Dressing Down: Nudity in Belle Epoque Theatrical Entertainment

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A powerful esthetic that is built upon a recognition of powerlessness is a slippery subject to grapple with, for its contradictions are elusive, ephemeral and ultimately impressive. A manner that combines a deferential attitude with ornaments of the upper class and an etiquette composed in equal parts of modesty and exhibition are paradoxes that require thoughtful interpretation. A strategy of survival that is based on overt concession and imposed restrictions deserves close study, for what is lost and what is gained is not always apparent. (Susan Brownmiller, 1984)

In March 1908, a journalist writing for Fantasio remarked that "in the year 1908 where Anastasie [a slang term for government censors] is retired, it is fashionable to display in all the revues which are self-respecting a woman of pure lines and without veils." Other journals of the day similarly pronounced that in Paris, the City of Light, the "nude in the theater" was all the rage. With the removal of theatrical censorship having occurred just three years

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2 Fantasio, 1 Feb. 1908, 659.
3 Fantasio announced, "At this moment a fashion rages, the fashion of the nude:" "L'Audace du Nu," 1 April 1908, 809. Similarly, Paris Théâtre proclaimed, "The nude is all the rage! Soon, it will be a fashion!" "Entendu au music hall," 23 May 1908, 12.
earlier, the Parisian public and entertainment industry enjoyed an unprecedented level of artistic and scopophilic freedom. Between 1894 and 1914, music halls from Montparnasse to Montmartre capitalized on Tout-Paris' passion for scantily clad women in erotically enticing revues entitled "Nude in Paris," "Paris All Nude," "Hide Your Nude!" "Nude Women!" "The Nude Woman," "Have You Seen My Nude?" "Nude Cocotte," and "But Don't Walk Around All Nude!" If the titles or publicity posters for "Without Pants," "It's Nature," "Skin!," "Flesh," "The Fig Leaf," "Yvette Going to Bed," or "The Champagne Bath" were too ambiguous or not explicit enough, the actresses' cameo shots within the programs left nothing, literally, to speculation or conjecture.

As a new social actor in pre-war France, "the nude in the theater" stood at the center of public debates on morality, censorship, the nature of public versus private, and the appropriate roles for women. Like the prostitute and hysteris before her, she captured both the attention and imagination of writers, critics, moralists, politicians, and journalists as a desirable yet dangerous, transcendental yet transgressive, pretty yet perverse physiognomic type. The nude woman's morally ambiguous place in French culture evoked fears of unregulated female sexual desire on public display often associated with the New Woman.

Recent scholarship by Elinor Accampo, Bonnie Smith, Joan Scott, Mary Louise Roberts, and Karen Offen has shown that women of nineteenth-century Europe, in taking advantage of new technologies, a changing workforce, and revolutionary discourses on the rights of the individual, whittled away at the age-old stereotype of females as the
"weaker sex."\textsuperscript{4} By the mid-1890s, the term "New Woman" connoted a diverse group of women who, while differing in approach and the degree to which they believed that women should claim a greater share of the public sphere, evidenced a dramatic shift in female consciousness characterized by a heightened awareness of themselves as active participants on the social stage. What is less known is how these women reconciled the perception that they "were no longer what they had been" with their corporeal selves.\textsuperscript{5}

Lynn Abrams, in her recent book \textit{The Making of the Modern Woman: Europe 1789 to 1918}, attempts to redress this omission in the historiographical record by insisting that "[t]he story of women's sexuality in the nineteenth century is the story of women reclaiming their bodies for themselves. From sex being something assigned to women by others, and given meaning by others, sex became


something that women owned." I would like to explore what a recovery of the body might have looked like in Belle Epoque France and whether or not such a reacquisition signaled an emerging modern female subjectivity.

Building upon a body of art historical literature that situates a handful of female artists, models, connoisseurs, and critics within Third Republic body culture through an engagement with the nude, this paper highlights and gives a voice to the nude woman who performed in various states of undress before a Parisian public between 1894 and 1914. I intend to discern who these women were, what nudity meant to them, and how they understood their actions and defined their audiences. I argue that the nude in the theater, while typifying the New Woman as a modern self-determining subject, remained inscribed within a

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traditional gender order. Through tactics such as "self-absorption," "disguise," "play," and "performativity," she "reinforced conventional gender norms, in this case, woman as ornamental *objet d'art*" while simultaneously creating a space for alterity and a means for subverting rigidly prescribed roles for women.⁸

It is important to note, however, that the nude woman did not see her actions as part of a collective project or "feminist" in nature, but rather in terms of interiority, self-improvement, self-sufficiency, and mobility. Writing in her memoirs, Colette reflected back on the days when, as a music-hall performer, she exposed her breasts and performed without a body suit: "It has seemed to me that I was exercising my body in the way that those prisoners who aren't concretely planning a breakout still braid a sheet, sew gold pieces into a lining, and hide chocolate under their mattresses."⁹ Colette's plans and preparations to break free from the suffocating isolation and loneliness of the bourgeois home were acts intended for her and her alone. Yet she recognized that her flight would serve as an example for others who desired the same freedoms. Biographer Judith Thurman noticed that while Colette led an unconventional lifestyle for her time, the writer/actress always found herself "flexing a will that aspired to, but wasn't yet fit for, the rigors of freedom."¹⁰ Like her fellow nude women, Colette realized that progress in terms of women's roles, French body culture, and morality would have to happen one performance and one person at a time.

In order to explain why this select group of women chose to dance, pose, act, and sing publicly in scandalously

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undressed states, one must interrogate not only the performers themselves—their motives, family backgrounds, life experiences—but also how they negotiated a set of social parameters and taboos that included assumptions about gender, art, and beauty. Aside from Colette's autobiographies and the memoir of American dancer Isadora Duncan, My Life, very few documents exist recounting the lives of such brazen young women. Court transcripts recorded the performers' testimonies, and the saucy journal of theater life Fantasio featured interviews with these once famous, but now-forgotten, nude actresses in its column, "Their Secrets." These intimate confessions reaffirm and also broaden our understanding of Colette and Duncan's decision to express their feelings and desires viscerally in the nude.

Although the subjects under review form a disparate group of women, differing in age, socio-economic status, occupation, and motives, they all shared a common set of cultural conditions that were historically specific to Belle Epoque France. As French women, they were expected to adhere to an idealized model of womanhood based upon a bourgeois ideology of separate spheres. As domestic moral guardians, they undertook childrearing and consumption as acts of self-abnegation for family and nation. Each duty, imposing its own set of physical limitations, kept housewives close to the home and absorbed in the managerial and maternal responsibilities of running efficient households.

It is not surprising that the "angel of the hearth's" lifestyle lacked appeal for many independently-minded women who, like Edmonde Guy, the self-proclaimed "queen of nude women," found such "cloistered life"
intolerable.\textsuperscript{11} The alternative, "to obtain a certificate and become a teacher," had no appeal for Marcelle Yrven. Despite her mother's wishes for and expectations of her daughter, Yrven rejected "the exclusive right to a monotonous life" to which a bluestocking was condemned.\textsuperscript{12} What Guy, Yrven, and even Colette's statements shared was a determination to escape the austere, prison-like conditions of women's lives in early-twentieth-century France. They sought excitement, change, an outlet for self-expression, and a freedom that traditional womanhood did not, and could not, offer them.

While opportunities opened up gradually to women in the fields of education, law, medicine, and factory and clerical work, the theater retained its quintessential reputation as a space where women could both imagine and create alternative subjectivities and roles for themselves. Rejecting her elders' advice "to only ever play the roles of mothers and irreproachable spouses," Yrven cast herself as the antithesis of bourgeois femininity and morality by appearing in more private, intimate scenes of the bedroom or bath rather than the socially acceptable setting of the drawing room.\textsuperscript{13} During the 1890s, Parisian theaters witnessed a surge in demand for "cubicular" plays, such as "Woman Putting On Her Corset," where "the act of dressing and undressing before a male client" alluded to the prostitute's profession.\textsuperscript{14} According to Eugen Weber these light vaudevilles, where the central action revolved around a bed (or cubiculum in Latin), presented an alternative interpretation of the traditional bourgeois themes of love

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\item[12] \textit{Fantasio}, 15 Feb. 1907, 57.
\item[13] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Yrven proudly announced her decision to appear in such scenes that whetted the bourgeoisie's appetite for and interest in sex: "I performed theater without a robe with a train, sometimes without even a robe at all, because my mother . . . left me free to act just as I pleased. . . . Lately, one can even see me dabbling in my bathtub on the stage of Folies Dramatiques."  

The idea and practice of a woman performing as an eroticized nude did not come easily to those early artists who deviated from social standards governing female behavior, dress, and display. Their self-exposure left them vulnerable to audience censure that filled them with fear and trepidation. Duncan, whose popularity and fame derived from the display of her bare feet, legs, and transparent tunic, recalled how "[t]he first time I ever had a contract to dance before the public in a theater, I hesitated."  

A similar situation occurred to Guy not long after her arrival at Ba-ta-clan, a music hall whose director, Mme Rasimi, commanded her to appear on stage without veils. In order to overcome Guy's reluctance, Mme Rasimi kicked her on the stage with an energetic "Get out there you donkey!" Instinctively Guy covered her breasts with her hands, an act that provoked Rasimi to sarcastically cry, "Keep that gesture, Guy!" Her initial performance as a nude dancer, marked by "shock and exhortation" gave way to a revelation that she could feel comfortable in her own skin without experiencing shame. The writer of this account concluded that "[f]rom then she found herself nude in the

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15 Eugen Weber, *France: Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 162. These plays were inaugurated in 1894 and often had as their titles "Le Lever," "Le Coucher," "La Puce," etc.

16 *Fantasio*, 15 Feb. 1907, 57.

presence of the public, [and] she lost all impression of malaise.\textsuperscript{18}

In conquering their personal inhibitions, transcending bourgeois modesty, and reinterpreting the nude as a healthy, regenerated form, nude women broke with moral dictates, sartorial rules, and gender conventions that designated the female sex as an enervated, passive body protected by layers of padded cloth and steel braces. Like Jules-Etienne Marey's photographic studies of human locomotion, active nude bodies "signified a liberated body free of external (social) constraints (clothing being the most obvious sign).\textsuperscript{19} Performers like Jane Delyane trumpeted the benefits of moving across stage "without the constraint of a single article of clothing."\textsuperscript{20} The absence of clothes facilitated the actress' ability to express herself more completely. According to Alain Corbin, when Duncan performed in Paris, "[w]hat her dancing really symbolized was the freedom to experience the body as something no longer external to the self," no longer simply a covering to don or adorn.\textsuperscript{21} The body became an intrinsically personal and introspective medium through which the female artist defined herself as an autonomous individual. As Colette declared, "I've had enough! . . . I want to do what I want! . . . I want to go on the stage, to become a mime, even an

\textsuperscript{18} Reboux, 9-10.
\textsuperscript{19} Karl Toepfer, \textit{Empire and Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 43.
\textsuperscript{20} "Leurs Confidences: Jane Delyane," \textit{Fantasio}, 1 March 1911, 510.
actress. I want to dance naked if I feel that a leotard . . . cramps my style."²²

Simultaneous with early twentieth-century discourses by race theorists, eugenicists, health gurus, and sexologists linking nudity "to the recovery of an atavistic state of freedom," performance artists spoke of this unfettered experience of the body in conjunction with a pre-lapsarian state of innocence.²³ Lise Brevannes, who had appeared at the Apollo music-hall in "Her Majesty the Nude," declared that she had recovered earthly paradise in following "the tradition of Eve." "Heavens, yes, I show myself every night in front of the public of Apollo, just as the Creator intended for me. Beautiful souls have nothing to hide."²⁴ Nakedness, by removing the sin (i.e. materialism) that aroused bodily shame, bridged the spiritual separation between herself and God. In her 1913 trial for offending public decency, Adorée Villany justified her act of bodily disclosure stating: "When I remove my shirt, it is in order to put my soul bare."²⁵ An emphasis on openness, transparency, and legibility functioned as a counter to the notion of woman as artifice. The performative nude's simplicity of dress, consisting of a veil, jeweled belt, and cache-sexe, "scorned decoration and ornament, it was (consciously or unconsciously) to challenge an aesthetic economy that historically had trivialized them" as frivolous, superficial, easily placated, and unenlightened.²⁶

In order not to appear vulgar or crude, professional nude women needed to demonstrate that they exercised

²³ Toepfer, 78.
²⁵ *L'Intransigeant*, 6 May 1913, 2.
self-discipline, civility, and sophistication. "The ideal dance is to be simple, very calm to slow rhythms," as too many "jolts and collisions" would create a "vibrant, lascivious or agitated" nude dance reminiscent of the hysterical or hypersexualized bodies of the New Woman or that exotic "Other," the belly dancer.\(^{27}\) One artist claimed, "I take great care not to risk a single brutal movement: no swaying of hips, no jumps in the small of the back. Just suppleness, slowness and rhythm."\(^{28}\) Such statements implied a shifting perception of the body not as object but as a "vital, kinetic energy" that the dancer, pantomime, or actress produced, contained, and controlled.\(^{29}\) As a self-regulating "harmonious being," the nude performer acted as both composer and conductor, overseeing the entire creative process and ensuring that everything worked in tandem together.

What all of these performance artists of the early twentieth century seemed to articulate about their trade was that their nudity had a poetics to it. In agreeing with those who declared that "there was nothing more chaste than nudity itself," Brevannes inquired, "Why shouldn't the theatre, like museums, have its works of art?"\(^{30}\) The nude


\(^{28}\) Fantasio, 1 May 1908, 895.

\(^{29}\) Duncan, 190.

\(^{30}\) "Sa Majesté Le Nu," 659.
performer took her role as an art object seriously, perceiving herself as the realization of a timeless beauty to be admired, and an ideal to be immortalized, not an object of erotic consumption and desire. On the one hand, the nude woman conformed to the traditional alignment of woman as nature/body/art object and man as culture/spirit/performative subject. Yet it was also her attempts to blur such boundaries that made her a victim of censorship and moral attacks.

To ensure against a loss or besmearing of her reputation, the nude woman employed modes of representation that played upon a "dominant sexual discourse" "of female sexlessness and purity" circulating in late-nineteenth-century France. The nude performer's self-presentation as a sexually modest artist was one of the most effective means of avoiding censorship and criticism. Performers conveyed this status by keeping some gauzes, garlands, and jewelry around their nudity. "That which one calls a nude dancer, is a body already protected, defended, dressed, by a paste of grease and powder; then some flowers, a jewel or lace would constitute that obligatory triangle." In addition to these accessories, some avoided frontal nudity completely. In an interview with an Italian journalist, Liliane described her evasion of the "most severe censors" when she performed as Salome Margherita at Barcelona's Eldorado and Marseilles' Crystal Palace. To retain her reputation as a "star without stain" she presented herself nude "in profile."

An appeal to classicism, another strategy of self-preservation, implicitly denied claims that the nude

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33 “La Potinière: M'as tu vu?,” *Fantasio*, 1 May 1908, 895.
woman's performances functioned as a form of pornography. As a subject of high art, the nude woman performed for a limited audience within an enclosed space where the uneducated and uninvited eyes of the public were prohibited. Her clients consisted of the same respectable bourgeois males who, as Leora Auslander has noted, spent their leisure time admiring and appreciating antiquity's treasures. These upper-class aesthetes shared a discriminating taste for art and, in particular, the nude. Duncan, like so many others, expressed reservations about performing for people other than art connoisseurs when she stated, "My dancing is for the elite, for the artists, sculptors, painters, musicians, but not for the general public." Appreciation of the nude body required the knowledge and ability to deny one's sexual urges, both of which the masses were believed to lack. While the presence of artists and literati, who traditionally consumed images of nude women in the privacy of their curiosity cabinets, private smoking rooms, and clubs, bestowed a degree of legitimacy on her performance, the rise of mass consumer culture raised the question of whether the theater counted as a public or private space and threw into doubt the nude performer's professional status as an artist and object of elite consumption.

By the twentieth century, the widespread use of contraception, innovations in abortion techniques, the increasing acceptance and popularity of female sports, and the advent of the bicycle, brassiere, and bathing suit made it possible for women to contemplate their bodies as extensions of their identities. However, physicians, politicians, publicists, feminists, lawyers, and artists met

35 Duncan, 98.
this greater physiological awareness of women's bodies with attempts to purge or contain female sexuality. A small minority of New Women spoke on and acted out the importance of female sexual expression, contending that nudity lay at the root of women's intellectual creativity and emotional/spiritual well being. Having "produced a public image that was transgressive yet culturally agreeable," these New Women participated in and promoted what Mary Louise Roberts has called a "feminist aesthetics," where their use of theatrical techniques and artistic motifs undermined rather than reified the boundaries of bourgeois morality. Empowered by the assumption that women's "natural social function is to exhibit themselves, in order to be pleasing to the eye," the nude woman positioned herself visually as object of the male gaze while corporeally expressing her feminine wiles and innocence, her desire for mobility and legibility. At a time when "a gender order based on sexual difference rather than on sex equality was still widely considered to be fundamental to the well-being of society," French women capitalized upon their "womanliness" to carve out a space from which they could redefine and critique gender norms.

36 Thurman, 112.
38 Jules Lemaitre quoted in Ibid., 57.
39 McMillan, 154.