerings from these sections of the park as being “cheap, tawdry, and downright suggestive.” He summoned Manager Lennox Lohr and Park Superintendent George T. Donoghue to a meeting that night. Together, they agreed to a two-day sweep of the Midway

\textsuperscript{90} Juvenile Protective Association Records, University of Illinois-Chicago, Box 5, Folder 91.

\textsuperscript{91} Juvenile Protective Association Records, University of Illinois-Chicago, Box 5, Folder 89.
(beginning the very next day) by policemen in plain clothes to inspect and arrest any acts that violated the fair’s coverage rules and other regulations. After this sweep ended on August 3, however, police reported that they had found no performers who violated the Fair’s rules. This was due to the chilling effect the announced sweep had on dancers, who took steps to comply and avoid arrest. Fan dancers and other acts wore adhesive tape, lingerie, or flannel underwear. Sally Rand protested the mayor’s sweep—citing his hypocrisy in enjoying seeing Hot Cha San’s nude dance—but wore a piece of gauze in compliance. Some showmen and artists nevertheless defied these efforts. One fair barker told the press “I doubt that the mayor is a reliable weathervane when it comes to art and morality.” A Lady Godiva impersonator and her horse—the symbol to the Fair’s burly opening—wore matching lace panties in a reference to Judge David’s ruling just weeks before in defense of artistic expression against censorship.

For Sally Rand and other performers, defiance was met with punishment and legal action. Rand, for her part, rebuked the orders to cover up and accused the Mayor and the Fair of being impartial against performers such as her over others considered more “artistic.” Just days after the mayor’s sweep of the Fair, Rand discarded the bit of cloth she used to cover the lower half of her body while performing at the Fair. Beyond the Midway, Rand was booked to perform her fan dance at the Chicago Theater. This, however, did not render her art beyond the reach of the law. On August 6, she was arrested by police at the Chicago four times for “putting on an indecent exhibition” with her fan dance. In court that evening, Rand and her attorneys negotiated a minor fine after arguing that keeping her back bare during the fan dance was a necessary artistic

---


93 “A Century of Nudity.”
element to the performance and promising to wear flesh-colored body paint to cover up.\textsuperscript{94} Negotiations and debates over what defined “tactful nudity in art” carried on in the courtroom and the press until August 9, when Rand’s team successfully negotiated a mere $25 fine. For every cross-examining question from the prosecuting attorneys, Rand countered that her nudity was essential to being able to move freely and with the level of grace her act demanded.\textsuperscript{95} Later in September, Rand was arrested once more and, after performing her fan dance for a jury, was sentenced to a year in jail and a $200 fine for indecency, though, later, both the fine and sentence was reduced and her charges dismissed altogether in Appellate Court.\textsuperscript{96}

Back at the Fair, nudity was poised to generate even more business in the Summer of 1934. By some accounts, the performers and their promoters became even more aggressive and suggestive than the previous year because neither Fair officials nor the police could or would monitor every show. Topless dancers adorned with flower pedals and body tape greeted patrons with steins of beer in cafes along the Streets of Paris. Shows that used to be emphasized as artistic or educational in nature were promoted heavily as peep shows. “Colony of nudists: step right inside,” said some barkers. “Live classes, live models! You can’t be Parisian until you’ve learned how to draw them!”\textsuperscript{97} The JPA reported that topless fan dancers, crude barkers, and other performers were becoming bolder. Attempts by police to shut down some of these acts were

\textsuperscript{94} Virginia Gardner, “Sally Listens to Judges, Then Wraps Herself in Coat of Paint,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, August 6, 1933.


\textsuperscript{97} "Merriment, Camaraderie, Noise, Naughtiness—That's Streets of Paris at a Century of Progress," \textit{Plaindealer} (Kansas City, Kansas), July 14, 1933.
blocked by the courts. In one case involving a nude model artist posing as Edvard Manet’s *Olympia*, on July 7, 1934, Judge John McGoorty of the Superior Court denied police’s request for a court injunction against the “pagan and immoral” act, saying that the responsibility lied with police and the Fair to stop these acts. However, he criticized the city of Chicago and the Fair for allowing such exhibitions to take place:

Peepshows are a travesty on an exposition designed to celebrate A Century of Progress in murals and art, as well as in material things. It is a disgrace that A Century of Progress should derive revenue from displays intended to rouse the lower, evil passions. ‘Olympia’ and other peepshows are utterly indecent, pagan, and immoral. I refuse to believe the public morals have descended so low as to accept such a standard for ‘A Century of Progress.’ If the Fair’s officials don’t stop such exhibitions, the city police should.\(^98\)

Subsequent attempts by police to pressure the model to cover up her breasts with flower pedals were also blocked by Judge Samuel David, who rejected such interventions as “prudery” against artistic expression. Fair officials claimed they did not have the manpower to monitor every performance on the Midway. In the entire two-year run of the Fair, only one show, the Theater Comique, was shut down by police—not for nudity, but for featuring cross-dressing. In effect, despite the wishes of the Mayor, the JPA and other “prudes” arrayed against burlesque and nudity in art, the “Century of Nakedness,” as one publication put it, could finish, having drawn untold amounts of people and business into the fairgrounds.\(^99\)

Despite the efforts of the JPA, Fair and city officials, and law enforcement, rules of censorship and cross-dressing were tested, bent, and broken not only on the grounds of the Century of Progress Fair and the burlesque stages and queer cabarets and bars of Chicago in the

\(^{98}\) Juvenile Protective Association Records, University of Illinois Chicago, Box 6, Folder 90.

\(^{99}\) A Century of Nudity.”
1920s and early 1930s. Previous industry-wide attempts to clean up burlesque in Chicago and nationwide before these decades seemed to give way to innovations in dress and undress; styles of jazz music and choreography that excited crowds and helped emphasize the beauty and bodies of performers; and a persistent demand for entertainment that deliberately broke with conventions of gender and sexuality. The coming of the World’s Fair in 1933 and 1934 only served to drum up even more business and excitement for venues of burlesque and drag founded during the era of Prohibition. The success and public profile of burlesque and drag entertainers, however, would go on to provoke a response the office of Major Edward J. Kelly. Kelly’s city government and the city’s police had, by the end of the Fair, been chastised by sitting judges for failing to enforce existing bans against indecent performances and cross-dressing in public, both on the Fairgrounds and around the city. A reporter for Variety predicted that as soon as the money for tourism for the Fair stopped coming with the Fair’s conclusion in 1934, Kelly would enact a plan to clean up the city’s cabarets and theaters. Indeed, in the Fall of that year, the city’s authorities began to turn against both drag and burlesque, in a concerted effort to remove both styles of entertainment from the downtown area and to police its shows and performers around the city.
CHAPTER 4
“FALL OF THE HOUSE OF GARTERS”
THE DECLINE OF CHICAGO BURLESQUE,
1934-1975

The popularity and business of burlesque peaked with the Century of Progress World’s Fair in 1933 and 1934. With the closing of the Fair, however, municipal government enforced censorship laws with greater force and shut down businesses deemed in violation of said laws. Between 1934 and the mid-1970s, burlesque shows and theaters diminished in number. Censorship was not the only factor forcing performers and venues to change and adapt. In these decades, burlesque faced greater competition from other forms of entertainment that usurped its status as a provider for the most risqué and provocative shows for adult audiences. Higher esteemed-alternatives such as nightclubs and “gentlemen’s clubs” featured burlesque artists and dancers in more diverse programs of music-based talent. These types of clubs grew in number in the Loop and other adjacent neighborhoods while theaters dedicated to burlesque either transitioned to other genres to stay in business or closed permanently.

Between the city’s firmer enforcement of censorship laws and the loss of business overall, the once wide and diverse industry in burlesque shrunk to a handful of venues in downtown Chicago by the 1960s. In their place, strip clubs or bars arose in the postwar era to fulfill a demand for risqué entertainment. Strip venues within and adjacent to Chicago’s Near North Side and the Loop had dancers display overt nudity without elements of tease or comedic performance that had long defined burlesque. Many strip clubs proliferated in Calumet City (or
Cal City, which attracted audiences local and interstate seeking entertainment unrestricted by Chicago’s censorship laws. Strip clubs were mostly expunged from Chicago and Cal City via police interventions and raids related to organized crime and by changes in the municipal code designed to keep the number of strip clubs and burlesque venues to a bare minimum within Chicago. By the 1970s, Chicago burlesque was firmly in a period of decline.

**Police Crackdown on Downtown Burlesque, 1934-1960**

Municipal governments in Chicago and other cities forced many burlesque venues to close in adherence to censorship laws in 1937. While there is no record as to why the mayor and police did not target burly theaters sooner after the Fair, the timing was significant for the national burlesque industry. In New York City, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia had effectively banned burlesque that year by refusing to renew the licenses of any venue that hosted burlesque shows or other indecent productions. As if taking that by example, the Chicago police, acting under Mayor Edward Kelly’s orders, moved swiftly to raid theaters, arrest performers, and to revoke the licenses of multiple venues in the Loop. On October 17, 50 women were arrested across multiple venues—including the Gem Theater and the Rialto—just after midnight, mostly performers and dancers. In addition, the police seized close to 50 coin-operated “peep machines” that displayed pictures of naked women from arcades that same evening, as part of a larger move against indecency in the Loop, in general.¹ Though producers remained resilient and promised that the “show will go on,” for some of them, that year marked the end of business. Just days later, in October 27, the Mayor revoked the licenses of six venues—including the Rialto—for

---

hosting indecent performances. Even the Star & Garter, which had previously evaded scrutiny or police intervention, was not spared. The ornate venue continued to attract top-billed talent such as Ada Leonard, a stripteaser and renowned singer, as late as the Fall of 1934.

Some of the “burlesque queens” of their day had their sights on other forms of entertainment beyond burlesque. Leonard, for her part, continued to attract top billing as a nude model and stripteaser as “America’s Most Perfect Beauty” at the Rialto and the Star & Garter. Leonard, according to the Arizona Republic, won over regular, devoted fans with her singing voice and her limited, measured amount of strip tease that never ended in nudity. Her musical talent led Leonard away from the burlesque stage to other ventures. She landed singing gigs at Chicago nightclubs and later attracted the attention of movie producers with RKO, who offered her screen tests and later cast her in the film, “Miss America.” Leonard ultimately became a conductor for the All-American Girl Orchestra, the first all-female band to tour with the USO during World War II and performed on tour long after. Even during performances with the orchestra, Leonard contended with catcalls and heckles to “take it off.” Other renowned and starting strippers remained in the industry well after the war. The average stripper, according to historian Rachel Shteir, made more than what Broadway showgirls earned in their show, but still far below the average daily or weekly take of stars such as Sally Rand, who made $125 a night in the 1930s. Other well-known burlesque queens, such as Blaze Starr and Tempest Storm, made

---


tens of thousands of dollars a week and negotiated highly profitable, long-term contracts with venues in cities with laxer regulations such as Las Vegas.\textsuperscript{6} They, however, were the exceptions.

As cities such as Chicago and New York all but expelled burlesque from the heart of their commercial and theatrical districts, performers such as Sally Rand gravitated towards shows across the country in carnivals, state fairs, and the like. In the postwar era, the very same circus tents where Sally Rand and others whose careers arguably peaked in the 1930s would continue to perform and created burlesque productions to try keep their art alive. Headliners drew enormous audiences and lucrative money during summer seasons when burlesque theaters tended to close. Sally Rand entertained 11,000 patrons Hennie’s Sideshow at the Des Moines Fair in 1947. Gypsy Rose Less spent the summer of 1949 with the Royal American Carnival, bringing “a slice of Broadway” to audiences in many states by performing strip tease alongside other performers. Summer seasons on circus tours were incredibly lucrative for headliners and “burlesque queens.” Lee made $125,000 in a single year, according to \textit{Variety}.\textsuperscript{7} Burlesque performances in circuses and carnivals were not without opposition and criticism, however. In state fairs in Minneapolis and St. Louis, Rand only performed after objections made by conservative citizens’ groups were either dismissed by fair managers or met with some compromise on content. Rand was personally defended by fair managers who cited the fact that she brought in record-setting amounts of money on their carnival midways.\textsuperscript{8} The relaxed rules and itinerant nature of traveling carnivals and fair midways allowed burlesque artists perform with fewer restrictions than they

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{6} Shteir, \textit{Striptease}, 242.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{7} A.W. Stencell, \textit{Girl Show: Into the Canvas World of Bump and Grind} (ECW Press, 1999), 71; “Hennies Sign Sally Rand,” \textit{Billboard}, February 8, 1947.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{8} Shteir, \textit{Striptease}, 272.
\end{flushright}
would suffer in full-time theaters. Allegedly, strip teasers in circus shows invented modern pole-
dancing by grinding against and climbing poles supporting circus tents. At the same time,
however, carnival shows presented additional to regional burlesque theaters already declining in
business, forcing some to close their doors whenever a circus or fair hosting burlesque was in
town.

The Chicago theaters where Ada Leonard and others called home did not long last
beyond the end of the Century of Progress Fair. In late December 1934, police acted enforced a
license revocation at the theater after investigators in attendance of the “Midnight Shambles”
show claimed to have witnessed comedians tell “lewd” jokes and chorus girls wear too little
clothing. Other adjacent taverns that held burlesque performances were likewise closed due to
charges of indecent performances and allowing performers to drink after hours. Such closures
marked the beginning of the end for venues like the Star & Garter, which either folded due to
financial troubles or tried to change their entertainment offerings. The Star & Garter, for its part,
closed in 1935 for undisclosed reasons and was sold to new ownership. When it reopened in
1946, the Star and Garter’s new owners reopened the theater as a combination burlesque and
movie venue before shifting it into just movies. The theater operated this way until it was
purchased in September 1971 and demolished to make space for a parking lot.

Similar venues that were the hallmarks of Chicago burlesque also bowed out to
competing genres of entertainment. The famous Rialto Theater persisted after the 1930s, but had

---

9 Stencell, Girl Show, 63.


to also diversify casts and programming, as it could no longer survive on burlesque show profits, alone. From 1931 to 1936, the Rialto was renamed the “Loop-End” and featured photoplays in addition to variety shows. This, however, did not prevent the Rialto from being swept up in a series of police raids and a revocation of its theater license in October 1937. According to LIFE, the night of August 24, 1944 was to mark the end of burlesque at the Rialto as the owners changed the venue into a movie and vaudeville venue. “For 25 years,” the LIFE columnist wrote, “the Rialto had been one of the U.S. top ‘burleycue’ houses. In that time, audiences…ogled innumerable strip-teasers strutting down the runway in the splash of a baby spotlight and discarding their clothes bit by bit. They guffawed as rag-bag comics week after week went through the same old blackout skit.” The writer went on to sermonize the Rialto as the place where Abbott allegedly met Costello; where Margie Hart began her striptease career; and where many headlining acts such as Gypsy Rose Lee, Fanny Brice and Ann Corio graced the stage. “With the closing of the Rialto Theater, the writer lamented “burlesque in Chicago sang its raucous swan song.”

Contrary to these headlines, 1944 was not the end of burlesque in the Rialto, so much as the beginning of the end. The theater reopened in September 1944 under new management, presenting stage shows, motion pictures, and name bands such as Duke Ellington and his band. In April 1950, Harold Minsky of the Minsky Brothers took ownership of the Rialto and resumed burlesque productions in a combination format with motion pictures. This phase only lasted a few years, as the Tribune reported that Rialto closed permanently after a New Year’s Eve show

---

on January 1, 1954, with plans to demolish the building to make way for retail shopping. With the fall of both the Rialto and the Star & Garter, no dedicated burlesque houses remained in or around the Loop district in Chicago, as the others reportedly transitioned to variety formats or motion pictures.

Chicago burlesque also suffered due to competition with newer varieties of adult entertainment that threatened its popularity and status as a transgressor of sexual norms. Clubs and late-night venues were not new to downtown Chicago, but they grew in number well after the end of Prohibition. Options for patrons were divided along lines of class and the perceived reputability of the chosen venue. For more upscale fare, adult patrons had their pick of supper clubs, restaurants, and nightclubs that had “floor shows” to entertain patrons between or during meals and drinks. These types of venues sporadically featured burlesque performances in programs of diverse entertainers, with an emphasis mostly on live jazz and dancing. One such venue, Chez Paree, operated in Streeterville from 1932 to 1960. At its location on 610 N. Fairbanks Court, Chez Paree hosted burlesque and vaudeville talent in floor shows, accompanied by live music. During Chez’s opening night in 1932, performers of the Ziegfeld’s “Follies” performed in a cast featuring other Broadway talent, all accompanied by live jazz. The Chez’s interior was ornately designed, with art deco and midcentury modern style, a large showroom with a curved bar, and a floor crowded with tables facing both a stage and a large dance floor.

Over the years, the Chez Paree featured a number of burlesque notables in its programming, such

---


as Sally Rand, Sophie Tucker, and Mae West. Burlesque was the exception rather than the main feature of most of Chez Paree’s entertainment.\textsuperscript{15} This was the standard for a lot of nightclubs, supper clubs, and hotels that hosted live entertainment in downtown Chicago between the 1930s and the 1960s. Whether it was a dedicated space such as the Chez Paree or a hotel venue such as the Walnut Room or the Knickerbocker, the expected genre of entertainment featured more live music, dancing, and comedy, and less and less striptease.\textsuperscript{16}

Venues on the North Side, however, were not above using female sexuality to entice customers to enter and spend money. Clubs for male members like the Gaslight Club dressed its waitresses in fishnets and “skimpy” costumes, while others like Chez Paree dressed its chorus girls in ornate and lavish costumes based on themes, such as tropical beauties or dice. Other nightclubs such as the Tavern House and London House, took root in the 1930s and persisted well into the Postwar Era. The success of venues like them and hotel-based showrooms stood in stark contrast to the cabaret scene, which also was in a period of decline alongside burlesque in Chicago. According to historian Lewis Erenberg, venues in hotels and nightclubs dominated downtown entertainment business in cities like Chicago as smaller bar shows and cabarets had reputations for “gypping” or cheating their customers.\textsuperscript{17} With that being said, supper clubs, like burlesque venues, were limited in their ability to consistently attract burlesque headliners. Clubs


\textsuperscript{17} Lewis Erenberg, “From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization,” \textit{American Quarterly} 38, no. 5 (1986), 768-769.
and casinos in Las Vegas outbid venues elsewhere in the country for headlining talent in multiple genres of entertainment, forcing others to either raise pay to keep pace or ultimately shut down.

North Side alternatives to the traditional supper club went above and beyond to feature women and their bodies as the main feature in entertainment and attraction. In the postwar era, “B-Joints,” or low-scale strip clubs, cropped up along Rush Street in the River North and Streeterville neighborhoods and along Clark and Madison Streets—essentially, in every direction adjacent to the Loop. These venues unabashedly featured women stripping on stage, typically on runways that stretched into or towards an audience, with or without elements of striptease. These spaces were the predecessors to modern “strip clubs” that rose in popularity in the 1980s, in that their performers, called “strippers,” would disrobe and dance in full or semi-nudity, but without the techniques of tease or production values of costuming, narrative, and choreography associated with burlesque. To put it simpler, the “stripping” that overtook burlesque striptease in this era had far fewer intentionality and theatricality behind each performance and existed mainly to attract patrons to purchase food and drink while keeping them entertained. The emphasis of these venues by using their performers to attract customers, without intent on pushing artistic boundaries aspiring to create art or theater. Publications such as *LIFE* indicated that former patrons of burlesque houses and theaters flocked to these strip venues after the closure of many burlesque venues downtown.\(^{18}\) Local journalists depicted the typical strip B-joint as a shady establishment with entertainment of unpredictable quality and, in contrast to the growing nightclub culture, embraced the “gypping” or scam culture of cabaret bars in the past. Local journalists portrayed strip clubs along Rush and Clark as intimate spaces like cabaret bars of the

---

past that encourage interaction between dancers and audience members in spaces that only served drinks and in which police alleged staff solicited men for sex.

One Chicago cabaret’s owner helped make these types of strip venues possible by creating the concept of a runway stage that extended into the audience from a bar or stage space, thereby allowing dancers to flirt with audience members mid-performance and receive tips in exchange. According to Chicago Tribune reporter Lloyd Wendt, this enabled bars to maximize space and pack in more patrons and lent to expectations of strippers playing to individuals for tips, rather than an entire theater audience.19 Beyond that, early Chicago strip clubs followed a pattern of musical, striptease performance like that of burlesque. Wendt described the typical strip club in the River North and Gold Coast neighborhoods in 1949:

> The shows which have made Chicago the talk of the convention world...run to a pattern. Eight or ten young women, billed as dancers, traipse down a runway among the drinking customers, shedding their diaphanous draperies to the thumpings of a four-piece band. Those able to dance attempt to do so. Others engage in gyrations known as the grind. Chicago draws the line at complete nudity. Currently, that line is one-quarter inch wide.

The level of performers’ skill and audience behavior varied from venue to venue, according to Wendt. Some unnamed dancers, for example, carried a crowd with charismatic flirting or tap dancing without the need to remove their clothes. These were called “talking women,” who, like Gypsy Rose Lee, were popular for their wit and humor more than for stripping. The majority of performers in strip bars, however, tended to be “grinders” who bumped and rotated their hips and shimmied as they stripped.20


Across the industry, however, audiences grew to expect less tease and complex choreography, and more direct stripping. Without artistic agency over how they dance or strip, if at all, some performers felt alienated in this work environment. “Show business isn’t what it used to be,” said one dance named La Verne to the Tribune. “The customers don’t want dancing, they want strippers. I can’t do it, with my family here and all. But a girl who just wants to be an artist has a hard time these days. The customers don’t treat us like we’re human. The agents can’t get us jobs.”

Eyewitnesses at the time reported that the talent of these strippers was mixed, at best. Without the theatricality, complex costuming, or teasing elements of burlesque, the style of stripping in these venues offered little for spectators beyond the climactic reveal. “Novelty is the spice,” said one critic, “but few of these women have the flair for it. They do know that the customers want nakedness, and they give as far as they are permitted. Beyond this climax, they are sunk.” Some venues, such as the L&L Tavern, also had a mixed record of managing and protecting their strippers, or “B-girls” as they were called. Dancers insisted on drinking with male patrons who would solicit them for sex and would take them into booths for more private dances. Performers who were veterans of the burlesque or stripping industry accused newcomers of engaging in this behavior too liberally and thereby creating a more dangerous work environment for all staff. Despite all this, the money to be made stripping in these venues was enticing. Wendt estimated that a striptease act earned an average of $100 a week in Chicago’s “better spots.”

21 Lait, *Chicago Confidential*, 166.

22 Ibid, 167.

One of the longest-lasting venues for burlesque was a bar and nightclub called Club 606. The 606 was one of the few spaces for modern stripping and burlesque striptease that remained on State Street well after the postwar years. Like other “strip joints” of its time, the 606 prioritized scantily clad entertainment ahead of other acts. Though the venue would feature singers and comics in its programming, customers jeered them and instead demanded the main attraction in the form of the club’s strippers. The women who worked at the 606 were diverse in their backgrounds and experience. Some were burlesquers who allegedly performed at the 1933-1934 Century of Progress Fair. Others, such as Carrie Finnell, were headliners who represented burlesque’s heyday of both comedic and titillating performance. According to the *Atlantic Journal*, Carrie performed at the 606 Club for nine years.

Into the 1950s and 1960s, however, multiple accounts of patrons’ experience in the 606 reported a decline in quality of the entertainment. Some reported acts featuring long bouts of strip tease that bored rather than captivated its audience. Offstage, the 606 was also bedeviled by multiple controversies. Firstly, like other venues for burlesque and stripping entertainment, the 606’s bar license was suspended more than once in retaliation for violating regulations of acceptable live entertainment. In 1945, the club was closed and its license revoked by police after four performers and an assistant manager were arrested for putting on “indecent exposure, disorderly conduct and immoral songs.” Among the arrested performers was Carrie Finnell, a well-known burlesque “queen” or headliner who, like other aging burlesquers, sought gigs at

---

24 Wendt, “Four O’clock Tease.”


bars and clubs devoted more to contemporary stripping and go-go dancing than theatrical burlesque. Beyond such charges familiar to the burlesque world, the 606 gained notoriety due to its entanglement with political conventioneers and alleged political corruption. As early as the 1940s, the 606 Club was known for being a hub of attraction to members of the Democratic Party visiting Chicago for political conventions and electioneering. Publications such as *TIME* and *LIFE* published photos of conventioneers posing with burlesquers and strippers at the 606 during Conventions. To make matters worse, the club’s owner, Louis W. Nathan, was indicted on charges of voter fraud in 1956. Nathan, who was then a Democratic precinct captain in the first ward, pleaded guilty to the charges and was sentenced to five years in prison. To the city government, especially the office of Mayor Richard Daley, the alleged and real entanglement of the 606 Club into local and national Democratic politics was a potential blight and liability they could not afford. This may explain why, for instance, Mayor Daley’s office challenged and investigated the transfer of the 606 Club’s license to a colleague of Nathan’s while he was under indictment – thereby avoiding revocation upon Nathan’s conviction. While these issues threatened to make the Club a liability – and, therefore, a problem to be removed – in the eyes of the city’s government, its role and reputation as a place for Democratic conventioneers and local lawmakers to socialize and, allegedly, make backroom deals was a significant factor in its longevity.


30 “Democrats Have Fun at 606 Night Club,” *LIFE*, July 29, 1940.
In the world of Chicago machine politics, 606 continued to provide a service to guaranteeing party loyalty in exchange for providing entertainment and boast worthy memories. As the Club’s owner put it in a 1960 interview with *TIME*:

> In the old days, when a man came to town he turned into a naughty boy. He wanted to do something daring, get tangled up with some gal, or look at a gangster. When he went home to Paducah [sic], he’d tell the stories, over and over, so that he got to believing them himself.

*LIFE*’s journalist concluded that, while convention goers were a bit tamer in their conduct compared to past decades, “there is plenty of evidence that the old frontier verve still two-steps on.”

State Street, between Van Buren and Roosevelt, lost many of its traditional burlesque theaters in the postwar era, except for some such as the Gem Theater or the 606 Club. In this period, options for mass retail and stage theater also dwindled on State Street, giving way to adult theaters, penny arcades with “peep shows,” and other attractions that lent notoriety to this part of what is now called the South Loop. Local journalist and author of *Syndicate City*, a history of organized crime in Chicago, Alson J. Smith, coined this stretch of State Street as “Satan’s Mile.” Even compared to other parts of the city, Smith argues, State Street was cheaper and not as “vicious” in appeal, hosting only a handful of nightclubs and burlesque theaters, some of which were little more than “stinking firetraps with movies which are almost as old as the strippers.” Other reviews of the last-standing burlesque houses on State Street were just as unsparing and unimpressed. “Burlesque theaters on South State and West Madison Streets do not

---


sell liquor or refreshments,” said writer Jack Lait. “The grinds go on and on, alternating stage shows and old ‘for adult only’ movies. The lowest degenerates patronize these houses.”\textsuperscript{33}

North Clark Street, by comparison, had a much larger concentration of “burlesque bars” or strip joints, hotels, eateries, and other amenities for adults in the late 1940s and 1950s. The section of Clark Street between the Chicago River and Chicago Avenue benefited from being within walking distance of the Loop. This region therefore became a hub for visitors, especially political and business conventioneers, seeking adult entertainment close to the transportation and hotels in the Loop. In 1954, the Chicago Crime Commission estimated that there were 165 “clipper joints” or overpriced bars, in addition to “burlesque bars”, gambling houses and other related places. The Commission disparaged this stretch of Clark Street with unsparing language. “B-Girls soliciting at bars, clip joints catering to homosexuals, bars and cocktail lounges operated after hours” were just some of the features the Commission ascribed to this district. Their account of “burlesque bars” aligned with those of other eyewitnesses in the 1950s, with stages aligning the bar and dancers and B-girls constantly performing in front of and soliciting customers for multiple drinks.\textsuperscript{34} In spite of such issues, patrons continued to crowd the “stripperies” adorned with framed photos and picture ads of dancers and then “rush in with their eyeballs bulging.”\textsuperscript{35} The amount of nudity or coverage in these venues vacillated with the amount of police attention they attracted. As Alson Smith put it, “these agile blooms drop their petals when the heat is off and fold protectively in G-string and bra when the civic temperature


\textsuperscript{34} Lait, \textit{Chicago Confidential!}, 73.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 72.
In one incident at a burlesque venue called the French Casino, two guests fought with staff over a tab that ran high with drinks bought for some of the female staff, were forced to pay, reportedly beaten with baseball bats, and tossed out onto the street. Afterwards, the Chicago Crime Commission investigated the incident and the French Casino’s tavern license was revoked. Other burlesque venues on Clark had their performers immediately cover up, rather than strip to the nude, to avoid attracting similar attention.

One of the older and, allegedly, largest of stripping venues on Clark Street was the Liberty Inn. Located on Clark and Erie Streets, the Liberty Inn featured a bar in its front room and both variety performances and strippers in its back room. The Liberty Inn, formerly known as the McGovern Brother’s Bar, reflected the generational changes to the character of bars and entertainment venues in North Clark Street. Under previous ownership, it was one of many neighborhood bars on Clark Street that primarily served locals. When the McGovern changed ownership and became the Liberty Inn in 1950, however, its new owners reinvented it as a strip venue, featuring matinee shows and as many as twenty-five “peelers” or strippers on staff. The Inn and certain accounts from this time credited it as “Chicago’s Biggest Girl Show” of the 1950s. The actual shows were not unlike the entertainment to be found in cabarets before the Liberty’s beginnings. A small jazz quartet band would play a few sets, followed by performances by a singer, a comedian, and four or so “strip girls,” according to musicians who worked there. The pay was decent for musicians, averaging about thirty dollars a week, and the Inn was

36 Smith, * Syndicate City *, 15.
37 Smith, * Syndicate City *, 216, 220.
38 Jack Lait, * Chicago Confidential *, 73.
constantly busy due to its adjacency to other bars, nightclubs, and venues for burlesque or “strip bars” that offered nude go-go dancing with little tease.\(^{39}\)

In January 1953, two *Tribune* reporters patronized multiple strip bars on Clark, such as Liberty Inn, to report back on their experiences. Donald Starr and Percy Wood described multiple encounters with “B-girls” posing as hostesses and waitresses sat next to patrons to pressure them into buying watered down drinks for them, soliciting tips, sliding change from the customer’s tabs to the bartenders, and other maneuvers to separate customers from their money. Across the half dozen or so venues the pair visited, they only found occasional entertainment in the small four-piece bands of Black musicians playing “some pretty good New Orleans imitations” and half-hearted and scant stripping performances with varying amounts of tease.\(^{40}\) This investigation coincided with a report by the Chicago Crime Commission that year that reported a total of 165 “clip joints, burlesque bars, assignation houses, and gambling houses” targeting men for drink hustles and scams. The same report alleged that there were bribes being given by such establishments to local committeemen and police to look the other way. Such investigations precipitated renewed police investigations, arrests, and shutdowns of venues due to practices of blatant solicitation.\(^{41}\) In March 1953, Captain Kyran Phelan of the Central police district reported to the *Tribune* that the city had closed the last strip venue remaining on the main drag of South State Street. The venue, Mac’s Burlesk Club, had its liquor, amusement, and

\(^{39}\) Art Hodes, *Hot Man: The Life of Art Hodes* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 41.


cigarette licenses revoked by Mayor Kennelly after the arrests of two hostesses who solicited plain-clothes policemen for drinks and of the owner and bartender on charges of “keeping a disorderly house” and lewd behavior. “This street is clean, at last,” said Captain Phelan. “The playboys and conventioneers will have to find a new playground. We’ve got no more strippers, no more ‘B’ girls, no more floosies waiting in dark booths for chumps.”

West Madison Street earned the nickname of “Strip Row” for the sheer amount of stripper joints and burlesque bars it had to offer. This area had long been a site populated with itinerants and day laborers who arrived to the city by train and worked at any of the various trainyards, service and hospitality business, earning just enough money to afford housing, drinks, and entertainment. About a mile west of the Chicago River’s south branch, the ”Skid Row” of Madison Street gave way to “Strip Row,” where multiple storefronts were converted into bars with stages for strip teasers and small bands. Here, patrons could find beer and whiskey for less than a dollar and the same kind of “rump-shakes” and striptease they could find on North Clark Street. Here, however, according to writer Alson Smith, there was more stripping and less teasing, even as authorities cracked down on stripper bars in other parts of the city. At a fundamental level, however, the same business model of striptease and outright stripping and an emphasis on driving customers to buy drinks for themselves and female staff was the standard here, as well. Some businesses like the Paris Club were often observed by policemen in plain clothes and performers would be alerted to “clean up” their acts by strategically placed lights that

---


43 Alson Smith, Syndicate City, 218.

44 Ibid, 219; Jack Lait, Chicago Confidential, 64.

45 Alson Smith, Syndicate City, 220.
would be turned on within sight of the staff. Other venues like the L&L Tavern operated similarly but had a reputation for being an “anthill of homos,” according to Chicago Examiner reported Jack Lait. The veracity of this claim is difficult to establish, but it falls within a historical pattern of gay men cruising and finding dates at venues of burlesque due to the homosocial character of its target audience.46

Why did businesses turn towards stripping and away from striptease and traditional burlesque? The answer lies both in the economic advantages of putting on cheap strip shows and changes in cultural tastes, in Chicago and the United States, as a whole. As stated previously, striptease burlesque lost its edge and controversial reputation in comparison to stripping, pornography, and other forms of adult entertainment that bore total nudity. With changes in sexual cultures after 1960 came the advent of not just strip clubs, but nude go-go dancing in nightclubs, live sex shows, and nudity in Broadway productions such as Hair. Sex, nudity, and entertainment was near ubiquitous in this era.47 At the same time, attendance at burlesque theaters in Chicago and around the country declined even as costs for booking talent and live bands were still high. A headlining stripper such as Tempest Storm commanded a wage of $1,000 a week in 1969, even though starting union wages were far smaller than that. At the same time, venues in Las Vegas were very competitive in outbidding competitors for burlesque headliners in gigs and residencies.

Burlesque’s reliance on jazz as its performance soundtrack also came with a price. In the 1950s, many burlesque shows transitioned from Chicago style jazz’s slower style of sultry grinds

46 Lait, Chicago Confidential, 71.
47 Shteir, Striptease, 325.
to that of New Orleans with its emphasis on rapid, legato notes and intensity.\textsuperscript{48} In order to host this kind of music, however, venues had to book or hire long-term large bands. This was an expense that up-and-coming nightclub venues such as Chez Paree could more easily afford than older burlesque theaters that were already losing business and experimenting with other media such as adult films. In 1962, a \textit{Chicago Tribune} columnist quoted a box office employee with the Follies burlesque theater in the Loop, one of the few remaining standalone burlesque venues by that time, on their financial difficulties. “I don’t know…what’s the matter, but lately we haven’t been drawing too well. If it were not for the sailors on Saturdays and Sundays, I don’t know what we’d do.” This, the columnist added, only served to pile onto the steep costs of business faced by venues like the Follies in Chicago. “Take four shows a day, some twelve strippers, and a live orchestra of four to five pieces,” they argued, “and it added up to a tremendous payroll.”\textsuperscript{49}

Opportunities for Black burlesquers and strippers in the North and South Sides were also markedly limited. Integrated and Black-owned nightclubs such as Club DeLisa and Joe’s Deluxe Café did host both drag and burlesque in the Bronzeville neighborhood. Local and national publications, however, indicated that more White burlesque performers were booked in these venues than their Black peers. In a 1953 \textit{Jet} article, one columnist alleged that Club DeLisa and other venues were booking White strip teasers disproportionately, while Black burlesquers were working downtown.\textsuperscript{50} A select few were booked as headliners downtown and commanded lucrative salaries as a result. Jean Idelle, advertised as the “Sepia Sally Rand,” headlined at the

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 254.

\textsuperscript{49} “A Line O’ Type or Two: Civic Betterment,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, September 28, 1962.

Rialto Theater and many downtown nightclubs with her fan dance routines and made $12,000 a year, according to the Burlesque Hall of Fame.\textsuperscript{51} That said, the overall lack of representation of Black burlesquers onstage led the \textit{Chicago Defender} to bemoan the state of the industry in the 1950s. “Burlesque of all the forms of entertainment…has been difficult for the Negro performer to crash,” wrote \textit{Tribune} columnist Cecil Craigne. “Aside from Negro comedians, few of the burlesque houses – even as few as there are now – have ever hired Negro talent.” The few Black burlesquers named by the \textit{Defender}, Craigne added, had since moved on to other genres of live entertainment.\textsuperscript{52} In previous decades, when burlesque circuits managed most venues, performers of color had more bookings and opportunity due to top-down rules of integrating casts in pursuit of larger audiences. From the mid-1930s onwards, however, Chicago burlesque was mostly “stock burlesque” or local, independently produced. This enabled venues to hire exclusively White casts more easily.\textsuperscript{53}

The abundance of strip clubs on and adjacent to the Loop was short lived. The numbers of these clubs declined due to renewed policing on the part of law enforcement and the mayoral administration of Mayor Richard J. Daley. In 1947, for instance, the master of ceremonies at the L&L Tavern was arrested for advertising and presenting an indecent performance, due to the comments he made introducing the dancers. The police report stated that the M.C.’s material promised that dancers would remove enough clothes to cause the police to come, in addition to “smutty and lewd statements, along with filthy stores that contained no humor whatsoever.” A


\textsuperscript{53} Shteir, \textit{Striptease}, 203.
police lieutenant asserted that such comments and the depiction of women in strip clubs likely encouraged assaults against women in the same district but provided no evidence behind the claim. Aside from indecency laws, the Kennelly and Daley mayoral administrations also targeted strip bar and club venues with solicitation laws due to their employment of “B-girls” or waitresses who enticed customers for drinks. Investigations by the local press highlighted just how common B-girls were as a nuisance for patrons in venues on Clark Street and other places adjacent to the Loop.

Under the administration of Mayor Richard J. Daley, who assumed office in 1955, raids against strip bars and venues accelerated under the guise of prosecuting “vice” and organized crime. Under Daley’s administration, the city government undertook policies intended to clear the downtown area of “vice” and “slum” conditions to make the city friendlier to commerce and appealing to long-term residents. For the striptease and stripping industry downtown, this meant an intensification of police raids and license revocations. Police Superintendent Orlando W. Wilson, installed by Daley as a “reformer,” enforced shutdown orders against some of the few remaining burlesque venues, like the Star & Garter, and strip club locations downtown and in the Near North Side throughout the 1960s. Streets in this area – especially along Rush, Clark, and Division Streets– were rendered “graveyards” by the end of the 1960s. Even as regions such as Rush Street continued to have night club offerings such as Mister Kelly’s, singles bars and a handful of cabarets or bars with dancers, venues dedicated to fully nude stripping were gone by 1981, according to the Chicago Tribune. A final nail in the coffin for downtown stripping and


striptease was the passage of an ordinance in 1977 barring the exhibition of nude performances in spaces that sold and served alcohol. Under this ordinance, which remained in effect into the twenty-first century, venues that hosted nude performers could not sell alcohol and had to be located at least 1,000 feet away from schools, religious buildings, other “adult establishments, and any zoning district zoned for residential use. This law deprived existing and would-be venues of their primary means of income. The only remaining strip venues within Chicago’s city limits were few and far between.

As for strippers, burlesquers, or other artists who utilize onstage nudity, their performances continued to be closely regulated by the city’s municipal code. The section that was utilized to fine “any person who shall appear in a public place in a state of nudity” was updated with additional stipulations in 2002. The standing law, under section 8-8-080 of the municipal code, prescribed a fine between $100 and $500 to anyone who displayed the “pubic hair region,” “anal region,” or “any portion of the breast at or below the upper edge of the areola.” The law also restricts the publication or exhibition of written works, visual media, or plays deemed “obscene,” which the code defines as a material that “appeals to prurient interests.” In effect, the city’s regulations of nudity outlived its bans of “crossdressing” that were utilized to arrest drag performers.

The statute surrounding public nudity, however, faced pushback and litigation. In 2016, Bea Sullivan-Knoff, a transgender female artist, filed a federal lawsuit against the city to force it

58 Chicago, IL, Chicago Municipal Code, Chapter 8, Section 8-080, Chapter 8, Section 8-90, 2002.
to relax rules regarding nudity in bars, clubs, and theaters. Knoff filed the suit after some venues refused to allow her to exhibit some performance art pieces that involved her displaying her breasts. Knoff asserted that the statute banning women from displaying their nipples and requiring them to wear pasties was inherently discriminatory on the basis of gender and unconstitutional. She also argued that the law, as it was written, ignored the rights and existence of transgender citizens, and that being able to perform nude would help empower transgender artists by countering misunderstandings surrounding them. “Since most of this negative rhetoric centers on the specifics of trans bodies,” said Knoff, “I most often perform about the body, which involves the presence of my nude body…in an attempt to reclaim a part of myself too often taken from me.”

In 2019, the city settled with Knoff and Mayor Lori Lightfoot agreed to remove the gendered rules surrounding women’s breast coverage from the municipal code. Even with these changes, however, the number of strip clubs in the city of Chicago remain scarce due to ongoing rules restricting liquor sales and their placement in specific areas, and pasties and other means of coverage remain an industry standard in Chicago burlesque.


A strip club and burlesque scene likewise peaked and fell in Calumet City between 1930 and 1970. Calumet became a hotspot for adult entertainment and drinking due to its convenient location. The city is located just over twenty miles south of Chicago’s Loop and close to the state’s border with Indiana. Therefore, when Indiana banned the sale of alcohol even before

---


nationwide Prohibition, Calumet became a natural destination for Indiana residents seeking a drink. Workers in the steel mills of East Chicago, Gary, and Hammond, Indiana, likewise, proved the natural target audience for liquor and adult entertainment on their way home from work. What’s more, being beyond the city limits, Calumet also was not required to follow Chicago regulations regarding public entertainment and censorship. Beyond geography, Calumet also became heavily influenced by the presence of organized crime. Local officials and police in this smaller, less funded municipality were easily swayed with bribes and threats to not police mob-run and affiliated businesses, legal and otherwise. Given its location, Calumet also was beyond the jurisdiction of both Chicago and Indiana state law enforcement. This meant that only Calumet City’s police and Illinois state authorities (with the permission of Cook County) could intervene with issues of law enforcement and organized crime. This was a boon for bootleggers during Prohibition, including Johnny Torrio and Al Capone, who reportedly kept safe houses and controlling stakes in legitimate businesses, as well as speakeasies, bordellos and gambling rings, all while reportedly bribing a majority of local police and officials.61

The end of Prohibition and the arrest of high-profile mob leaders did hurt the profits of the Chicago-area Syndicate, but they sought to recoup their losses in Calumet. Beginning in 1939, multiple strip bars, honky tonks and taverns were founded on two blocks on State Street. The timing was either fortunate or intended, as employment and wages were increasing for steel mills in neighboring Indiana to fulfill orders for war preparation.62 In very short time, there was a hyper concentration, if not a district, of strip-tease venues and bars next to each other on State

61 Smith, Syndicate City, 186-188.
62 Ibid, 190.
Street in a two block stretch that *LIFE* and other press nicknamed the “Barbary Coast” as early as 1940. The city’s newfound boon in adult entertainment was no secret, but rather the topic of scandalous articles in the local and national press. In a profile piece of the city in January 1941, *LIFE* bluntly laid out the scope of the drink and entertainment industry in Calumet:

Here is the nirvana of workers from the smoking mills, refineries and shops…Here is the repository of their newly earned wages…Calumet City has 14,000 inhabitants, no railroad station, no Protestant church, no traffic lights, no central telephone system, 308 night clubs, and several policemen. Its ratio of one bar for every 46 persons is highest in the U.S…Twenty years ago, it was headquarters of a rumrunning outfit. Today, it is the nocturnal hotspot, the busy Barbary Coast of Lake Michigan’s industrial plain.

In the eyes of the press and the people who worked in the Coast, Cal City’s hub of striptease and entertainment combined industrial efficiency with the gritty “B-joint” style burlesque and stripping that bore comparisons with strip venues in Chicago. Given the proximity of many venues to each other, visitors from Indiana began their evening from the state line on the eastern side of State Street and “zigzagged” from one to another westwards, from the early evening to four or five in the morning. Bass player Richard Davis described work for musicians in the Barbary Coast as a “factory job,” since show schedules were often coordinated to begin one show as another ends. That way, performers and musicians worked multiple gigs in short time across an entire evening and venues could maximize profits from “continuous action.”  

City’s government and public were pressured to turn a blind eye not just due to bribes and threats, but the fact that the license fees for the hundreds of bars and strip-tease venues composed a majority of the city’s tax revenue - funds that, otherwise, would have to be raised with less popular means such as property taxes.64

What was good for businesses and their owners in Calumet was not always the case for performers who worked in these spaces. Issues of safety, inconsistent pay, and exploitation were especially prevalent in Calumet, because of a hostile work culture and a lack of regulations of labor conditions. The venues on the Barbary Coast gained a reputation for “low end” striptease and grift that maligned the stripping industry in other parts of Chicago in the 1950s. The type of striptease entertainment was alike that of Chicago venues in this era, with mostly inexperienced performers, untrained dances, and varying levels of tease or showmanship. Some feature performances in Cal City utilized elaborate “bits” of costuming, dance, and themes that defined the postwar style of burlesque. In this period, headlining acts such as Lily St. Cyr set themselves apart from other performers by conceiving elaborate signature acts that utilized intentional props or costuming – such as splashing in a bathtub on stage, in Cyr’s case. In Cal City, some performers went to this extent in their gigs. In an act titled “The Devil and the Virgin,” the teaser would undress under coercion by a devil in white tie and tails. One stripper named Roszina had a famous “Beauty and the Beast” act, in which she wore a gorilla costume on one side of her body and a traditional stripper outfit on the other. The gorilla half tore away parts of the stripper half’s

64 Smith, *Syndicate City*, 192-193.
costume with the music, concluding with the gorilla seemingly pinning the stripper to the ground. Of all the crimes taking place in Strip Row, lack of creativity was not among them.65

What set work in Calumet City apart from Chicago was the unbridled exploitation of the performers. Without the protection of Chicago or state authorities, burlesquers were susceptible to low wages and wage theft by their employers. Bic Carroll, a former choreography and costumer for burlesque in the Chicagoland area, broke into the burlesque industry in Calumet City in 1954 and witnessed employers deceiving new performers into extractive contracts. Promoters would promise applicants traveling to Calumet from out of state hundreds of dollars, only to assign them to lower paying roles. Their pay was also regularly stiffed by employers. “When the girls would get their first check,” Carroll said, “they still owed the promoter money… The promoter for the club would [then] say… ‘You owe us for the bus fare and the transportation and the lodging.’” Since women working as performers in Calumet often were transplants from other states or countries, they had little recourse but to stay and bear it.66

The working conditions in Calumet City were so notorious that unions of variety artists tried to dissuade performers from working there. The American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA) forbade its members from working in Calumet City in 1953. The executive board of the guild issued this ban after reports of “deplorable working conditions in honky tonk type resorts” in Cal City. Erwin Fast, the Midwest Director of the AGVA, reported that he tried to organize dancers in Cal City and Chicago between 1956 and 1962, only to be threatened by mobsters to stay away. Fast speculated that they did so in order to keep their performers as independent

65 Shteir, Striptease, 274.

contractors, rather than as full-time employees in order to pay less taxes and keep performer pay low.\textsuperscript{67} The AGVA ban protected members from getting entangled with nefarious promoters, but put dancers already employed in Cal City into the position of choosing whether to risk reprisals by complying with the ban or punishment by the AGVA for crossing the picket line.\textsuperscript{68} Ultimately, the AGVA ceased efforts to unionize and recruit performers in Cal City. Its ban against bookings in Calumet City also failed within a few years, as a 1963 Senate report on labor conditions found that many “renegade” members crossed the picket line and work as “bar girls and prostitutes in the guise of exotic dancers” even after the ban was first put into place ten years earlier. As a result, the AGVA and venue operators signed union agreements that granted some improvements on paper but were unenforced in practice. The AGVA continued to receive initiation fees, membership dues, and other financial contributions in exchange for turning a blind eye to the conditions in Calumet.\textsuperscript{69}

Ultimately, Cal City burlesque was shut down by intensified policing at the local and federal level. The open secret of mob influence behind burlesque was put under the spotlight by Congressional investigations into organized crime, adult entertainment and pornography in the 1950s. Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver and the Kefauver Commission visited Chicago and Calumet, as well as other cities such as Dallas, Miami, and Cleveland, to investigate ties of organized crime and city politics. The Commission broadcast its report live on television in the Spring of 1951 and made note of the presence of gambling rings and solicitation in Cal City.

\textsuperscript{67} Shteir, \textit{Striptease}, 310.


venues, as well as acts of bribery and unspoken influence that kept such establishments open. Subsequent investigations by the U.S. Senate uncovered deplorable working conditions for strippers and showgirls in Calumet, as well as additional evidence of Syndicate influence.

In 1963, the U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Welfare documented accounts by Canadian women who worked in Calumet City on work visas, pursuing promises of a career as headlining starlets. The Committee’s findings reinforced the claims made by the AGVA that performers were exploited in Calumet by producers and venues. One performer named Joan Gainsley, for instance, was booked by her agent into performing at the 21 Club in Calumet, where she was required to flirt with customers and tempt them into buying her drinks. She also reported that working girls used back rooms in the 21 Club and other venues to perform “immoral acts” on customers under instructions by management, in clear violation of agreements the AGVA negotiated for its members. Other dancers testified that managers in Calumet similarly forced performers to provide sexual services for patrons and kick back earnings from these transactions to the clubs. What’s more, many venue operators in Calumet refused to sign the AGVA bargaining agreements in the first place, as these documents would require them to hire talent as employees rather than independent contractors and disclose to the IRS workers’ legal and illicit income.

Renewed national awareness of corruption in Cal City precipitated renewed local efforts to combat mob influence and to shut down the “Barbary Coast.” In 1953, Stanley E. Bejger won the local mayoral election on a campaign that promised to crack down on the “Strip Row” that

---


had maligned Cal City’s reputation. Bejger, the son-in-law of a former mayor, had the backing of the police magistrate and a citizens’ committee that pushed for reform and the removal of the former Chief of Police and City Attorney for their inaction. In cooperation with the new mayor, local sheriffs pledged to rotate uniformed police in and out of the bars and nightclubs featuring striptease every few minutes in order to dissuade and prosecute any overt nudity witnessed onstage.\(^72\) The city passed new ordinances to strengthen prohibitions against onstage nudity and to force venues to give up shady business practices that swindled patrons.

In 1955, two ordinances were passed unanimously by the city council. The first required strippers and burlesquers to wear clothes and to keep them on, while also banning “indecently suggestive” words or gestures. The second made club owners and managers legally liable for any female staff who solicited customers for drinks. These laws enjoyed the support civic groups, especially the local Catholic parishes, which pledged their support in helping to “wipe out” Strip Row.\(^73\)

After 1959, local police, under new leadership, coordinated with the Illinois State’s Attorney and state law enforcement to ramp up arrests of bar managers, dancers, emcees, and other entertainment staff held liable for violating these new indecency ordinances. The zealous enforcement of the law worked to force strip venues to clean up their act and to deprive Strip Row of their revenue, overall. Reporters with the *Tribune* claimed that they could find “nothing but financial ruin and professional boredom” in the once-booming businesses on State Street. They noted the constant presence of pairs of police walking into and out of strip bars on the main

\(^72\) James Doherty, “Expect Cleanup in Calumet City by New Mayor,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1953.

\(^73\) “Plan to Stirp Calumet City’s ‘Strip Row’ of Strip Teasers,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 1955.
strip. Doormen and female bar staff would once promise patrons seedy nude shows and solicit customers for drinks quieted themselves when within sight of police in the venue.\textsuperscript{74} Arrests and license revocations only continued under the new mayoral administration of Joseph W. Nowak, elected 1961, who appointed a new Chief of Police with the express mission to enforce the laws to the fullest extent. The new Chief, Cashimir Linkicz, reportedly told the mayor “If there are any laws on the books you don’t want enforced, you’d better take them off, because I intend to enforce all the laws.” Under his leadership, the number of “full-fledged strip tease palaces” on Strip Row reduced to three.\textsuperscript{75} In the decades to follow, additional striptease venues, active and former, were lost to redevelopment and fires. The Strip Row that made Cal City infamous as a destination for stripping entertainment was effectively contained and shuttered by the end of the 1960s.

These controversies aside, modern stripping had planted its roots in Chicago and persisted into the twenty-first century. Burlesque, on the other hand, persisted in Chicago either as a side attraction to other programming in venues or as parts of shows that toured the country and stuck to the road, rather than to brick-and-mortar theaters of the past. Burlesque stars such as Sally Rand continued to find bookings in Chicago and many other cities with traveling productions, such as her “Nude Ranch” show featuring cowgirl stripteasers and chorus girls.\textsuperscript{76} Circuses and the occasional fair were other welcome opportunities for burlesquers who performed around the country. Only locations with more relaxed policies surrounding nudity and

\textsuperscript{74} “Heat’s On; Calumet City Chilled,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, July 27, 1959.


\textsuperscript{76} “Golden Gate Exposition,” \textit{Life}, March 6, 1939.
semi nudity onstage, such as Las Vegas or traveling circus and carnival productions, could be counted on as constant sources for contracted gigs and long-term employment, and even then, only for higher-profile performers who were trusted with attracting larger audiences. High profile performers who secured bookings in such locales left their stamp on what some considered this “Golden Era” of burlesque with acts that emphasized “bits” or combinations of talents, dance, and costuming intended to be unique and synonymous with performers. Performances like Lily St. Cyr bathing in a tub onstage or Zorita’s dance with live snakes, for instance, were heavily advertised hallmarks that continue to inspire hesitation today. In short, the postwar era was one of decline and setback for Chicago burlesque as an art form in vogue and a source of employment for men and women onstage. Other sources of adult entertainment, such as strip clubs and, later, pornography, seemed to outstrip the provocative edge with which burlesque was once able to cut against norms of sexuality and gender in previous decades. Chicago drag, however, was another story.
CHAPTER 5
“BUSINESS IS DRAGGING”
CHICAGO DRAG’S BOOM AND GAY LIBERATION,
1934-1973

Chicago drag grew as an entertainment industry and node of the queer community in the Postwar Era. Drag performers continued to find employment even after the close of the Century of Progress Fair of 1933-34 in newer venues for variety entertainment and exclusively drag shows. As drag gained a larger public profile in both straight and queer-coded spaces, hostile police and unsympathetic citizens harassed and outed performers, patrons, and the broader queer community. Nevertheless, drag performers and venues endured precisely because drag and friendly spaces served as a site of community for queer and genderqueer Chicagoans. During a time in which being or appearing to be homosexual or genderqueer was novel and taboo, drag artists satirized and challenged conventions of gender and sexuality with campy humor and an emphasis on “glam” or exaggerated beauty via costuming and makeup.

Drag performers and shows very much emulated burlesque by utilizing techniques of parody, glamorous beauty and sensuality with the primary goal of sending up and challenging conventions of gender and sexuality. Chicago drag was different from burlesque in the way in which it was policed and regarded as a transgressor of laws and mainstream culture – especially with its association with the LGBTQ community. Drag venues and queer businesses were crucial sites for political mobilization – where the Chicago gay community became a movement by uniting with other communities and movements on the political left on the issue of police
violence and corruption. The years between 1934 and 1973 marked a period in which Chicago drag established itself as a tentpole in the queer community and grew alongside advancements made in the rights and equality of the LGBTQ+ community.

New Spaces, Old Problems: Chicago Drag in the North and South Sides, 1934-1970

Drag venues persisted even after the peak in tourism and business with the Century of Progress Fair. Surviving venues in the downtown area continued to do business, though not without interference from the city. The Cabin Inn (formerly known as the Cozy Cabin Inn) relocated to a new address on State Street, where drag floor shows were produced by drag queen Sepia Mae West. West was the alias of Dick Burrows who left behind college coursework in medicine in Los Angeles for a career in entertainment. Standing at six feet tall, West owned about a dozen suits and fifty-seven evening gowns. His talent at wearing women’s clothing and makeup convincingly and his musical skills on stage and floor shows earned him praise for shows on tour in clubs in New York and at the Cabin Inn, where he regularly emceed and performed. “At work in any of his reputed 57 evening gowns,” said David Bartin of the Chicago Afro-American in 1934, “it’s something else again. He is transformed into an amazing imitation of a curvesome, cold weather honey, and sings and dances on par with the gals, and enjoys himself mightily.”¹ Ultimately, West moved to Los Angeles to pursue other opportunities there after the closure of the Cabin Inn in 1940.²

Venues in the Loop or close by in the South Side were not equal in success, owing mainly to police interference. The DeLuxe Café opened on State Street in 1934, while Club

---

¹ David Martin, “Male Mae West in Chicago has 57 Evening Gowns,” Afro-American, November 3, 1934.

DeLisa reopened in Bronzeville. Both spaces featured female impersonators as headliners and encountered ongoing resistance and interference by police. In October 1935, police raided both the DeLuxe and Cabin Inn, ordering the impersonators to “either put on pants or go to jail with the management.” Later that year, police also forced Club DeLisa to close early and cited the Cabin Inn for violating its entertainment license. Some venues remained open for years while others were forced to close or change their content.

In the fall of 1936, the Cabin Inn reopened under the management of drag performer Valda Gray who directed very elaborate and glamorous productions. Gray, in particular, was singled out for praise by the *Chicago Defender*, which documented and reviewed many drag shows during this era. According to one writer in 1939, here should be no reason why Valda Gray’s shows are to be considered the best on Chicago’s great South Side.”

Cabin Inn, however, was an exception as a drag venue that survived within and close to the Loop after the Fair. Nevertheless, drag performers had considerable exposure in the later 1930s by being featured in the floor shows of cafes and cabarets that catered to straight, mainstream audiences. Hilda See of the *Chicago Defender* argued that female impersonators “supply the main draw in cafes,” though also noted that the previous success of famous performers set a high standard that newer artists struggled to fulfill. “Good female impersonators are scarce,” said See. “You will find quite a few who can dress and look the part, but in most instances they have no stage ability. A few of them can sing but cannot dance; others can handle their feet well on the floor but cannot sing and it

---

really requires a combination of dance and song to win a place in one of these floor shows of today.”

In the South Side, both drag and queer residents continued to find home and community. Drag balls, in particular, continued to be a relatively safe space for drag in the South Side. The most well-known of balls after the end of Prohibition were those produced by one Alfred Finnie. On Halloween in 1935, alleged gambler and hustler Alfred Finnie held the first of his drag balls in the basement of a tavern on 38th Street and Michigan Avenue, charging twenty-five cents for attendance. Until 1943, the event was held in different venues each time and was relatively small-scale in terms of attendance and scale of production. Drag queen Nancy Kelly attended the first of these balls and recalled that the balls used to be smaller, intimate affairs. “They’d just pick out a random little shack, you know,” Kelly said. “Decorate it, put up some balloons…they would have a big band, maybe a seven- or eight-piece band…and you’d dance with a friend…or somebody else’s friends.”

Finnie himself was murdered in 1943, but the balls he began persisted. The events found a more permanent home in the Pershing Hotel, where they transformed into annual drag contests with thousands in attendance and prizes on the line. Black newspapers covered Finnie’s Halloween Balls and ones of similar scale around the country as glamorous events of spectacle and celebrity sight-seeing. Ebony Magazine reported that more than 1,500 spectators waited outside the Pershing Hotel ballroom to watch impersonators arriving by limousines and private

---


5 Brett Beemyn, Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997), 141.
Vehicles in Bronzeville continued to offer drag shows to diverse audiences. In 1938, a nightclub called Joe’s Deluxe Café opened at 5524 South State Street. Its founder and director, Joe Hughes, booked drag artists as headlining performers and producers. One such artist, Valda Gray, produced many shows at the Club and was known for her troupe comprising of other well-known drag artists featured throughout Chicago. Gray and other performers such as Dixie Lee and “Petite” Gloria Swanson, according to the Defender, regularly attracted large audiences and even celebrity parties. The Deluxe Club was supported by Black celebrities in the entertainment world, such as Joe Lewis and Eddie Rochester Andersons, and was also heavily advertised and endorsed by publications such as the Chicago Defender and Ebony Magazine. In addition, locals in the Black community consistently attended and supported the Club in its regular shows and for special events. With its constant bookings of drag artists and the support of the local and broader Black community, Joe’s Deluxe Club served as a “mecca” for female impersonators seeking work and exposure in the South Side. At the same time, the club held performers

---


8 “Queer Business: The Case of Joe Hughes,” *Queer Bronzeville, 1900-1985* (OutHistory); "At Joe’s,” The Chicago Defender, December 9, 1939.
accountable to rules of conduct that were more stringent than what was expected of burlesquers or strippers at the time. A 1948 profile piece by *Ebony Magazine* cited Hughes’ rules that performers must not dress in drag outside of the club and “cannot accept invitations to sit at customers’ tables unless real women are present.” In exchange, impersonators were paid fifty dollars a week and ensured consistent employment all year round.⁹

Drag performers worked in other venues in the South Side beyond Joe’s Deluxe in the postwar era. Robert’s Show Lounge opened in 1954 and was billed as the “largest Negro nightclub” in the United States. While it enjoyed business from booking traditional musical talent such as Sammy Davis Jr., Nat “King” Cole, and Sam Cooke, the Lounge attracted even larger audiences with special drag revue shows. The Lounge was the Chicago stop for the “Jewel Box Revue,” a touring drag production that had been active since 1939. In its run at the lounge in 1958, the Revue introduced drag to a new audience and enjoyed unexpected longevity. The Revue’s show, titled “25 Men and a Girl,” featured twenty-five drag performers and a single female songstress. According to the *Defender*, the artists performed imitations and parodies of songs and dances by leading mainstream musicians and bands at the time. “What helps make the show click,” according to one *Defender* columnist, “is its many singers and dancers who can ‘ape’ the nation’s top artists, male and female. Just as Sammy Davis ‘impersonates’ Frank Sinatra, Nat Cole, Johnny Mathis, Dean Martin, Satchmo Armstrong, and Pearl Bailey, the Jewel Box Revue starts come on with their own interpretations of what other artists do.” The same writer highlighted one drag queen Lynn Carter, a singer “with all the performing talents required

---

of a Broadway and Hollywood personality,” all while wearing a $2,500 gown.\textsuperscript{10} The show was so well-received that the Lounge extended its booking to eight months, with many nights being sold out. Due to the success of the Revue, female impersonators were able to continue performing at the Show Lounge “with comparatively little hindrance” until the Lounge closed in 1961.\textsuperscript{11}

Part of the Revue’s success was owed to drag artist Tony Midnite, who booked the talent for “25 Men and a Girl.” Midnite had moved to Chicago in 1951 on a brief hiatus from working with Jewel Box Revue. He performed in the North and South Sides until he developed throat issues sometime in the mid-1950s that prevented him from singing. Midnite established a costuming workshop and studio in the basement of the Lorraine Hotel in the Loop. He was able to get constant work making costumes and props for strippers and drag artists, alike. “There were about fifty strip clubs in Chicago, Calumet City, and Cicero,” Midnite explained in an interview, “and as I went for flash and had a sequin machine, the strippers loved my wardrobe.”\textsuperscript{12} After the success of the Jewel Box’s run at Robert’s Show Lounge, Midnite toured with the show on the East Coast before branching off to pursue drag gigs in New York. By the early 1960s, Midnite, along with many other drag performers, lip synched and pantomimed to music played by records rather than having to sing. Ultimately, Midnite returned Chicago where he continued to make costumes for drag queens and strippers and was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall


of Fame in 1996 in recognition for his contribution to the drag community and his political activism for gay rights.\textsuperscript{13}

Not every member of the Black community welcomed female impersonators. Performers who worked and lived in the South Side were subject to discrimination from their peers and neighbors but were also supported by their families. In an interview, drag queen Nancy Kelly recalled that his sisters and boys in his neighborhood called him a “sissy” to his face or complained about him to his relatives. “The boys was gonna beat me up one day – they’s so hard on the queens – and they told my uncle, ‘He’s a sissy’ and he says, ‘Well, he’s my sissy!’ and he had the biggest fight on 45th Street. My uncle whipped all those little punks up there. And later on in years they became trade [sexual partners].”\textsuperscript{14}

Some performers, like Valda Gray, openly flouted laws and attitudes against cross dressing in public by taking public transit to their shows in full drag.\textsuperscript{15} Consequently, Gray, Kelly, and others were faced with threats of violence for wearing drag in public.\textsuperscript{16} The success of drag shows incurred a conservative backlash in the Black community. According to historian Timothy Stewart-Winter, drag balls and shows received less coverage into the 1950s as Black papers emphasized middle-class politics of respectability during the civil rights movement. A Defender reader wrote, “I saw in your paper some months ago some men dressed as women.

\textsuperscript{13} De la Croix, Chicago Whispers, 239-240; Tony Midnite Biography, Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame.

\textsuperscript{14} Beemyn, Creating a Place for Ourselves, 128-129.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 127.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 130.
Please don’t advertise the mess.”17 Another Black reformer complained in 1960 of “prostitutes, male homosexuals, and drug addicts” strutting along 63rd Street in the Woodlawn neighborhood “with the air that it was a badge of honor to be this sort of scum.”18 At the same time, South Side drag performers suffered from arrests and police harassment. In the 1950s, Nancy Kelly was arrested for “appearing in public in clothes of the opposite sex” and was sentenced to ninety days in jail. Kelly also lost his job at Kraft as a result. Both incidents hurt Kelly particularly hard, as his income from drag and his day job were a major source of income for his family.19

Drag balls were also not untouched by politics of race or discrimination. Some, like Finnie’s Drag Balls, were competitive between performers of different races and backgrounds. Jacques Cristion, a female impersonator who began his career in the South Side in the 1950s, insinuated that white female impersonators competing at Finnie’s drag balls enjoyed unfair advantages that hurt the purpose of the ball as a welcoming space for the queer community. “The Black contestants were disappointed because everyone had spent so much and whatnot to get prepared for it,” Cristion said in a 1994 interview, “and it seemed as though the judges…the staff of the Finnies Club at that particular time would lean towards all the whites and that’s why they began to pull out.”20


19 Beemyn, *Creating a Place for Ourselves*, 128, 139-140.

Drag venues and queer residents were ultimately expunged from the downtown area by policing and urban redevelopment policies. The Cabin Inn would close in 1940 due to declining business and increased competition with other local cabarets in Bronzeville. Police interventions under Mayor Edward J. Kelly also reportedly drove the Club DeLisa and Deluxe Café to stop booking female impersonators and to stick to safer, music-driven programming.\textsuperscript{21} At the same time, Towertown and the downtown area became less and less hospitable for openly gay men in the later 1930s. Accounts from academic observers at the time observed an increase in arrests of men for allegedly fondling other men in theaters and other public spaces. Police in plain clothes reportedly arrested men for soliciting and loitering in Washington Square Park. Gay rights advocacy groups documented similar arrests of citizens as late as the 1960s. In October 1966, the Mattachine Midwest newsletter noted an increase in police stops of gay and straight men on suspicion of soliciting for prostitution or for loitering in the park in the early evening. Attorneys who worked with Mattachine and provided counsel to those arrested claimed that police made these arrests based purely on profiling and in some cases entrapped gay men with offers of sex.\textsuperscript{22}

Historians such as George Chauncey have argued that many municipalities and states forced homosexuality and expressions of “queerness” in gender or sex out of public view in the way they policed sexual offenses and public morality. “The state built a closet in the 1930s,” Chauncey argues “and forced gay people to hide in it.” In addition, property values in Towertown grew from the 1920s onwards due to its adjacency to high-end shopping and retail on Michigan Avenue. These developments forced gay Chicagoans to live and find community in


other parts of the city, spurring a migration further North toward the Clark, Diversey, and Broadway area in Lincoln Park.\textsuperscript{23}

In the North Side, queer friendly bars, nightclubs, and entertainment spaces also grew in number in the postwar era. Multiple venues and shows cropped up in the Gold Coast and Lakeview. The area around Dearborn and Division, nicknamed “Queerborn and Perversion,” contained venues that were often raided and shut down by police on suspicion of being fronts for organized crime. One such venue, the Shoreline 7, opened in the mid-1940s and was advertised as “An interesting spot in the heart of the Gold Coast, with unusual entertainment nightly.” This entertainment largely included comic drag with sight gags and prop play. A former bartender recalled one drag performer named Terri Jackson who sat in a large bucket filled with water on the Shoreline’s stage and splashed around while singing “Splish Splash, I’m taking a Bath.” “Everybody was soaked,” said the bartender. “The bartenders were soaked, the audience were soaked, and it was just amazing.”\textsuperscript{24} Just a few blocks south, more audacious drag entertainment took place at the Nite Life, a bar located on 933 North State Street. The Nite Life was open from the early 1940s until it closed permanently in 1981. In the 1960s, it was another hot spot for comical drag that traded glamor for shock value. One repeat performer, an alleged pre-op trans woman named Gayle Sherman, was a student of Tony Midnite who relied on performance to pay for gender transition treatment. At the Nite Life, Sherman reportedly drew gasps and applause.

\textsuperscript{23} Steven Jackson and Jason Argis, “Making Chicago’s Boystown,” WBEZ 91.5, Chicago, IL, May 7, 2017.

\textsuperscript{24} De la Croix, \textit{Chicago Whispers}, 220-221.
from audiences with elaborate and provocative acts, such as dressing as a witchdoctor and roasting a baby doll over a fire while lip syncing.25

In the 1960s and 1970s, multiple gay-owned or friendly businesses also opened up in the Gold Coast. The Baton Show Lounge at 436 North Clark Street was a popular venue for drag remained open for the decades to come. The Lounge’s owner, Jim Flint, worked hard to convert the space from a neighborhood dive bar to an entertainment hub for the local queer community. “When I first came down here with the Baton…it was so sleazy. That’s when I thought, ‘How the hell can I get people to come down here?’ So I put sixteen beer cases together and threw some plywood over it [to make a stage]. And that’s how the Baton started.”26 In the decades to follow, the Baton Lounge hosted some of the most well-known drag artists in its recurring “Top of the Nation Revue.” It also became the first venue to feature male strippers. In spite of its overtly gay audience and character, the Lounge had breakthrough mainstream success and fame. Flint and his cast were featured on many local and national talk shows and interviews, while the Lounge hosted many celebrities in its years of operation.27

Drag venues in other stretches of the North Side had their share of business and controversy. The north side neighborhood later became Boystown, roughly spanning the area between Clark Street on the West, Broadway on the East, and Diversey to the South, was the product of the relocation of queer communities from other parts of the city. Gentrification in the downtown area forced gay Chicagoans from areas such as Towertown to move to sites like

---


Boystown. Many bars, theaters, and other businesses catering to gay men and lesbians became sites of “cruising” and casual dating. In the 1960s, the “epicenter” of gay nightlife in Chicago’s North Side was in the gay and gay-friendly bars on Clark Street and Diversey Avenue.

Two of these bars, the Club Chesterfield and the Annex, were drag bars that operated on the same block on Clark Street. These venues hosted some of the biggest names in local drag in their day. Sociologist Esther Newton profiled the Annex and Chesterfield as similar venues that complemented each other rather than competed. The clubs’ schedules overlapped in such a way that audiences could see multiple one-hour shows in each venue in sequence, beginning at 10:30 P.M. and ending at 3:30 A.M. The Chesterfield’s audience, according to Newton, tended to be “exclusively male, exclusively homosexual, young, and more casually dressed” than the older and more mainstream Annex crowd. Nevertheless, both venues were similar in that their buildings were unobtrusive and purposefully did not openly advertise the shows within. Though both venues attracted plenty of talent, their accommodations for performers were sorely lacking. Newton went backstage after a show at the Annex and noted the poor state of the performers’ “dressing room.” “It had a broken window affronting right out on an alley and was freezing cold,” said Newton. “It had hardly any room to move around in, improvised dressing table on some beer boxes, crates of liquor everywhere, dresses scattered here, there, and everywhere…in short, woefully inadequate, undignified, and a mess.” The lack of appropriate or safe performing spaces was a common criticism among supporters of Chicago drag. The editor of the *Mattachine Midwest Newsletter* argued that, while Chicago drag was rich in talent during the


29 Ibid, 88.
1960s, it suffered due to “inadequate staging facilities.” In addition to being often cramped and with little stage space, many venues, the editor furthered, were bars that prioritized drink sales and providing a romantic atmosphere for gay patrons - both of which detract attention and investment into the show, itself.\(^\text{30}\)

Given their proximity to each other, the Chesterfield and Annex tended to book the same performers with their own campy approaches to drag. Miss Tillie, also known as “The Dirty Old Lady” and a “Male Sophie Tucker” earned his nickname with his raunchy humor and flirty stage presence. Miss Tillie began performing in Chicago as early as 1961 “screaming” Sophie Tucker songs. Tillie exemplified glamor with her ornate appliqued dresses, large boas, hand fans, and wide-brimmed, feathered hats. According to Chicago historian Owen Keehnen, Miss Tillie preferred to sing Broadway hits about unrequited romance and heartbreak, with crass jokes interwoven to break the tension. Tillie, according to Keehnen, became popular at the Chesterfield with the help of stage manager and fellow drag queen Roby Landers, who gave her the nickname of “The Dirty Old Lady” because she flirted with patrons for drinks at the bar. In an interview, Tillie claimed she went on to work many venues “up and down Halsted,” but never worked Sundays because she worked at a uniform company out of drag on Mondays.\(^\text{31}\) As popular as Miss Tillie was, her real name and precise biography eludes the historical record, but she did go on to perform with other drag queens in other venues in the 1960s and 1970s.

Miss Tillie’s drag colleague, Roby Landers, headlined at the Annex and Chesterfield as a comedian and emcee. Landers was known both for her singing and jokes onstage, as well as her


\(^{31}\) Bell and Dentel, “The Dirty Old Lady,” *Unboxing Queer History*, Gerber Hart Library and Archives, Chicago, IL.
productions at these and other venues. He went on to own another drag bar called the House of Landers on Diversey Boulevard for a few years, booking other drag talents like Miss Tillie before closing in 1973. Landers also produced the “Hot Pants Revue” at other venues such as Sparrows in Edgewater, where they produced drag parodies of the Broadway musicals Hair and Cabaret. Sparrows was unique among the North Side drag venues in that it had a larger stage and more accommodations for the performers. Unfortunately, both the House of Landers and Sparrows closed by 1975 due to both police interventions and increasing competition with other venues.32

Like the South Side, drag venues in the North Side also played host to balls for holidays and special events for community fundraising and politics. Drag balls were also common in the North Side. Halloween was a particularly popular occasion for drag balls that catered to the gay community. Gay rights advocacy groups such as Mattachine Midwest held annual Halloween Balls in spaces such as the Grand Ballroom in the Palmer House Hilton Hotel and the Aragon Ballroom. These balls included costume contests that awarded cash prizes and vacations tickets to drag queens with the best costumes. These special events raised money for gay rights advocacy organizations and cosponsored gay businesses that contributed funds or sold tickets, such as the Baton Lounge and Sparrows.33 Dedicated drag venues and performers produced their own Halloween drag balls as well. Both the Baton Lounge and Sparrows, among others, hosted their Halloween drag balls in the 1970s. Roby Landers, in particular, was a prolific host of


33 Tom Erwin, “President’s Corner,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, October, 1970; “MM and Trip Balling Together,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, October 6, 1972.
Halloween balls at the Baton Lounge and other locations. One such drag ball, called the “Cinderella Ball,” attracted over a thousand attendees at the Continental Plaza Grand Ballroom on October 31, 1973. Drag balls and fundraising events for the queer community were also lucrative performance opportunities for performers of both drag and burlesque. The Mattachine Midwest Newsletter’s editor praised the entertainers who performed at the organization’s benefit ball in 1972. Dancers in the “Danny Windsor Review” at the Ball performed a variety show of chorus lines, can-cans, and burlesque strip tease, alongside impersonations of Barbara Streisand and Gypsy Rose Lee that were “better than 95% of the female strippers in their straight shows.”

Drag venues like the Baton Lounge reciprocated the exposure and patronage of Mattachine Midwest with their own fundraising events.

The pay in some of the North Side venues paled in comparison to glitzy South Side counterparts like Robert’s Show Lounge. Miss Tillie and others reported receiving about nine dollars plus tips each night at Roby Landers’ show. Headliners like Tillie and Landers were not immune to the familiar struggles drag artists and venues had with police. The city forced the House of Landers to close after a stabbing incident in its second year of operation. “I didn’t take my wardrobe out,” Tillie said in a 1996 interview. “I left my wardrobe there, thinking that we were going to reopen again – that the bar was going to continue. And I finally came back to get my drag [costumes], and I had nine gowns stolen from me down there – nine of my best gowns that ran up into some money because I had a lot of Tony Midnite’s gowns and everything.”

36 Bell and Dentel, “The Dirty Old Lady,” Unboxing Queer History.
Landers is remembered for being a consistent presence in both the drag and LGBTQ community. “Roby was a wonderful emcee and lip-syncer,” said Jim Flint, owner of the historic Baton Show Lounge in Chicago. Landers went on to host annual Halloween balls alongside Flint.\(^{37}\)

The style and content of drag performances utilized conventions and techniques of burlesque while also creating standards that would set drag apart from burlesque. Drag performers then and now tended to focus on specific skills such as singing, dancing, comedy, or some combination of the three. Sociologist Esther Newton observed and interviewed drag performers in Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s. She found that drag artists who danced as chorus girls or more “exotic” styles of ballet or flamenco did so while trying to maintain the femininity of their stage characters. Performers shaved their body hair and avoided exercise that caused muscle growth. Striptease in drag did occur but was mainly targeted towards straight audiences who did not often watch drag. Only a few drag venues, such as the Baton Show Lounge, featured non-drag strippers alongside their drag talent.\(^{38}\) As Newton put it, since gay audiences “know for a certainty” that drag performers were flat chested and male beneath their bras and G-strings, strip tease for gay audiences “concentrated simply and purely on creating the visual illusion” of their characters. Drag shows for queer audiences also tended to emphasize campy humor that directly mocked performers’ characters and gender norms.\(^{39}\) Visuals and fidelity to character were essential for effective drag performances. Even while some artists continued to sing, it became more common for drag performers to lip synch to records and focus more on-stage

---


\(^{38}\) “This was the Way it Was in Gay Windy City.”

\(^{39}\) Newton, *Mother Camp*, 45.
presence and audience interaction. Newton cited, for example, an unidentified Chicago performer who lip synced to “torchy, emotional songs” with a focus on how the audience perceived them. “He had an extremely mannered style of presentation,” said Newton, “involving much handwringing, tortured facial expressions, and arresting body angles. Much of his audience responded favorably to his… ’gutsy’, give-em-all-you-got style. Supporting his ‘delivery was his make-up style, which made his face severe and hard, and his dress, which ran always to slinky, tight, low-cut gowns and spiked heels.’”

In these ways, drag performance was similar to burlesque in that it relied upon varied expressions of gender, beauty, and sensuality designed to provoke strong responses from audiences.

Even though drag functioned as a burlesque of gender and sexuality in much the same way as burlesque, drag performers were held to additional standards regarding their onstage appearance and offstage lifestyles. The prioritization of appearance in drag was and is both a potential benefit and obstacle to performers. The idea of “glamor” is used to measure many drag performances by how much they successfully emulate female celebrities and characters with a clear grasp of aesthetic in costuming and overall appearance. This, however, proved difficult for drag artists aging into their thirties and forties. These artists still earned many bookings in postwar Chicago but often did so with characters that accommodated their age and downplayed their sexuality and attractiveness. Based on her observations, Newton argued that many older drag queens had to adopt an “older glamour style” with archetypes such as Hollywood “madam characters” or older performers such as Mae West and try to compensate with “sophistication” and “experience” in their performance. In so doing, older drag artists could still “look good,” but

---

40 Newton, *Mother Camp*, 46.
often had to balance their impersonations with witty humor to not break the illusion that they were female characters. The reason for that, according to Newton was because “glamor,” at its heart, was the representation of women “at their ‘best,’ that is, at their most desirable and exciting to men.” Arguably, the same could be said of headlining female burlesque performers who had to uphold professional reputations of grace, talent and appeal. For newer burlesque performers in cheaper burlesque or stripping venues, however, the priority often was to attract male audiences to purchase food and drinks in the venues, not necessarily to put on the most extravagant and well-rehearsed of shows. Aspiring performers of drag, however, were arguably held to a higher standard from the very start of their careers, as they needed to earn the approval of the audiences and employers of the scant few drag venues in competition with each other to put on the best shows. In short, the stakes for earning gigs and a warm reception from primarily queer audiences were far higher for drag performers, as they were serving a smaller, more niche demographic and with fewer venues from which to choose.

An additional distinguishing factor between drag and burlesque was the delineation between acceptable crossdressing as performance onstage and offstage. In its origins in vaudeville, drag or female impersonation was a theatrical technique that existed only to portray and parody fictional characters and real people with little speculation to the artists’ personal gender identities. In the Chicago drag industry in the 1960s and 1970s, dressing in drag was likewise regarded as just a performance for employment, not as an expression of gender transition. Interestingly, transgender people who attended or sought to perform in drag shows were rejected and met with disgust. Drag artists interviewed by Newton reasoned that drag was

---

done to make a living, whereas men who identified as women did so for “perverted” or “freakish” reasons. Artists who appeared too feminine or did not have enough glamorous or comedic elements to undercut their femininity, were labeled as “transy drag” by some for being “too much like a real woman” and not “showy enough.” In practice, transgender women were not welcome in the drag community, according to Newton, because dressing in drag was seen as a method of performance and making money, rather a means by which one could be a woman in their personal and public life.\textsuperscript{42} Coupled with the city’s standing bans against crossdressing in public, these attitudes within the drag industry served to designate drag as only being acceptable within drag venues. Granted, burlesque artists and strippers had been arrested for violating similar statutes that prohibited “indecent exhibitions” and nudity in entertainment spaces in the same era. The main distinction, however, was the fact that drag, as well as homosexuality, was collectively categorized as a form of perversion by mainstream society in such a way that the legal and cultural punishments for transgressing norms of sex and gender went beyond mere arrests. Even as drag artists justified to themselves and others that their crossdressing was for professional entertainment and not for “perverted reasons,” the city and its municipal government saw no such distinction.

\textbf{Police Harassment and the Gay Rights Movement, 1950-1973}

The queer community and drag industry continued to weather police intervention and discrimination as they became more visible and outspoken in the 1960s and 1970s. Chicago drag remained in a vulnerable and gray legal position due to the interpretation and enforcement of “decency” statutes that regulated public nudity and crossdressing, a lack of consistent labor laws,

\textsuperscript{42} Newton, \textit{Mother Camp}, 51.
and allegations that queer venues and bars were associated with organized crime. After World War II, queer spaces in Chicago were both heavily policed and unprotected by the law. Police and lawmakers utilized allegations of extortion or influence by organized crime in Chicago to justify renewed surveillance and policing of venues owned by and catering to gay and lesbian Chicagoans. In 1952, investigations by the press and law enforcement unveiled a scheme by which mob-affiliated meat suppliers replaced ground beef with horse meat to bump up profits. That same year, a Republican committeeman was shot and killed allegedly by members of the syndicate. These controversies spurred the Chicago Crime Commission to step up investigations of businesses with any alleged ties to organized crime.\textsuperscript{43}

Gay businesses and drag venues fell under the gaze of law enforcement agencies due to how the queer community was characterized as outsides beyond the legal purview of the postwar United States. In the Cold War politics of the McCarthy Era, citizens suspected of being gay were investigated by state and federal law enforcement on suspicion of being spies or of cooperating with organized crime to keep their sexual orientations and identities secret. In this atmosphere, Chicago officials were also pressured to pass additional policies to police people or businesses for being gay or queer in the public sphere. In 1953, for instance, a correspondent for the \textit{Chicago Daily News} opined that city should look to the city of Miami as an example, as it had passed an ordinance expressly prohibiting female impersonation performances in 1952.\textsuperscript{44}

Queer businesses and drag venues were additionally threatened by organized crime. Given the profits drag venues attracted from audiences and the need for discretion for its

\textsuperscript{43} Stewart-Winter, \textit{Queer Clout}, 21.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 22.
performers and gay attendees, they became susceptible to extortion or being bought out by mob affiliates. The scale to which this applied to bars and cabarets across the city is difficult to measure given the clandestine nature of this arrangement. The problem was prevalent enough to be noted by both advocates and critics of drag performance and venues in the city. Esther Newton observed in her field notes that most drag venues – and gay bars, for that matter – were not owned by performers or members of the community. Managers were often believed to be associated with the mob, whereas venue owners tended to own several bars. This had a chilling effect on any effort to improve working conditions, to collectively organize performers, or even to quit. One performer named Kenneth Marlowe reported that he was detained for an unspecified amount of time in a Calumet City nightclub by orders of management. He told Newton that others feared being blacklisted or even assaulted for trying to leave their employment. “A very popular performer in a gay bar,” Marlowe recalled, “had given the managers notice after a highly successful run of several months. The managers nightly approached him about staying. He told me that he was determined to leave, but that he had to be careful about it, as he didn’t want to wind up beaten up in an alley. He said he was afraid of the syndicate.”

If the local press at the time were to be believed, the mob had a heavy hand in the operations of several gay bars and drag venues in the postwar era. In 1966, Tribune reporter Robert Wiedrich cited an anonymous whistleblower who claimed that mobsters had coerced or tricked tavern owners into selling a controlling share of taverns’ profits in return for guarantees of greater business and protections against police interventions. As a result, bars caught in this scheme ended up patronizing gay customers who were simply redirected from other mob-run

45 Newton, Mother Camp, 121-122.
venues. The anonymous source estimated that at least fourteen bars were trapped in this scheme that the Syndicate was using to recoup losses suffered when police had repeatedly shut down strip clubs under their management. An FBI anti-racketeering report written in 1972 alleged that mob front men operated some of the most popular drag venues on their behalf – including the Baton Lounge and Sparrows – but these allegations were made with anonymous informants and were disputed then and now.

The scope and scale of the Mob’s influence over gay businesses and drag venues is difficult to measure, but the city’s response was systemic and heavy-handed. The Richard J. Daley mayoral administration in particular sought to close many spaces of queer entertainment and community and to arrest those within, in spite of new laws regarding the legal status of homosexuals and the licenses of businesses in Chicago. In 1961, Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexuality in its state code. This was the result of a campaign to modernize and simplify the state’s legal code while removing its restrictions on “sodomy.” This historic gain for gay rights was undermined by an escalation of targeted policing by Chicago law enforcement and the mayor’s office. Those suspected of being gay, for instance, were entrapped by police into arrests for public sexual activity. In 1957, lawyers sympathetic to or aligned with gay rights advocates circulated pamphlets informing queer Chicagoans of their rights under arrest and warning them of profiling tactics police would use to justify arrest. Pearl Hart, an attorney who often worked with Mattachine Midwest, instructed gay Chicagoans in one such


47 Baim, Leatherman, 184.

48 Baim, Out and Proud, 70.
pamphlet that “‘No police officer has a right to question a person who has committed no offense, and the law does not require the person to answer indiscriminate questioning because the police happen to be making an investigation, or because there is a so-called ‘crime wave.’”"

Nevertheless, police devised reasons to justify arresting queer persons on the street, bar patrons, and employees in gay-friendly businesses on the slightest pretenses. According to historian John D’Emilio, plainclothes police would flirt with or expose themselves to gay men or eavesdrop for pickup lines and solicitation in gay bars to then make arrests for “lewd conduct” or for running a “disorderly house.” Arrests for the latter could then be used by the city to justify revoking licenses for businesses catering to gay men. In 1961, this problem was compounded by changes to state law that required businesses with revoked liquor licenses to remain closed until an appeals commission would reverse the mayor’s decision. In practice, this forced many queer spaces that lost their licenses to close permanently, as they could not afford the loss of business and often did not win their appeals against the mayor’s office.

Businesses catering to straight audiences also felt the sting of these license revocations under the same justification combatting syndicate-operated businesses and “public indecency.” In 1964, for instance, Police Superintendent Orlando W. Wilson enforced the closure of a half dozen strip bars in the Loop and West Loop after allegations of prostitution, staff soliciting customers for drinks, and the discovery of records indicating mob ties and police bribery. A total of eleven such strip bars were forced to close that year, while others were compelled to “voluntarily” close to avoid arrests. One venue, the Talk of the Town at 1159 N. Clark Street,

49 Stewart-Winter, Queer Clout, 39.

ironically changed its entertainment focus from striptease to drag performances to avoid future entanglement with police.\textsuperscript{51} This had the opposite effect. On January 7, 1965, the Talk of the Town was again raided by police after a drag performer allegedly solicited a detective for a drink. Nine drag performers were arrested and charged with public indecency, public crossdressing, and “being an inmate of a disorderly house.”\textsuperscript{52} Patrons and performers present in these raided venues were often arrested for dancing or being physically intimate with members of the same sex due to the way in which police construed the meaning of laws regarding “public indecency” and “deviate sexual conduct.” Chapter 30, Section 11-A of the municipal code prohibited sexual intercourse, acts of “deviate sexual conduct,” exposure of the body “with intent to arouse the sexual desire” of others, and fondling the body of another person in a public space. Legal advocates for arrested gay men and crossdressers argued that while these laws were not discriminatory per se, they were utilized by police to target queer citizens because closeted homosexuals were easy targets for arrest and intimidation, and in order to appear to be tough on crime.\textsuperscript{53}

Men and women were also arrested during raids of gay and lesbian businesses for wearing clothing of the opposite sex. Women were profiled by police as lesbians and arrested if they wore pants with fly fronts. This strict rule originated from Section 192-8 of the Municipal Code of Chicago, stating, “Any person who shall appear in a public place in a dress not belonging to his or her sex, with intent to conceal his or her sex, shall be fined.” Put another way,


\textsuperscript{53} Pearl M. Hart, “‘Vice’ and the Plain Clothes Policeman,” \textit{Mattachine Midwest Newsletter}, October, 1967.
Chicago citizens were arrested and fined for the act of impersonating another gender, regardless of whether they did so professionally as drag artists or as an expression of their own gender and sexual identity. As a result, large numbers of lesbian women would be targeted for arrest under this “zipper code.” In February 1961, police raided the C & C Club on Chicago’s North Side, arresting more than fifty women and the bartender. The Chicago chapter of the Mattachine Society, an advocacy organization for gay rights, reported that all arrested women were wearing fly fronts and “were made to undress in order to determine whether they wore jockey shorts.”

As the punishment for this code was a fine, many arrestees gained their freedom not long afterwards.

The chilling effect of this level of policing was palpable and became all too familiar to the queer community in Chicago. Marge Summit, a woman who frequented gay and lesbian bars in the 1960s, recalled in an interview, “At the [bars], when somebody yelled ‘Raid!’ and they had light eight paddy wagons lined up, you went in the back and you changed your shoes and turned your pants around because they’d check: they’d stand there with the flashlight on your crotch, fly-fronts, fly-fronts, fly-fronts. And then they’d take you downtown and put you in with the prostitutes.” The experience was very much the same for drag queens. Historian Owen Keehnen claimed that many drag queens like Miss Tillie were often arrested at night and then jailed downtown with prostitutes while in full drag, only to be released with a fine the next morning. The experience of having to commute home in drag in broad daylight, he added, was

---

54 Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*, 51.

an insulting added touch to the ordeal. Other headliners were not spared from arrest. Jim Flint of the Baton Lounge recalled the 1965 arrest of Roby Landers and others at the Club Chesterfield in Lincoln Park. “Roby came down the stairs from the apartments above the bar in red satin pajamas, and they took her in for that!”

Police raids of drag venues and gay friendly bars devastated businesses and gay patrons alike. Stretches of venues in nascent, still-growing gay neighborhoods especially felt the blow of these crackdowns. Queer-friendly businesses near Dearborn and Division Streets faced several obstacles from both local crime and law enforcement. Both the Nite Life and Shoreline 7, among many others, were raided multiple times based on police complaints of indecent conduct, solicitation, and alleged ties to organized crime. The impact of these arrests did not stop at the police precincts and future court dates. For many queer patrons and drag performers, raids of drag venues and the press coverage surrounding them threatened to out their identities to an unsympathetic public, at a time when being perceived as gay was grounds for loss of employment and ostracization. Following the 1962 police raids of the Shoreline 7 lounge, the Chicago Tribune published the names and addresses of two arrested men who worked there as drag performers. The same occurred to other venues in Chicago’s North and West Sides, with the local press reporting the names and addresses of female impersonators, business owners, and

---

56 Erin Bell and Jen Dentel, “The Dirty Old Lady,” Unboxing Queer History.

57 Baim, Leatherman, 233.

58 De la Croix, Chicago Whispers, 241.
patrons arrested on charges of keeping or being an inmate of a “disorderly house” or for indecency for cross-dressing.\textsuperscript{59}

The most infamous example of this invasion of queer Chicagoans’ privacy by police and the press was the raid of Louie’s Fun Lounge in 1964. The Lounge, located in Leyden Township on the outskirts of Chicago’s North Side, was accused of being a “vice resort” that violated local ordinances regarding underaged drinking and hours of operation by local police. The owner of the Lounge previously refused to testify in court about his alleged connections with organized crime. In the election year of 1964, then, the Fun Lounge presented itself as an easy target for local officials to crack down on “vice” and appear tough on crime. On April 25, 1964, undercover police in the crowd at the Lounge reported seeing “10 or 15 male couples dancing and half a dozen male couples embracing.”\textsuperscript{60} The local sheriff’s department seized on that as recourse to surround and burst into the lounge on all sides, lining up, parading, and arresting six women and 103 men in front of multiple news photographers. The names, addresses, and professions of many of the arrested men were published by local press such as the \textit{Chicago Tribune} and \textit{Chicago Daily News}. Those arrested were charged with being “inmates of a disorderly house,” and a few were also charged with “lewd and lascivious conduct.” The vast majority of those arrested would have their charges dropped in May because police could not identify them in court. Even so, lasting damage was done on the lives and reputations of the men arrested in the Lounge raid. Seven teachers and one school principal were caught up in the raid and subsequently lost their jobs in school districts in Chicago and the suburbs. This occurred

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59} “5 Female Impersonators, Others Nabbed at Lounge,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, April 5, 1966; “Cop Arrests 5 in Raid at 7 W. Division,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, July 6, 1962.
\item \textsuperscript{60} “98 Arrested in Fun Lounge Raid are Freed,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, May 16, 1964.
\end{itemize}}
after Richard Ogilvie, the Sheriff who conducted the raid, sent letters to the districts that employed the arrested teachers informing them of their arrests. He later justified his actions by arguing, “School districts should keep an eye on people who maintain such close contact with youngsters in the community.”

The Fun Lounge Raid inspired outrage and pushed queer Chicagoans into mobilizing on the issue of police harassment. Mattachine Midwest was founded in 1965 in direct response to the raid as a successor to the former Chicago branch of the same organization. In the years to follow, Mattachine prioritized both protesting the policing of the gay community and raising awareness of Chicagoans’ legal rights. Their initiatives included an attempt to republish lawyer Pearl Hart’s publication, “Your Legal Rights,” which advised gay men and lesbian women of their legal rights when confronted with police officers. Mattachine’s newsletters alerted members and the broader community of police officers disguised in plain clothes seeking to entrap gay men by flirting with them in public spaces, such as restrooms in public parks.

Reports of police entrapment and arrest of gays and lesbians were common well into the 1960s. William B. Kelley of the Mattachine Midwest Newsletter warned readers of police patrolling park space and beaches on foot and in patrol cars in Lincoln Park, Uptown and Edgewater, searching for anyone committing “public indecency” in public spaces in July, 1969. According to Kelley, two policemen had arrested one man for approaching them as they pretended to fondle each other in bushes. Mattachine Midwest also worked to provide gay

---

61 Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*, 56.


Chicagoans with legal counsel and precautionary advice to avoid arrest. Attorneys working on behalf of gay rights advocates advised readers to refuse to answer questions beyond their name and address while being stopped by police and reiterated standing law as to what justifies a lawful arrest. In addition, Mattachine hosted a 24-hour hotline to request legal aid and report unlawful arrests or police harassment.\textsuperscript{64} Mattachine Midwest published pamphlets with this information and also provided members with forms to submit information to attorneys after an arrest, including their personal identification, the events leading to their arrest, and the names and ranks of the arresting officers. In so doing, Mattachine pledged to compile cases in order to present the police superintendent with enough information to hold particularly abusive officers accountable and to demonstrate a pattern of systemic discrimination to the city.\textsuperscript{65}

In spite of multiple attempts to reach out to the Chicago Police Department for public forums and meetings regarding officers’ conduct, police officials declined such invitations multiple times. Instead, Police Superintendent O. W. Wilson told the local press that police procedures of “stop-and-quiz” that profiled gay Chicagoans in public would continue to be expanded to other precincts in February, 1966.\textsuperscript{66} Undeterred, gay rights advocates continued to provide counsel and direct aid to individuals and businesses targeted for arrest and raids, even coordinating “patrols” of gay bars and businesses in order to provide witnesses to any potential raids.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{64} “Stop and Quiz,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, March 1966; “Questionnaire,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, March 1966.

\textsuperscript{65} “M President Tells Rights Activity, Questionnaire,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, March 1966.

\textsuperscript{66} “Stop and Quiz,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, March 1966.

\textsuperscript{67} “Xmas Party, Bar Patrol in Works,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, December 1969.
Police raids of queer venues and arrests of citizens continued unabated. According to some estimates, their raids against places of drag entertainment only escalated after the controversy surrounding the Fun Lounge raid. Local press such as the Tribune reported regularly arrests and raids of drag venues, gay bars, and even bathhouses on allegations of “vice,” indecent behavior in public and cross dressing. The total number of businesses shut down by police is difficult to estimate, as arrests and raids received more press coverage than their eventual closures. Observers from this period estimated that a vast majority of drag bars were forced to close. Esther Newton estimated that there were seven clubs in Chicago operating full-time drag shows in the winter of 1965-1966. By the spring of 1966, Newton claims, only two remained. The Mattachine Midwest Newsletter reported that, by December, that number remained unchanged as many businesses remained closed as they appealed revocations of their licenses.

Under Mayor Daley, the city continued to raid queer spaces even in the lead-up to the Democratic National Convention in 1968. In January and May 1968, the Trip, a gay bar in Chicago’s North Side was raided by police on reports of same-sex couples acting “indecently” or, in this case, simply dancing together. Upon the second raid, the city revoked the Trip’s liquor license, and the liquor license bureau issued an emergency closing order to require the bar to remain closed pending appeal. The arrestees were released by the court, but the Trip’s ownership fought to stay open and were the first gay business to challenge a closure order in court.

---


69 Newton, Mother Camp, 5.

Eventually, the owners won a complete reversal of the decision by the Illinois Supreme Court in 1969, allowing The Trip to remain open for a few years afterward.\textsuperscript{71}

During the Convention and the protests surrounding it, more gay establishments around the city were forced to close. Chuck Renslow, founder and owner of the Gold Coast Bar, a gay leather bar in the Gold Coast, narrowly avoided a police raid due to a tipoff from within the police department. “A communications officer who was a customer of mine called me up,” Renslow said in an interview, “and said, ‘The word has gone out that all gay bars are to be closed or raided in the city tonight.’” Renslow managed to close the bar that night just as officers with the city’s vice squad arrived to potentially raid the Gold Coast. He decided to remain closed for a week during the proceedings of the Convention and later said that most of the gay-friendly businesses “closed up like a drum” for fear of Mayor Richard J. Daley and the police attempting to “clean up” the city’s appearance and reputation.\textsuperscript{72} Drag shows and establishments were likewise targeted for raids and coerced into closing down during the time of the Convention. Mattachine Midwest reported that drag artists were arrested by police and subsequently lost their day jobs, while only a single venue with a drag show remained open throughout all the city.\textsuperscript{73} The organization submitted a letter to Police Superintendent James B. Conlisk decrying the raids and arrests of two bars by undercover policemen who reportedly goaded patrons into flirting with them in order to justify making arrests. “We are tired of receiving ‘special’ treatment as a minority group in Chicago,” said the organization’s leadership. “We demand to be accorded the

\textsuperscript{71} Baim, \textit{Out and Proud}, 80.

\textsuperscript{72} Baim, \textit{Leatherman}, 263.

\textsuperscript{73} “The Dish Rag,” \textit{Mattachine Midwest Newsletter}, August, 1968.
same treatment as any other group of citizens. Unfounded arrests, trumped-up charges, entrapment and constant surveillance of homosexuals and their social institutions must stop.” In addition, the organization’s newsletter released in September detailed witness’ testimony to the police crackdown on demonstrators in Lincoln Park and the Loop and noted that many in the gay community were swept up in police arrests of demonstrators in a wave of teargas and beatings that the editors argued “belong in a history of Nazi Germany.”74

Anger and political activity surrounding police violence against the gay and drag community came to a head between 1968 and 1970. The issue of police harassment and violence against the gay community garnered additional support in these years due to renewed interest on the issue in light of high-profile incidents of police violence under orders of the mayor’s office against anti-war protestors and Black rights advocates in the late 1960s. Events in 1969 provided common ground between gay advocacy groups and the Black Panthers, in particular. On June 28, police in New York raided the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village – an incident that provoked days of protests and rioting locally and gay political mobilization nationally. In Chicago, existing organizations such as Mattachine Midwest cited the riot and compared it to the record of Chicago police as an indication of just how opposed law enforcement stood against the rights and safety of queer Americans. Students at the University of Chicago formed the University of Chicago Gay Liberation Front in direct response to Stonewall in 1969 and later merged this organization with one called Chicago Gay Liberation (CGL). In February 1970, the CGL organized the first large-scale dance for gay men and lesbian women at the Coliseum Annex and

marched with demonstrators to protest the war in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{75} The issue of police violence helped to unite organizations like Mattachine Midwest and the CGL with Black power advocates and the local Black community against a common foe. In December 1969, Chicago police and officers for the Cook County state’s attorney raided the West Side apartment of Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, killing both and arresting others. Police, however, failed to secure the apartment as a crime scene. This allowed the Black Panthers to open the apartment to public tours to demonstrate how police accounts of the pre-dawn raid were directly contradicted by physical evidence in the apartment, such as the claim that multiple shots were fired at police. Representatives with Mattachine Midwest visited the apartment and later released a statement coauthored with the CGL condemning the actions of law enforcement and siding with the Black Panthers’ account of the raid, which they deemed a murder.\textsuperscript{76}

Gay rights advocates saw issues of police brutality and discrimination against theirs and other communities as part of a shared struggle against undemocratic government policy in the Vietnam Era. Issues of the \textit{Mattachine Midwest Newsletter} published in 1970 documented cases in which police beat gay men and men in drag downtown and in the Near North Side and called for witnesses to share their testimony with them to build a case. The power of police to arrest, assault, or even kill any citizen for having dissident beliefs or lifestyles was regarded by Mattachine’s leadership as a shared threat to the rights of their organization and its straight allies. “An enormous wave of totalitarian thinking is sweeping the country in the opposite direction,”


\textsuperscript{76} Stewart-Winter, \textit{Queer Clout}, 89-90.
said Mattachine President Jim Bradford. “Nixon’s crime bills, no-knock warrants, Hoover’s rabid anti-Panther ravings…if this mentality is not overcome, no one, homosexual or not, is going to have any freedom left, whether free speech or sexual freedom.”

In the following year, CGL and Mattachine, and members of the queer community in Chicago, further mobilized on the issue of police harassment with help and collaboration with the Black Panthers. These organizations held demonstrations downtown on the issue in spite of the city’s recent history of harshly cracking down on mass demonstrations surrounding the Democratic National Convention in 1968 and the subsequent trial of Chicago Seven in 1969. Indeed, these advocacy groups wedded the gay community’s concern and protest of police brutality with the broader left-of-center movement by collaborating with figures and organizations tied to the anti-war movement. On April 15 and April 16, 1970, hundreds of members of the CGL and Mattachine gathered downtown to demonstrate as a part of the Student Mobilization Committee’s national week of anti-war protest. On the first day, CGL members and students marched on State Street from the Civic Center to a federal building to protest the use of tax dollars toward the Vietnam War effort.

The following day, about 250 mixed members of the CGL and Mattachine and spectators gathered at a noon rally in Grant Park to celebrate “Gay Liberation Day.” The rally’s theme of “Out of the Closets and into the streets” was carried home by members carrying signs of “Gay Power” and “Gay is beautiful.” Speakers at the rally included Lee Weiner, one of two Chicago Seven defendants who were acquitted during the trial. The rally than proceeded to march to a jury court at 321 N. LaSalle Street to protest the criminal defamation trial of a man named David

---

77 Jim Bradford, “President’s Corner,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter (Chicago, IL), August, 1970.
Stenecker who wrote articles in publications for CGL and Mattachine warning members of police who profile and arrest gay Chicagoans. Behind the scenes, gay rights advocacy groups were cementing their alliance with other leftwing organizations in common cause against local and federal law enforcement and efforts to surveil and undermine political movements in this era.

In April 1970, the Alliance to End Repression (AER) was founded as an alliance of fifty organizations ranging from the CGL and Mattachine Midwest to the Illinois Black Panther Party, the Black P. Stone Nation, and local unions. The AER went on to successfully sue the Chicago Police Department for harassment and subversions of First Amendment rights with records demonstrating the infiltration of different political movements by undercover police. In addition, the AER spawned a Gay Rights Task Force (later renamed the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Task Force) that became the main vehicle by which gay advocacy groups would coordinate demonstrations and policy demands (such as antidiscrimination ordinances regarding housing and employment) while providing resources such as legal rights hotlines and community events.

In 1970, activists further mobilized to protest police brutality against the queer community. Later that same year, additional protests and marches were held to commemorate the one year-anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. On June 27, 1970, at least a hundred people gathered in Washington Square Park in River North to march to the Civic Center. This proved to

---

78 “100 Protest Harassing of Homosexuals,” Chicago Tribune, April 17, 1970; Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, May 1970, Chicago Gay Liberation Memorabilia Collection, Gerber/Hart Library and Archives, Chicago, IL.

79 Queer Clout, 92; Alliance to End Repression Records (Chicago History Museum), Box 3, Folder 16, “Gay Liberation 1970.”
be the first official “Pride” march for gay rights in Chicago. This parade was repeated the following year with an official parade permit under the Chicago Gay Alliance. In November 1971, Chicago police killed a Black drag performer named James Clay Jr. under heavily criticized circumstances. Clay, described as a “well-known female impersonator,” was confronted by two policemen on the 2900 block of West Madison Street for wearing women’s clothing and waving at motorists. Allegedly, the two officers shot and killed Clay after allegedly being confronted about wearing women’s clothing in public. The case drew harsh criticism by the CGL and Mattachine Midwest, as well as allies such as the Black Panthers, drawing comparisons to other recent killings of Black gay men. The Chicago Gay Alliance, among other organizations, criticized and accused police reports of Clay’s killing as dishonest and suspicious similar to the slaying of Fred Hampton. One newsletter by the Chicago Gay Alliance stated, “They [the police] ‘shot to prevent his escape…’ Eight shots in the back killed James Clay. We do not mean to impugn the officers and we lack knowledge of the actual substance of the charges against Clay. Nevertheless, being shot eight times in the back strikes us as more than just a simple police action involving the minimum required force.” The CGA requested the Civil Rights Division of the FBI to conduct an outside investigation of the actions of the police officers, but their request was ultimately denied for lack of evidence. The officers involved in the shooting were never charged and the FBI never built a case regarding the shooting.80

Outrage over the case and the lack of investigation into police transpired into further political mobilization in the queer community. The CGA held a marching protest from its headquarters in the Gold Coast to the 18th District Police Station on December 18, 1971. In a

letter addressed to the Police Superintendent reprinted in public leaflets, the CGA listed among their demands, “Stop demanding sex from, arresting, beating and killing transvestites. Arresting gay people for wearing ‘attire of the opposite sex’ is as ridiculous as arresting straight women for wearing ‘male attire.’”81 Representatives of CGA went on to allege that police targeted gay men in cross-dress due to the fact that they were among the “most upfront part of our community and among the most legally vulnerable, given the express bans against wearing drag in public.82 In 1971, the Transvestites Legal Committee, Chicago’s first transgender political organization, formed in direct response to Clay’s case. Other organizations, such as Mattachine and the Black Panthers, used the case as motivation to expand programs to surveil and report police harassment and to offer aid and support to victims.83

Outside of political advocacy groups, queer businesses also increasingly challenged police harassment and extortion. The Baton Show Lounge was founded in 1969 in the River North neighborhood at 436 North Clark Street by Jim Flint, who had worked in gay bars and drag entertainment spaces for years before founding his own. The Lounge became a safe space and home to many drag shows and continued to operate in the twenty-first century, albeit in a new location in the Uptown neighborhood. Early in its operation, however, the Lounge was nearly forced into an extortion scheme with Chicago police that had bedeviled many businesses that catered to gays and lesbians. According to Flint, the Baton was raided multiple times even within its first year and was pressured by police to make payoffs to avoid future harassment. As

82 Ibid.
83 Stewart-Winter, Queer Clout, 61-63; Liz Benacka, “Chicago’s Drag Race,” Drag in the Windy City (digital history project), Lake Forest College, Chicago, IL, 2018.
it turned out, this arrangement was a conspiracy by officers in the 18th Police District that coerced bar owners into paying to have police “slant” reports of vice, obscenity, or license violations. One officer Cello, who turned state’s witness, elaborated on how the extortion took place during his testimony.

The conditions were that they would pay $100 a month to the vice officer that would be collecting. In return, there would be no harassment by members of the vice squad. Under harassment, it would be classified as premise checks, I.D. checks of individuals in the bars. If it was a gay bar, you would not go in there with flashlights and harass the patrons of the bar. You would assist them in any trouble that they have. If you were assigned to make a followup report, in your followup report you would try to make it or slant it in any way or form that would help the tavern owners.84

Later investigations by federal and state’s attorneys uncovered that gains from these payoffs ranged from hundreds of dollars for beat cops to $3,710 a month for Captain Clarence Braasch, the highest ranked officer found to be involved in the scheme. Investigators for the Tribune later reported that virtually every gay bar on Chicago’s North Side was extorted by police. Gay businesses in the Gold Coast, in particular, were longtime victims of extortion by both police and organized crime. Charles Renslow, owner of the Gold Coast leather bar, said in an interview that he paid representatives of the Mafia fifty dollars a week in addition to the hundred dollars he paid in bribes to the police. Bars like the Gold Coast, Renslow said, were often forced to use the Mob’s suppliers for bar supplies, as well, and his was one of the few to be owned by a member of the queer community rather than a Mob affiliate.85

84 United States V. Braasch, 7th Circuit Court, October 29, 1974.

85 Baim, Leatherman, 268.
The turning point against this culture of silence and harassment came with the refusal of gay businesses to participate in the scheme and subsequent investigations of officers involved in it. The silence surrounding the police extortion was broken by Jim Flint of the Baton Show Lounge among many other owners of gay bars refusing to be extorted in spite of the threats made by police and alerting the queer community and state and federal law enforcement of the illegal arrangement. In June 1973, following an investigation by U.S. Attorney James R. Thompson, a total of forty-seven officers – including Captain Braasch and twenty-two officers from the 18th Police District – were indicted on charges of extortion and interfering with commerce. Leading up to the trial in August, the Tribune reported that key witnesses who were directly involved in the scheme received death threats over the phone and one juror was dismissed after their home was repeatedly burglarized.86 To prevent further retaliation by police, jurors were granted protection by federal marshals and State’s Attorney Bernard Carey pledged to protect witnesses and victims to the extortion scheme against retaliation by the “crooked police or their political pals.” “I urge the citizens of Chicago,” Carey said to the Tribune in September 1973, “to cast aside fear and come forward to join us in this effort.”87 Fifty-three businesses and their owners answered the call and testified in court. Though many were gay bars or drag venues like the Baton, others were “singles bars” that had go-go girl dancers or stripper entertainment, located chiefly on Clark, Rush, State, Welles, Dearborn, and West Division Streets.88 On December 14, 1973, Captain Braasch was sentenced to six years imprisonment for his role in the scheme, while

87 De la Croix, Chicago Whispers, 232.
the other officers received sentences ranging from 18 months to four years. The role of gay bars in dragging this issue into the spotlight was not lost to gay rights advocates, who felt more and more emboldened to challenge how police curtailed their personal and public lives. “The situation would not have become the profitable venture that [it] apparently was,” said Jim Bradford in the *Mattachine Midwest Newsletter* in January 1973, had bars and other establishments refused to go along with the pay-off system in the first place. This breakthrough now should liberate everyone – bars, bar employees and individual gays – to assert their right to pursue their happiness unmolested by authorities. Anyone who is bothered unlawfully, either by false arrest or extortion attempt, should say ‘never again.’” Extortion by other groups, such as organized crime, was also exposed in later court cases in the 1980s that resulted in the conviction of mob affiliates who attempted to extort gay businesses.

For professional drag performers and Chicagoans who cross-dressed in their personal lives, they too would achieve lasting and significant victories for their rights that same year. On August 21, 1973, four men aged seventeen to twenty were arrested after entering a tavern to purchase cigarettes while wearing women’s clothing. They were beaten by bar patrons but were the only ones arrested by police, who charged them with wearing clothing of the opposite sex in order to “conceal” their sex. Their attorney, Renee Hanover, argued that the ordinance violated the Illinois and United States constitutions by denying transvestites equal protection under the law and cited previous federal court opinions that struck down public school dress codes that had

---


90 Baim, *Out and Proud*, 82.

specific rules for acceptable outfits and hair lengths for male and female students. The Assistant Corporation Counsel Arthur Mooradian, speaking on behalf of the city, defended the ban against cross dressing and insinuated that, without such a law, men in drag “with intent to deceive” could attempt to enter women’s restrooms or deceive people into sexual encounters under false pretenses. The defendants, for their part, showed up to court in blouses, miniskirts, makeup and wigs in defiance. Ultimately, the North Youth Court Judge Jack Sperling freed the defendants and overruled the ordinance, arguing that, while the city could pass laws to protect public health and morals, these laws had to be “reasonably related” to some kind of threat.

Sperling went on to defend the merits of the case as a test of the constitutional rights of those targeted by the ban. “I take very seriously my responsibility to rule on constitutional matters,” said Sperling. “Where this may be a matter of laughter to some people, it is a very serious matter to these defendants.” Hanover, for her part, was not satisfied with this court decision. Since the case was not decided by an appellate court or an even higher-level court than that, it lacked, in her eyes, enough weight to set a lasting precedent or to immediately change police protocol and behavior. The city’s ban against cross-dressing was challenged in a subsequent case in 1978, in which two men were arrested for wearing drag and forced to strip and pose for police officers to “prove” their real gender. The Illinois Supreme Court ruled that the way in which the ban was enforced in this instance, rather than the law itself, was a violation to the defendants’ rights to privacy that had been established by precedent in Roe v. Wade.

92 *Bishop v. Colaw*, 450 F.2d 1069 (8th Cir. 1971).


(1973). The court, ruling in favor of the defendants, openly challenged the legality of bans against crossdressing.

The notion that the State can regulate one’s personal appearance, unconfined by any constitutional strictures whatsoever, is fundamentally inconsistent with values of privacy, self-identity, autonomy and personal integrity that…the Constitution was designed to protect.96

Legal advocates for gay rights sought more permanent changes to municipal law to not just roll back discriminatory policies but to enforce equality on the basis of sexual orientation and expression. Rennee Hanover testified in favor of a proposed “gay rights bill” sponsored by Alderman Clifford P. Kelly and advocated for adding a repeal of the cross dressing ban into the legislation to make it standing law.97 The gay rights ordinances in question would not be passed by the City Council until 1988, by then granting protections homosexuals protection against discrimination in accommodations, employment, and housing, among other rights. With that being said, the close of the 1970s saw, at least anecdotally, a marked decrease of police interference and raids of drag venues and gay spaces, in general.

One of the last significant police raids of a gay space was that of Carol’s Speakeasy in May 1979. Captain Joseph McCarthy of the Chicago Avenue police district defended the raid and arrest of eleven people at the Speakeasy on May 19, citing the fact that the venue was packed beyond its maximum occupancy and had multiple fire code violations. Nevertheless, the raid provoked a march of over a thousand protesters on Daley Plaza afterwards. Mayor Jane Byrne, for her part, reportedly instructed her Police Superintendent that no gay bars were to be

96 City of Chicago v. Wilson, 75 Ill. 2d 525 (1978).
97 Baim, Out and Proud, 91.
harassed simply for having gay patrons or staff. This was reinforced by subsequent police training bulletins issued to mandate police to “foster a climate of mutual understanding” by granting equal protection to gay Chicagoans and continuing to engage with leaders of the gay community to address concerns about policing in public forums. On paper, at least, the broader queer community in Chicago were to no longer be subject to police harassment and profiling with the close of the 1970s.

The years between 1934 and 1980 witnessed a marked change in the performance style, business, and legal status of drag and in the Windy City. The drag community, their fans, and venues were forced to relocate further and further away from the Loop due to both gentrification and police harassment. Drag performers persisted in diverse casts of musical and dancing entertainers in floor shows of nightclubs and supper clubs in the North and South Sides that enabled some to rise to lifelong careers in live entertainment. In the postwar era, the content and style of drag was set in place by entertainers and productions with an emphasis on glamour and campy comedy that openly parodied conventions of gender and beauty for straight and gay audiences, alike. All the while, performers had to contend with instability in their employment and compensation; harassment and threats of violence by patrons or pedestrians; or, worst still, arrest by police for cross-dressing in public or providing “indecent” performances. High profile arrests and police violence against people in drag and gay Chicagoans, in general, mobilized the queer community on the issue of civil rights in the late 1960s and 1970s. The campaign for legal rights and nondiscrimination helped shed light on police profiling and extortions of drag venues.

and gay bars, and ultimately forced changes in municipal law and police procedure, allowing Chicagoans to dress in drag in public and prohibiting police from targeting queer venues or citizens for arrest without just cause.
EPILOGUE

“WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN”

CHICAGO BURLESQUE AND DRAG,

1980-PRESENT

In their two centuries of existence, burlesque and drag served multiple roles in the lives of artists, audiences and municipal authorities in the city of Chicago. For many, these art forms and entertainment industries were sources of employment and means of personal, artistic expression that could open doors to careers and camaraderie with others like them. Audiences witnessed and praised productions and performers for their innovations in aesthetics and movement, all while being exposed to new forms of dance, music, and sensuality onstage.

At the same time, shows and artists in both fields have been repeatedly swept up into campaigns of moral policing and censorship of stage theater content and public apparel, often justified with claims of combating “perversion” or of making Chicago’s public sphere safer and more palatable for families and business. What’s more, changes in the boundaries of humor, nudity, and sexuality in American entertainment also meant cycles of economic boom and decline when burlesque and drag failed to meet audiences’ demand.

In particular, the Chicago burlesque industry struggled to remain relevant in a cultural landscape of heavy policing by municipal authorities even as competing genres of entertainment – such as modern strip clubs or pornography - outstripped burlesque venues’ reputation and ability to provoke the interest of audiences. Drag, on the other hand, persisted with a larger public profile and attendance due to its role as a hub in the queer Chicago community and efforts
by the broader gay rights movement to safeguard these and other queer-friendly spaces and businesses.

Chicago drag and burlesque performers continue to challenge audiencees’ standards of sex and gender in live entertainment today. Since the 1980s, both entertainment communities and industries grew in terms of popularity, venues, performers, and demand. As this project indicated, American burlesque entered a period of decline in the 1960s and 1970s for various reasons. Brick and mortar venues and theaters in Chicago and other cities shut down or pivoted to other genres of entertainment in this era. Potential audiences seeking nude or provocative live entertainment turned to alternatives such as gentlemans’ clubs and strip clubs that rarely, if ever, featured burlesque striptease. So, what changed? How did burlesque seemingly reemerge into American public culture?

A crucial element to the revival of burlesque in American culture has been the collective efforts of current and former performers to preserve the history and community of exotic dancers of the past. Even during the postwar era when burlesque, as an industry, was in decline, performers made some attempts to organize into social and professional associations, as well as to preserve oral histories and physical collections of memorabilia. In 1955, burlesque artists working or retired in Las Vegas organized the Exotic Dancers League in order to organize performers and assert pressure on venues to increase base pay, make working conditions safer for performers, and to challenge unjustified firings of dancers. One founder and first president Jennie Lee undertook many projects to keep members of the League in touch with one another and to attract retired burlesquers to become members. Such efforts included writing columns on burlesque and striptease to inform members and the public of past and current performances, as
well as an annual meetings and awards ceremonies to celebrate members of the community. Crucially, Lee also collected physical memorabilia, in the way of costumes, props, and personal records, from members from around the country. Lee took this collection with her when she relocated to a ranch in Hellendale, California, where she established the Burlesque Hall of Fame Museum (BHOF). This museum was staffed by EDL members who lived on the premises in trailers and contributed with their own souvenir collections to the exhibits.¹

Lee continued to lead the BHOF Museum and host annual meetings and awards ceremonies until her passing in 1990. After Lee’s death, former performer and burlesque queen Dixie Evans assumed responsibility of the Museum and the League, and worked to expand its collections and programming.² Evans had a talent for marketing and conceive the idea of holding the Miss Exotic World Pageant in 1991 as a competition between the top burlesque talent, open to performers from around the world. Ever since, the Miss Exotic World Pageant has become the signature fundraising and social event of the year for the BHOF Museum and for the international burlesque community. The event continues to feature acts from new talent for titles such as “Miss” and “Mister Exotic World,” “Most Comedic,” “Best Group Act,” among other categories, while also featuring performances by “golden legends” of the burlesque scene of the 1950s and 1960s. The event and the BHOF Museum remained in Hellendale until relocating to Las Vegas, Nevada in order to more effectively store and display the Museum’s growing collections of artifacts. The Pageant, for its part, has only continued to grow in the size of


contestants and audiences it draws each year. Artists who have won titles through the competition gained exposure throughout the community and have become some of the top-billed performers and producers in their respective cities. As a center for the past history of burlesque and a community hub for performers and enthusiasts today, the Burlesque Hall of Fame and its members helped to inspire, if not inform, the journeys of artists who entered the burlesque scene in the 1990s and 2000s around the country by maintaining a sharable history, heritage, and sense of community around the craft.

Burlesque shows and audience interest in them, according to some historians, revived in the 1990s in a wave of renewed interest in other forms of “vintage” culture or “Americana” entertainment. Michelle Baldwin, also known as burlesque artist Vivenne VaVoom, argued that the preservation of burlesque imagery and movies through pinup art and re-releases of films such as Striparama (originally 1953). As a result, people working in adjacent industries, such as stripping or go-go dancing, discovered burlesque of the “Golden Era” between the 1930s and 1960s – artists who would go on to embrace the aesthetic and stylings of burlesque while reinventing themselves as burlesque artists. Most observers credit New York City for being the site where burlesque’s national revival took root. Here, burlesqueurs emerged in the 1990s to create shows, burlesque troupes, and schools to teach aspiring artists how to perform. Initially, many arrived to the scene from related but distinct modes of entertainment. Artists such as Miss Indigo Blue and the World Famous “BOB” were primarily known as go-go

---


dancers at nightclubs or as “female-female impersonators” who dressed in glam in drag shows. BOB, for her part, stumbled into performing burlesque as a result of comparable performance art involving imitations of blonde bombshell characters and lip synchs of vintage music. “My performance art was already known for partial nudity,” said BOB, “and the next thing I knew I was doing burlesque quite by accident. Someone said, ‘I love your burlesque,’ and I thought, ‘Oh, that is kind of what I’m doing…’ Once I realized what I was doing, my interest in it grew.”

James “Tigger” Ferguson, likewise, was a performance artist in shows regarding political and sexual issues in satire before he began performing burlesque striptease and marketing himself as a burlesque artist in 1997 onwards. Bambi the Mermaid collaborated with the Coney Island Circus Sideshow, a revival production that introduced Coney Island audiences to circus performances such as fire eating, sword swallowing, and snake dancing alongside burlesque performances that imitated the traveling circus shows Gypsy Rose Lee and other burlesque performers during the postwar era.

Over time, artists of similar backgrounds organically migrated into burlesque due to the appeal of its aesthetics or because it enabled them to engage more directly with themes of sexuality and gender. In addition, burlesque festivals (usually composed of two or three days of subsequent shows, workshops for student performers, and occasionally competition for titles) began in New York and New Orleans in 2002 as opportunities to attract local and regional talent to some of the biggest productions of the year and, in the process, encourage networking among artists of similar backgrounds.

---

5 Baldwin, Burlesque and the New Bump-N-Grind, 28.

performers.\textsuperscript{7} The revival of burlesque in New York was treacherous initially, however, due to concerns of how to market burlesque shows amidst a crackdown against adult entertainment. The mayoral administration of Rudy Giuliani (1994-2001) shut down many strip clubs and adult video store in an attempt to improve the city’s reputation for safety and tourism. Consequently, performers and productions struggled with how to promote themselves in such a way that would avoid interference by municipal authorities. Some, for instance, emphasized their shows as performance art or “erotic dance.” The Blue Angel Cabaret, a burlesque venue established in 1993, reopened in 1997 after losing its lease and discontinued lap dances to avoid being categorized as a strip club. Melanie Myers, the general counsel of the City Planning Department, told the \textit{New York Times} that burlesque and other live performance forms were not to be held to the same zoning requirements that were shuttering many strip clubs at the time so long as they were “legitimate theatrical productions” with occasional nudity that were not dedicated to “adult entertainment” in the same way that strip clubs were.\textsuperscript{8} Indeed, producers and performers of burlesque were quick to distinguish themselves from strippers and strip clubs by emphasizing the artistic nature of burlesque shows. The Blue Angel Cabaret directly advertised itself as “Burlesque Revival” and featured singing, fire-eating, and other performances alongside striptease, in a bid to demonstrate the variety of talent that the big tent of burlesque contained. Producers defended burlesque shows to the press as having more variety and more entertainment than topless bars where strippers just “danced around” for hours on end. Burlesquer Velocity Chyald, who previously worked in such strip clubs, told the \textit{New York Times} she much preferred?


working in burlesque, as she and other artists had greater artistic license over the kinds of acts they could perform and worked fewer hours than strippers.\textsuperscript{9}

Crucially, new generations of performers, venues, and promoters of burlesque survived initial skepticism and censorship by embracing new topics for parody and techniques of performance to expand what was “burlesque.” Burlesque, in its iteration from the 1990s onwards, was not simply an imitation of performers in more “classical” periods and styles, but a new genre of “neoburlesque” that utilized vintage aesthetics as a framework within which artists could scrutinize and challenge newer, contemporary issues of sexuality, gender, and politics while also parodying and paying tribute to niche topics and content in popular culture. Performers active today have distinguished that, while stripping of the classical era of burlesque and modern strip clubs tends to be for the purpose of arousing male audiences, neoburlesque prioritizes performance as a way of empowering the artists and to inspire members of the audience.\textsuperscript{10} Chicago performer Dahlia Fatale explained in a 2012 interview that past performers and current, “classically-styled” ones usually fell back on methods of slow, dainty removals of costume pieces and “ladylike” choreography that emphasize beauty and femininity above all else. Fatale, who continues to perform and showcase acts set to heavy metal and punk music, argued that performers like her respect classical burlesque, but prefer the freedom offered in neoburlesque styles and shows. “Neo-burlesque is just a wider topic,” Fatale stated. “You can dance to anything, raise any subject matter, and behave in more extreme ways without worry of

\textsuperscript{9} Tribelli, “Burlesque’s Back.”

\textsuperscript{10} Joan Acocella, “Take It Off!” \textit{The New Yorker}, May 6, 2013.
being deemed not ‘burlesque.’’’’

In other words, neo-burlesque shows, as practiced by artists of the revival period of the 1990s into the present, feature traditional glamorous performances of glove peels, feather fans, and glittery costuming, and so on, alongside acts that skewer modern characters, stories, and issues in their own way.

In Chicago, burlesque in the classic and neoburlesque style arrived in the 2000s in the form of revamped productions, schools and theatrical troupes, and festivals. Much like their counterparts in New York, Chicago performers tended to discover burlesque through attending other shows, performing in adjacent genres of live entertainment, or by chance. Artists who became headlining performers in this era, such as Michelle L’Amour, began careers by dancing alongside live bands in shows not dedicated to “burlesque,” per se. With a college education in finance from the University of Illinois, L’Amour had a passion for dancing as a hobby that began in childhood and sprouted to become a career following her burlesque debut in 1997. In the years to follow, L’Amour established her own dance studio and a troupe of student performers who would perform as a group and as soloists at the Miss Exotic World Pageant at the Burlesque Hall of Fame. L’Amour, for her part, won the title of Miss Exotic World in 2005 with an act in tribute to Sally Rand’s feather fan performance - making her the first Chicago performer to earn the title.

---


L’Amour was not the only artist to find success as a performer and educator – nor was her classical style the only one being practiced in the Windy City. Angela Eve began her career as a backup dancer for heavy rock bands before beginning to perform and produce shows that featured music and live bands to accompany burlesque performances. This spirit of experimentation carried over into other projects Eve produced, such as the Twisted Tassel Burlesque Festival in 2008 and the Windy City Burlesque Festival from 2011 to 2015. In these festivals, Eve and her collaborators attempted to expand the realm of what burlesque shows could include by featuring variety artists, comedians, and live rockabilly and r&b bands to soundtrack the burlesque performances. In addition, those involved in the festivals sought to put Chicago onto the map of the national revival of burlesque to rival New York and its own burlesque festival. “This city has a lot going on in terms of burlesque,” claimed Eve to the *Tribune* in 2008, “but it’s not always seen by the outside world. So this festival is a good way to show people that there’s a thriving scene here.”

The thriving scene in Chicago from the 2000s onwards could be measured by the scope and diversity of productions it offered, as well as the mentorship and community being built by artists. Pop-up shows – that is, monthly shows that are offered in non-theatrical spaces such as bars and restaurants – have become a regular feature in the Chicago scene, often co-produced between business owners and performers who book and perform alongside the talent. More permanent brick-and-mortar locations for regular shows are rarer, but many have been created to

---


serve as places of employment and education centers for aspiring performers. Headlining performers such as Michelle L’Amour and Angela Eve created their own troupes and schools in the form of the Chicago Starlets and Eve’s Parlor, respectively. Another performer, Red Hot Annie, formed the company Vaudezilla in 2008, which offered regular classes and mentorship to students, as well as a performance space to exhibit their acts in exchange for some pay. Some troupes and communities grew around shared, more niche interests that themselves became a subgenre within burlesque. “Nerdlesque” productions and groups of performers based in Chicago, such as Gorilla Tango Burlesque and Plan 9 Burlesque, originated in the 2010s to pay tribute to and parody stories and characters in comic book culture, science fiction, fantasy literature, and other sources in “nerd culture.”

Newer productions and revues also highlight and celebrate performers from demographic groups that have historically been underrepresented in American burlesque. In the past two decades, artists of color have ascended to become some of the most lauded performers and producers in Chicago. Jeez Loueez, an African American artist who has been consistently rated as one of the most influential burlesque performers of the past decade, began a blog about Black burlesque performers and representation in 2009 that grew into an annual revue celebrating and featuring Black artists from around the world called Jeezy’s Juke Joint beginning in 2016. For her efforts, Jeez has consistently been ranked as one of the most influential figures in burlesque by 21st Century Burlesque Magazine and frequently collaborates with large festivals and competitions such as the Miss Exotic World Pageant and the Show Me Burlesque Festival, the latter of which she co-created and has co-produced since 2015. Likewise, other productions, such

---

as Latinesque and Bast Productions, led by performer Sio Bast, produce shows that heavily feature Hispanic and Latino artists in acts and shows that celebrate this cultural heritage.

Burlesque schools or troupes such as the House of the Lorde in Pilsen and the organization Body Confidence for Queens, among others, have also been teaching, producing shows for, and advocating on behalf of up-and-coming Black performers since 2019 in an effort to increase diversity in local burlesque productions and to prevent exploitation and discrimination.

Male performers, sometimes called “boylesquers,” have also become more common in Chicago since the burlesque revival of the 2000s. Some high-profile examples have included Hot Toddy, a classically-styled artist who would go on to win titles such as “Best Boylesque” at the Miss Exotic World Pageant in 2009. Toddy invoked aesthetics of masculinity intended to be the equivalent of the graceful femininity displayed by his female peers in the form of recognizable icons or characters that played into or skewed masculinity, such as a devil or Liberace. In interviews, he admitted that he challenged himself to construct his acts as male interpretations of the graceful choreography of female performers in past eras of burlesque. He went on to mentor a trio of students called the Stagedoor Johnnies, each of whom respectively pursued successful careers as headlining performers at the Burlesque Hall of Fame and in productions within and beyond Chicago. Other male burlesque artists in Chicago continue to earn top billing and produce shows highlighting masculinity and the local queer community, such as Willie LaQueue and his show series Delirium, which features and highlights performers and voices from the queer community while advocating on behalf of queer issues. In the past two years, male

---

burlesque artists have also won consecutive titles at the Miss Exotic World Pageant, indicating not only the talent Chicago has to offer but the growing openness of such competitions to award top ranking titles to male performers.

Only a few permanent, dedicated burlesque venues have existed in Chicago since the neoburlesque revival began. One such location was the Uptown Underground, a venue in the Uptown neighborhood that hosted the Kiss Kiss Cabaret troop and rotations of burlesque shows produced by guest and resident artists from 2011 to 2019. Given its spacious, dedicated stage space, the Uptown Underground served as a home for both Kiss Kiss Cabaret and niche shows produced by members of the burlesque community. This was best exemplified by the Burning City Neo-Vintage Burlesque Festival in 2017, which hosted both a weekend of shows dedicated to different themes such as circus arts, horror, and film noir aesthetics, and workshops for students and historians of burlesque. More recently, performer and producer Eva La Feva co-founded the Newport Theater in Wrigleyville in 2019. Since its founding, the space has hosted not only in-house productions, but shows guest produced by members of the burlesque community, featuring everything from nerdlesque shows and LGBTQ+ themed productions to one-act musical plays and live comedy. Crucially, the Newport continues to offer one-off workshops and eight-week class sessions for students of burlesque, drag and comedy, and operates its shows and businesses by firm standards of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as a code of ethics guiding the actions of producers and performers in its space.¹⁸

Chicago burlesque, as an industry, continues to endure issues of labor exploitation, racism, and discrimination that have long been a part of its history. The pay and working

conditions of burlesque performers remain inconsistent across the industry due to the nature of burlesque performers’ work as independent contractors, rather than employees. Consequently, the compensation per performance or show greatly varies based on the deliberations between venue operators, producers, and performers. This has continually sparked discussions and debates over what the base pay of performers ought to be across the industry, as well as accusations that up-and-coming performers who accept lower pay for greater exposure were potentially undercutting seasoned artists who work in burlesque full-time.

Some performers have also come forward in the recent past about venues and producers that perpetuated exploitative and unsafe working conditions. For instance, performers have accused producers and promoters turning a blind eye to incidents of sexual harassment against performers at the hands of production staff. Other common complaints have been the lack of safe, private, and sanitary dressing rooms for performers and little prior negotiation producers regarding pay. Entire burlesque companies and productions have faltered or fallen apart due to revelations of harmful and discriminatory behavior against cast and crew. In 2020, members of the Vaudezilla burlesque troupe and company shared experiences with the burlesque community online and in person regarding racially discriminatory practices such as the theft of Black performers’ creative property, low and exploitative pay, and the casting of majority-white artists. In response, members of the burlesque community in and around Chicago signed onto an open letter demanding that the organization acknowledge its fault, to hire outside consultants to reform Vaudezilla’s standards of conduct, and to establish a higher base pay for non-White, queer, and disabled performers.19 The delayed response from Vaudezilla’s founder, Red Hot Annie, or the

---

rest of the team, led to instructors and students quitting en masse, and the broader community breaking ties with the remaining organization.

The burlesque community has attempted to address issues of labor exploitation and discrimination with its own initiatives. Members of the burlesque community collaborated to create and disseminate the Burlesque Community Against Unsafe Spaces (BCAUS), a set of standards that commit venue operators and producers to basic conditions to guarantee the safety and compensation of performers. This form and license awarded to venues communicates to the broader community that member venues are more trustworthy or, at the very least, being held to higher standards by burlesque artists. While by no means universal, as of writing, such initiatives and the sharing of experiences of performers via social media have helped to make the industry much more transparent about the ways in which theatrical spaces and businesses support or fail adult performers. In addition to elevating shows and productions that celebrate non-White performers and identities, artists have also published informational resources to combat the casting of all or majority-White burlesque shows. Po’ Chop, a Black performer and instructor at the House of the Lorde studio, published the Black Burlesque Directory in 2015: a digital repository of Black performers’ names, locations, and contact information from around the world. In so doing, Po’ Chop sought to make it so that “unsung innovators” in the burlesque world would gain bookings and respect, and to make it so that homogenous productions would become unacceptable in the industry. The effectiveness of these and other initiatives to make the burlesque industry more transparent and equitable are difficult to evaluate. Nevertheless, they

---

reflect that the burlesque community in Chicago has become more mutually supportive of its members and less tolerable of issues of inequity and exploitation within it.

Since 1980, the drag community and business in Chicago has also enjoyed tremendous growth in spite of lingering issues confronting the queer community from broader society and internal divisions among drag performers and venues. Drag performers and spaces not only survived the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s but became more engaged in the public sphere and cultural mainstream of Chicago. Some performers became advocates for the broader queer community in this time of need. Drag queen Wanda Lust, for instance, volunteered with the Chicago Gay Health Project to help get gay men tested for sexually-transmitted diseases. Lust dressed up as a nurse and accompanied a van that fellow volunteers parked outside of gay bars in the North Side to collect samples from patrons. These efforts helped to destigmatize STD testing in the gay community and put additional pressure on the Chicago Board of Health and regional hospitals to increase testing and contribute volunteers to these and other initiatives from within the gay community.21

Other drag queens sought to boost the visibility of the queer community and the issues facing them through direct appeals to local and national press and broadcasts. Chilli Pepper, for instance, was a performer who frequently contributed or was interviewed in publications such as the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun Times, as well as made appearances on talk shows such as the Oprah Winfrey Show to introduce more mainstream audiences to drag and gay culture and to broader awareness of the impact of HIV and AIDS. “You were seeing people who were dying,

and a lot of people weren’t doing anything because they didn’t understand what was happening,” acknowledged Pepper in a 2013 interview. “I was blessed by having lots of media exposure. The media has such big power… if you don’t say it, nobody else is going to say it.”

The role of some drag queens in public politics only increased in visibility with the gains and higher political clout of the LGBTQ community in Chicago. This was vividly illustrated by the 1991 mayoral campaign of Joan Jett Blakk on behalf of Queer Nation, a political collective of activists concerned with HIV/AIDS and against politics of respectability and assimilation in the queer community. Though Blakk lost, the amount of press coverage and spectacle put forward by the campaign provided a platform for broadening awareness of issues confronting the queer community locally and nationally. All the while, the Chicago gay community gained an enormous victory with the passage of an antidiscrimination ordinance in 1988 that banned discrimination in employment, housing, and other spheres, as well as the long-term development of the gay community into an effective and decisive voting bloc in the city. In the following years, the number of shows and venues continued to proliferate, as did the variety of artists included in drag programming. Drag shows spread, much like burlesque, in the form of pop-up shows at spaces such as bars and restaurants, and in some dedicated entertainment venues, as well. One notable example, the Berlin Nightclub, opened in Lakeview in 1983, where its management offered many shows in the decades to follow.

---


bars catering to mainstream audiences, including the historic Walnut Room in the Marshall
Fields building in the Loop, offered drag brunch or evening shows. Other programs, such as
“Drag Story Hour,” provide family entertainment in the form of drag artists reading to children at
bookstores or libraries. Drag performers have also had increased opportunities to perform
alongside burlesque performers in the past decade in monthly pop-up shows around the city.
Outside of regular gigs, drag performers also have had greater opportunities to compete in
Chicago for titles and prestige. In 1980, Jim Flint of the Baton Lounge began producing the Miss
Continental Pageant, a tournament of drag talent from the city and the Midwest. He was
motivated to do so because other pageants, such as Miss Gay America, explicitly banned
transgender performers from competing. The Continental Pageant continues to this day and has
propelled the careers of many competing artists.

The diversity and inclusivity of the drag community has also grown into the present.
More artists, for instance, are emerging from communities historically underrepresented by the
drag industry. Black artists have proliferated in this space over the past decade and gained
breakthrough success by engaging with aspects of their culture and racial identity in their art.
Performers such as Shea Coulee, Lucy Stoole, and Switch the Boi Wonder, for instance, have
performed in all-Black burlesque and drag revue shows in Chicago including Jeezy’s Juke Joint.
Switch, for his part, co-produces the show *Notes on Masculinity* with burlesquer Po’ Chop to

---

24 Kathleen Hinkel, “The Art of Drag,” *Block Club Chicago*, June 22, 2023; “Drag Queen Storytime is Not a Threat

directly engage with art and issues surrounding race and gender each month. Additionally, more drag kings – that is, artists impersonating male characters or personas – have entered the industry in the past decade and featured in shows that focus on parodying masculinity. The inclusion of masculine and non-binary gender expressions in drag have allowed artists to explore and portray their own evolving identities onstage in a more open and welcoming environment than previously before. “Doing drag literally cracked me open,” said drag performer “pj” to Block Club Chicago. “I have been slowly coming out as trans over the years, and then I did drag and realized it’s time for me to fess up that I’m kind of a guy.” What’s more, some artists such as Switch the Boi Wonder and Dusty Bahls, perform “draglesque,” a style that combines the striptease act format of burlesque with the aesthetics and gender-inverting portrayals of drag. The normalization of draglesque or striptease within drag has helped many artists to secure bookings with burlesque productions, helping to break down barriers and distance between the two industries. Barriers to entry in the drag industry, likewise, have been reduced by the normalization of mentorships between established artists and aspiring ones eager to learn methods of choreography, characterization, and makeup and costuming to create their own characters. This often takes place as a personal arrangement with artists or in structured courses and workshops in institutions like the Chicago School of Burlesque and the Newport Theater. Such resources and mutual support have helped prevent the drag scene from becoming too exclusive to grow.

26 Jake Wittich, “Drag Kings are Booming in Chicago, Pushing Limits of What Drag Can Be,” Block Club Chicago, June 8, 2022.

27 Jake Wittich, “Drag Kings are Booming in Chicago.”
Like the burlesque industry, however, Chicago drag continues to contend with issues of labor rights, representation and equity as of late. Drag artists too are often independent contractors whose compensation and expected working conditions vary greatly from venue to venue. As such, the longevity of burlesque productions depends largely on the scrupulousness of venue operators and their ability to pay staff and performers. Some spaces in the drag scene have shut down over this issue. The Berlin Nightclub, long a staple gay club and venue for drag shows, closed in the winter of 2023. The Berlin’s staff had engaged in months of strikes because of failed negotiations to secure higher pay, a full-time worker status, and other benefits, and performers had boycotted the venue in solidarity, only for the owners to decide against reopening altogether. Such incidents are a reminder of how easily spaces for gig entertainment, drag or otherwise, can be lost due to mismanagement or disputes over labor.

The drag community also continues to be marred by underrepresentation of and insensitivity towards specific communities that have long been active in it. While the number of drag kings and performers of color in drag is higher now than in previous years, the majority of drag gigs, according to members of the community, continue to book White cisgender drag queens. The lack of diversity in production and direction staff has manifested in some cases of abuse and discrimination. In 2020, political activism amongst Black drag artists in Chicago grew in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter protests taking part across the country against police racism. Chicago artists such as Jo Mama helped coordinate and lead the Drag March for Change.

---

in solidarity with these protests and to assert pressure on the drag industry and the broader gay community to follow suit.\textsuperscript{29}

In 2020, members of the community also formed the Chicago Black Drag Council to directly redress accusations of discrimination, racist jokes, and employee abuse by multiple general managers of venues. In a public meeting moderated by burlesquer and diversity, equity, and inclusivity consultant, Shimmy LaRoux, the Council read the collected allegations against managers and producers and issued demands for them to take material steps to regulate and prevent future behavior by accepting outside consultants and pledging material support to causes supporting the Black community.\textsuperscript{30} Such incidents displayed that, while inequality in representation and leadership is an ongoing issue, the drag community has become more responsive and less tolerant of toxic environments that, in their eyes, make their world less inclusive and more dangerous.

Both burlesque and drag continue to be vibrant, diverse and prolific sources of live entertainment in Chicago to this day. Productions in each genre showcase artists as they perform and explore their own interpretations of standards of beauty and gender to which they may or may not identify. In addition to providing employment and the immediate thrills of performing in front of wide audiences, the burlesque and drag communities also continue to foster relationships and friendships between established performers and mentees eager to learn from them and to contribute in their own way. While diversity, equity, and inclusion in live adult entertainment is


far from perfect, performers and producers in Chicago drag and burlesque have taken concrete steps to hold themselves accountable and to identify and condemn behavior that transgress the rights, safety, and dignity of members of their communities. The performance, productions, and priorities of drag and burlesque entertainment have changed tremendously since their origins in the Windy City in the nineteenth century, but both genres retain their drive and ability to reflect and challenge standards of sexuality, gender, and behavior to the amusement and surprise of audiences. The “horrible prettiness” of Chicago artists has never been prettier.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Archival Collections:
Alliance to End Repression Records, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

Burgess Papers, Special Collections Research Center, The Regenstein Library, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

Chicago Gay Liberation Memorabilia Collection, Gerber/Hart Library and Archives, Chicago, Illinois.

Juvenile Protective Association records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Publications/Press:

“100 Protest Harassing of Homosexuals,” Chicago Tribune, April 17, 1970.


“5 Female Impersonators, Others Nabbed at Lounge,” Chicago Tribune, April 5, 1966.

“5,000 Attend Bud’s Big Turkey Party,” Chicago Tribune, November 26, 1932.


“American Files $500,000 Suit,” *New York Clipper*, December 20, 1922.

"At Joe’s,” The Chicago Defender, December 9, 1939.


“Blonde Venus from Racine a Hit on Stage,” *Racine Journal Times*, September 24, 1933.


“Burlesque Managed like a Big League,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 10, 1911.


“Can’t Enforce 1 O’Clock Order,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 5, 1922.


Chase, Al “Old Trocadero Theater Sold for $190,000,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 1922.


“Chicago Show Reviews,” *New York Clipper*, February 1, 1922.

“Chicago Theatres Declared Unsafe by Building Committee,” *New York Clipper*, March 16, 1921.


“City the Victor; Dancer is Guilty: Municipal Power to Censor Burlesque Productions Is Demonstrated in Court.” *Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1908.


“Cops Blow in the Wind Blew Inn; Blow out with Forty,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 12, 1922.


“Court Smiles on Walkin’ the Dog: Burlesque ‘Queen’ Dances Before Judge to Disprove Indecency Charge,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 1916.


“Democrats Have Fun at 606 Night Club,” *LIFE*, July 29, 1940.


Doherty, James, “Expect Cleanup in Calumet City by New Mayor,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1953.


“Female Impersonators: Unique Chicago Night Club Features Make-Believe Ladies as Entertainers,” *Ebony Magazine*, March 1948


Gardner, Virginia, “Sally Rand Has a Day in Court with the Cops: Judge Fines Her $25.” *Chicago Tribune*, August 9, 1933.
Gardner, Virginia, “Year in Jail for Sally Rand: Jurors Goggle as Court Sees her Fan Dance,” Chicago Tribune, September 24, 1933.


Gentry, James, “’Ol Satchmo’, Kirk to Play Grand Terrace,” Chicago Tribune, July 17, 1937.

“Girlish Chums in a Flat,” Chicago Tribune, July 31, 1890.

“Girls are Girls: Miss Binford, Don’t Be Shocked,” Chicago Defender, February 9, 1924.


Hart, Pearl M. “‘Vice’ and the Plain Clothes Policeman,” Mattachine Midwest Newsletter, October, 1967.


“He Thrills ‘Em as a Brunette or Blonde,” Chicago American, April 1, 1932.


“Hobohemia’s Temple Burns,” Chicago Tribune, April 22, 1922.


“How a Man Makes Himself a Beautiful Woman,” Chicago Tribune, September 27, 1908.


“Impersonators Are Aces Over at Joe Hughes,” Chicago Defender, October 2, 1948.

“Introductory Overture,” New York Clipper, March 5, 1870.

“’I’se a Muggin’ at the De Lisa’s New Show,” Chicago Tribune, May 16, 1936.


“Lady Man Daintily Confides that Lacing is Disagreeable,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 1909.

“Let the Boobs Look, Judge’s Idea on Nudes,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 1933.


Mantle, Burns “Ziegfeld’s New Show Outdoes All His Others,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 1931.


“May Shut the Cort Theater: Police Find Orders to Eliminate Indecency Are Disobeyed.” *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1910.


“Minister Sues Burlesque Show.” *Chicago Tribune*, April 13, 1919.


“Race Talent Given a Change in Burlesque,” Chicago Defender, August 22, 1925.


“Shocking Shows Pass All Limits: "Burlesque" at Trocadero and Folly to Be Eradicated in the Interest of Public Morals,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1908.


Wendt, Lloyd "Four O'Clock Tease!", Chicago Tribune, July 17, 1949.


Wittich, Jake “ Drag Kings are Booming in Chicago, Pushing Limits of What Drag Can Be,” Block Club Chicago, June 8, 2022.

“Women as Theater Ushers: Manager Sam T. Jack to Introduce an Innovation in His Playhouse,” Chicago Tribune, April 20, 1893.


“Women’s Fight Closes Gaudy Theater Row: Seven Lower State Houses Shut by Police, but Two Escape the ‘Lid,’” Chicago Tribune, February 20, 1916.


**Monographs:**


**Secondary Sources**

**Monographs:**


**Blogs/Digital History:**


Benacka, Liz, *Drag in the Windy City* (digital history project), Lake Forest College, Chicago, IL.


VITA

Dr. Lucas Bensley is a professor of history with a Ph.D from Loyola University in Chicago. He also has a Master’s Degree in social sciences from the University of Chicago and a Bachelor’s of Arts in history and political science from the University of California, Los Angeles. Dr. Bensley primarily studied United States history in his undergraduate and gradual school education before Loyola, with a focus on African American history, issues of race and racism, and urban politics in the twentieth century.

In his coursework and research for the doctorate at Loyola, Dr. Bensley primarily studied and researched topics of urban politics and mass culture, as well as gender and sexuality, while also pursuing a minor in public history. Many of his seminar papers and his dissertation focused on the history of burlesque, drag, and politics of censorship surrounding art and entertainment in Chicago in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Dr. Bensley aims to one day publish his dissertation, titled “Daring Dames and Dirty Deeds:” Chicago Burlesque, Drag, and Censorship Politics, 1850-1980, and to pursue a career in education or the public humanities.