

A Lady by Footlight

Female Impersonation in Nineteenth-Century Denver

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Introduction

In 1895, a small, effeminate man sat in cell number 5 at Denver's police headquarters, calmly answering the questions of both officers and the local press, who were curious about his "peculiar" lifestyle. Joe Gilligan was arrested that evening on the charges of burglary and forgery, but this was not what the readers of the *Evening Post* wanted to know about. They wanted to know why he was in possession of an entire lady's wardrobe, as well as several romantically suggestive letters between he and other men. The accused denied nothing, even explaining that Denver was filled with "others like himself," further baffling both officers and members of the press with an apparent lack of shame over his unorthodox lifestyle. Seizing the opportunity to capitalize on such a controversial story, the press helped themselves to his personal correspondences, printing them in the paper, and further dragging the young man with descriptions of his "girlish" behavior. They would even go as far as to call him the "Oscar Wilde" of Denver, which in 1895 had unambiguously negative connotations.¹

Only a few months after Gilligan began his sentence at the penitentiary, Richard Harlow took his bow on the city's grandest stage to the sound of uproarious applause. While the operetta performed that evening might have left a lukewarm impression upon audience members, they would return to the theatre night after night to enjoy the grace and skill of the production's star performer. Both Gilligan and Harlow were female impersonators, but

¹ This occurred during the same year as Wilde's infamous Cleveland Street Scandal, therefore the comparison between Gilligan and Wilde was meant to have homosexual connotations.

unlike Gilligan, Harlow's female illusion would gain him "emphatic praise" from the *Evening Post* for his "attractive impersonation" of the character of Isabella.²

These two examples highlighted an apparent double-standard, and begged the question *why* female impersonation was socially acceptable (and even celebrated) during the late nineteenth-century, as long as it was isolated to vaudeville or legitimate theatrical stages?³ Certainly serving as the most public form of constructed female illusion, why did professional performers like Richard Harlow escape the legal repercussions and societal ostracism that their non-professional counterparts, like Joe Gilligan, were subjected to? The obvious answer to the question of social acceptance would seem to be in the satirical nature of these performances - that female impersonation was acceptable within the realm of farce, and therefore their performances were not taboo, but comedy. While this was originally true for minstrel shows, where female impersonation truly gained a foothold during the mid-nineteenth-century, evidence suggests that as the practice moved over to vaudeville and legitimate theatre, these performances became increasingly valued more for their strength of female illusion than for their humor.⁴ Indeed, these actors were always billed under their

² "A Queer Case, This," (Denver, *Evening Post*, 25 Apr. 1895); "Sentence Day." (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 14 June 1896); "Amusements." (Denver, *Evening Post*, 3 Dec. 1895).

³ The term "legitimate" when referring to a type of theatre means that the production featured one or two full-length plays or operettas rather than the more mixed media selection found at vaudeville and minstrel shows.

⁴ J. Stanley Lemons, "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920," *American Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1977): 102-107; Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 31-31 & 98.

male names (though usually credited as the “Female Impersonator”) in order to highlight their feats of femininity, further showcasing the spectacle of their illusion.⁵

While early scholarship on this topic focused primarily on the incompatibility of female impersonation within the framework of the Western American mindset, the arguments of George Chauncey from his acclaimed 1994 book titled *Gay New York* have been generally accepted and expanded upon by historians within more recent decades. Chauncey argued that the concept of the homo-heterosexual binary only rose to prominence after World War II, and prior to this classification, both homosexuality and female impersonation were associated with an “inversion” of a man’s gender, not his sexual practices. Recent historians have expanded on this point by claiming that professional female impersonators had to carefully maintain public images as “normal” men in order for their stage acts to be accepted by respectable audiences, thus highlighting their illusion while challenging the assumption of an internalized gender inversion. However, the uniting theme

⁵ "Multiple Classified Advertisements." (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 15 June 1882); "Multiple Classified Advertisements." (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 22 June 1886); "Elitch's Gardens." *Rocky Mountain News* [Denver, Colorado] 28 June 1891. The subject of transgendered-identity certainly could have been an element in many of these cases, and likely was a prominent component. However, the perspectives and vocabulary of the era leaves a great deal to speculation, especially when exploring the differences between sexual identity, gender identity, and sheer circumstance. I will not be exploring the likelihood that any given case was a genuine example of homosexuality or transgendered-identity because without further specialized research, I cannot adequately do justice to what would doubtlessly be an expansive scholarly undertaking. Aside from contextual reference, I also will not thoroughly explore the subject of male impersonation, because while this shares many commonalities with female impersonation during the era, the circumstances, experiences, and cultural reactions were markedly different and deserve further scholarly consideration; For further reading regarding Transgender Studies: Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, (Berkeley, Seal Press, 2008); Heidi M. Levitt and Maria R. Ippolito, "Being Transgender: The Experience of Transgender Identity Development," (*Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 21, 2014), 1727-1758; For further reading regarding male impersonation: Peter Boag, *Re-dressing America's Frontier Past*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011); Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, (U.S.A., Duke University Press, 2015); Laurence Senelick, "The Evolution of the Male Impersonator on the Nineteenth-Century Popular Stage" (*Essays in Theatre*, 1, 1982) 30-44.

reflected by most queer theorists was the idea that the boundaries of “normal” society were created by the classification of what was *abnormal*, indicating that normalcy was in fact created by what was not.⁶

I found arguments which addressed the potential reasons for the social acceptance of professional female impersonation to be incomplete, if such an exploration could ever realistically reach completion. Above all, I was unconvinced that the conscious reinforcement of one’s assigned gender, paired with a convincing performance on stage were the determining factors of one’s social acceptability. What, then, allowed for “normal” audiences to praise one form of female impersonation, and disdain all others? I argue that the theatre itself created a special circumstance which allowed all participants to transgress carefully-maintained social boundaries. These included class, race, and gender boundaries, and were crossed by both actors and audience members through the safety of the “fourth wall.”⁷ The subconscious acceptance of these boundary-infractions, within the specified spaces of theatres, allowed for the nineteenth-century society of Denver to celebrate theatrical female impersonation while simultaneously condemning the practice in all other public spaces.

⁶ Terry Mangan, “The Gay West,” (Denver, Unpublished Article at the Colorado Historical Society, 1979), 2-3; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, Basic Books, 1994), 47-62; Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, (U.S.A., Duke University Press, 2015), 11-12; Peter Boag, *Re-dressing America’s Frontier Past*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011), 15.

⁷ The “fourth wall” is a theatre term for the side of the stage that is open to the audience. While actual walls could be constructed on three sides of the stage, the fourth wall was always figurative, thus allowing the audience to view the actors on stage.

Take it to the Stage!

While standards regarding gender and sexual normativity within public spaces likely did not change between the bright streets and the darkened theatres of Denver, there certainly seemed to be a schism between what performers could do and be on stage, and what audiences perceived as acceptable in all other public spaces. This, however, has not always been true with theatre in the United States, resembling something closer to concert saloons in the 1830s, complete with connected rooms for prostitutes and patrons to do their business. Consequently, theatres became a part of society's underbelly, catering almost exclusively to male audiences and maintaining an atmosphere in which no respectable woman could be spotted without being likewise labeled as "disreputable."⁸ However, in an effort to attract greater viewership during the mid-nineteenth-century, traveling museum exhibits and lectures began producing performances that mixed elements of scientific exhibition, lecture, and variety shows in what came to be called museum theatres.⁹ Offering clean and informative daytime entertainment, women and children were finally inducted into the audiences of popular theatre.

⁸ The fact that these concert saloons primarily operated at night also contributed to the disclusion of "respectable" female patronage. "Respectable" refers to status quo of public comportment for middle and upper-class women during the nineteenth century; Richard Butsch, "Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies: The Re-Gendering of Nineteenth-Century American Theater Audiences," (*American Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 3, Sep., 1994), 378-380; M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, (U.S.A, University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 87.

⁹ Busche, "Bowery B'hoys," 383.

Richard Butsch explained in his article titled “Bowery B’hoys and Matinee Ladies: The Re-Gendering of Nineteenth-Century American Theatre Audiences” that the introduction of matinee performances occurred during the 1860s as an attempt to attract female patronage during an era of national economic stagnation, as well as to compete with the rising popularity of minstrelsy. As attendance to museum theatres grew, other forms began the process of cleaning up their acts in order to compete with the museum theatre’s dominance of the female market. Not only were prostitutes and liquor-serving waitresses no longer allowed in many theatrical houses, but the subject matters that were presented on stage also transformed from bawdy acts and heroic themes of masculinity, to melodramas and themes of social reform and even temperance.¹⁰

This “feminization” of the American theatre also required a change in dynamic between the audience, the space, and the actors. Starting in the 1840s, theatre proprietors began monitoring audiences’ behavior by disallowing drinking, speaking loudly during performances, and generally lewd behavior. Changes to the physical space also helped facilitate female patronage by replacing benches with cushioned chairs, transforming the parquet into the “dress circle,” and dimming the house lights during the performances.¹¹ All of this combined to strengthen the barrier of the fourth wall, which further highlighted the performers on stage while granting the audience an increased sense of voyeuristic

¹⁰ The ideal middle-class woman was socially required to be the “moral compass” of the family, therefore a symbol of American virtue morality. Therefore theatrical performances needed to reflect such themes.; Busch, “Bowery B’hoys,” 389.

¹¹ Butsche, “Bowery B’hoys,” 378-383; Melvin Shoberlin, *From Candles to Footlights*, (Denver, The Old West Publishing Company, 1941), 56-58.

anonymity. These changes also further separated the realms of a polished, public atmosphere *onstage* versus the hidden working-class conditions which persisted behind the scenes.

With more respectable venues for the female members of the audience came an increase in the social status of actors.¹² The theatre's former proximity to rowdy saloon activities and prostitution had rendered actors as little better themselves than prostitutes. Female performers within the theatre were unavoidably labeled as "disreputable women" because of society's restrictions on respectable female behavior and associations.¹³ Therefore, the transformation of American theatres from masculine spaces into venues at which ladies would not jeopardize their social respectability, in turn, dissociated actors directly from prostitution and society's underbelly. This transformation is key to understanding the precarious social positioning that actors within reputable theatre companies held in the greater social sphere.

It's also important to note that professional female impersonators were, above all, actors within professional theatre companies. The use of male actors to play female characters obviously had its origins before the nineteenth-century, but the widespread practice on American stages began with blackface minstrelsy, which was the nation's most popular theatre-form from roughly 1840 to 1880, and remained popular through the end of the century. Usually cast with white actors, performances consisted of disparate skits, songs,

¹² I use the term "actor" to include both female and male performers.

¹³ Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 87-88.

and dances that were meant to irreverently poke fun at middle-class values through the “perspective” of black slaves, which in turn was predominantly a white mockery of the perceived inferiority of black Americans.¹⁴ Minstrel shows were the first to transgress both race and gender boundaries, eventually including black performers (still forced to wear blackface make-up) and female impersonators.¹⁵ While the inclusion of black performers in minstrel shows reflects a disturbing exploitation of these individuals, it also slightly blurred white society’s strict racial boundaries within their own mainstream entertainment. Whether consciously or not, audiences came to accept the blurring of these lines within the confined spaces of minstrel theatres.¹⁶

As late as 1897, the citizens of Denver consistently packed houses at the Lyceum Theatre to watch “one of the finest all-colored minstrel shows on the road.”¹⁷ The Mahara Minstrels gained an emphatic announcement on the pages of the *Rocky Mountain News*, a newspaper that catered almost entirely to a white readership, as well as several subsequent announcements and positive reviews throughout their evidently popular run.¹⁸ One of the featured stars of the company was Leroy Bland, a female impersonator with an impressive

¹⁴ Kibler, Rank Ladies, 8-9; Lemons, J. Stanley, "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920," (*American Quarterly* 29, no. 1, 1977), 102-106.

¹⁵ For the sake of context, the racial boundary that I refer to is the allowance of black actors to perform on stage alongside white actors, and to predominantly white audiences. The racial boundary violated by white performers impersonating black slaves, rooted in institutionalized racism is a different discussion that deserves its own scholarship.

¹⁶ "Amusements," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 1 May 1897); "Coming Amusements," (Denver, *Daily Rocky Mountain News*, 3 Sept. 1878); "Amusements," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 20 Apr. 1892).

¹⁷ "Theatrical World," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 2 May 1897).

¹⁸ "The Plays Players," (Denver, *Evening Post*, 6 May 1897).

soprano singing voice and unmatched dance-acclaim.¹⁹ What is more, aside from opening to a large audience on a *matinee*, the Lyceum continued to provide Wednesday and Saturday matinee performances, indicating at the company's popularity among family audiences. Evidently, mainstream (white) society was consistently transgressing their own strict racial and gender boundaries within the safe space of the theatre, where societal transgressions could be witnessed and experienced through the guise of entertainment. However, members of the troupe were likely still required to wear blackface makeup, and Bland still required to hide his masculinity as not to highlight their status as "problem bodies" sharing space with those who held racial and gender boundaries so dear.²⁰

The female impersonators of early minstrel shows did not particularly resemble Leroy Bland, or those of legitimate and vaudevillian acclaim because of the satirical (and usually cruel) nature of the performances. Just as vaudeville shows would eventually cast physically eccentric women to play female misfits, as well as men, minstrel shows cast men in female roles for the very purpose of accentuating an awkward, and therefore comical female impersonation.²¹ It is likely that when the practice moved over to variety shows (and eventually over to vaudeville) sometime around the 1860s, this type of female impersonation

¹⁹ Among all the mentions that I have read reviewing the performances of female impersonators, few mention their dancing skills, and none have as many praises as Leroy Bland; "The World of Players," (Denver, *Evening Post*, 3 May 1897); "Amusements," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 3 May 1897); "At the Theaters," (Denver, *Evening Post*, 1 May 1897).

²⁰ The term "problem bodies" was coined by Clare Sears in her book as a label for the populations who were considered too disreputable or unsightly to share public spaces with normative society. These included prostitutes, cross-dressers, physical deformed people, Chinese immigrants, African Americans, and others.

²¹ Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 8.

was meant to be practiced as a form of comic relief, but it is unclear when and why the transition to realistic female impersonation began. In Bland's case, by the time the Mahara Minstrels performed in 1897, audiences were inclined to expect a realistic female illusion rather than gender-satire.

The first actor actually billed as a "female impersonator" in nineteenth-century Denver was "the Great original and only" Alf Wyman, performing with the Parlor Comique Troupe in June of 1876. Comedic suggestions of his performance are indicated by the name of the theatre company, as well as his billing as a "Comedian and Female Impersonator."²² Perhaps the evolution into realistic female illusion hadn't taken place yet as vaudeville had not yet become a part of America's mainstream entertainment.

According to the "Classified Advertisements" for the Palace Theatre in May and June of 1881, the next two female impersonators to surface in Denver's newspapers were J. Arthur Doty and Gus Mills. Doty's billing only mentions that he was a female impersonator and that it was his first time performing at the Palace, while the "original and only" Mills also received the label of a "truly wonderful Female Impersonator."²³ Neither mention is particularly astonishing, however the designation of Mills as an impersonator without a single mention of his comedic ability suggests that the introduction of true female illusion within Denver's theatre houses had already taken place. One year later, in 1882, another

²² "Multiple Classified Advertisements," (Denver, *Daily Rocky Mountain News*, 16 June 1876).

²³ "Multiple Classified Advertisements," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 22 May 1881);

"Multiple Classified Advertisements," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 11 June 1882).

advertisement for Mills included “comedian” at the end of a long list of his talents, further suggesting that female impersonation had become a special ability rather than just a comedic position within the theatre company.²⁴

The 1880s and ‘90s saw a consistent speckling of theatre companies granting their female impersonators top billing throughout the era, which is likely a reflection of their popularity among audiences. These billings also primarily excluded the classification of “comedian” in favor of highlighting their abilities of female-illusion, often crediting another cast member as the featured comic relief. Speculation aside, the printed reviews of these performances truly give a window into the popular reception of the artists, further underlining their worth as illusionists rather than comedians. By 1897, it appears that an elevated standard had been established by Denver’s audiences as to the appropriate appeal of the female impersonator:

Mr. Stuart’s performance... was excellent and merited the hearty applause which was given it. He is a female impersonator of the unusually meritorious sort, and has a voice of great range and sweetness. As a rule, when men essay to sing falsetto, the wonder is not so much that they do it well, but that they can do it at all... But in Mr. Stuart’s case, there is no need to make reservations, he has a real soprano voice.²⁵

From the review, however, rang a certain tone of dissatisfaction with the general acceptance of other female impersonators who may not have performed their illusions as convincingly, thus reminding audiences that they were witnessing a transgression in their gender norms.

²⁴“Multiple Classified Advertisements,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 20 July 1882).

²⁵ “Erminie Superbly Sung,” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 27 Dec, 1897).

Reviews of other performers during this period, however, suggested that more often than not, female impersonators were fairly adept in their abilities of feminine-illusion.²⁶

Denver Takes to the Stage

What allowed for this shift in American theatre from the safe realm of comedic crossdressing to the celebrated art of female impersonation? To answer this, we must continue to examine the evolution of Denver's entertainment standards, elements of which did not directly mirror larger cities such as Chicago, San Francisco, or New York. Founded as late as 1859, the city of Denver did not fully witness the slow feminization of theatre that older communities had. The process occurred within a smaller window of time as the city's demographics shifted from being almost entirely male during the 1860s to a more gender-balanced society by 1870, the year that the Kansas Pacific Railroad built a rail connection through Denver.²⁷

The earliest theatrical performances in Denver of course included variety theatre (mainly in saloons), minstrel shows, and burlesque, whose content would often overlap with variety theatres or concert saloons.²⁸ The truth is, during Denver's frontier days, roughly the period between 1859 and 1870, all forms of theatrical entertainment blurred into the next,

²⁶ "The World of Players," (Denver, *Evening Post*, 3 May 1897); "Amusements," (Denver, *Evening Post*, 3 Dec. 1895); "Amusements," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 20 Apr. 1892); "Amusements," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 1 Mar. 1892).

²⁷ Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, 31-32.

²⁸ Shoberlin, Melvin. *From Candles to Footlights*, 30-31; "Local Matters", (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, Feb 12, 1863).

with variety shows displaying elements of burlesque, operettas featuring quirky side acts that would eventually evolve into vaudeville, and minstrelsy largely reflecting variety shows, but with the key elements of blackface and racial commentary.²⁹ It's no wonder that William Byers, editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, saw respectable theatre as a necessary civilizing influence on the miners and laborers who populated Denver during its infancy. Either this was the case, or Byers simply loved the theatre, always ensuring that traveling theatre troupes received ample lip-service within the pages of his newspaper.³⁰

Regardless of his personal reasons for supporting Denver's early theatre scene, Byers' logic was clear and simple: if Denver could attract and maintain respectable entertainment, its citizens (and therefore the city itself) would, in turn, gain in respectability. Byers and the *Rocky Mountain News* ensured that Denver's society held their entertainment to a high standard, demanding respectable modes of theatre from early in the city's lifetime. Indeed, from concert saloons performed by candlelight over noisy gambling halls to the opening of one the grandest opera houses in the nation, Denver set itself an ambitious pace of cultural evolution within two short decades, the end of which would begin see the popular rise of the female impersonator.³¹ Therefore, even though Denver was too young to experience the national evolution which brought women consistently to theatres in the East, the city's

²⁹ I demarcate Denver's frontier period as ending with the arrival of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, therefore in 1870.

³⁰ "Local Items", (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, Sep 29, 1859); I am using Byers' announcement of the very first theatre company to arrive in Denver as a general example of his support, which can be seen in nearly every theatrical announcement during this period.

³¹ Alf Wyman was the first person was billed as a "female impersonator" in 1876; "Multiple Classified Advertisements," (Denver, *Daily Rocky Mountain News*, 16 June 1876); Henry Miles, *Orpheus in the wilderness: a history of music in Denver, 1860-1925*, (Denver, Colorado Historical Society, 2006), 204-205; Schoberlin, *From Candles*, 261.

isolation and ambitious growth led to its own unique experience in securing respectable entertainment for respectable audiences.

The pair who certainly aided most in the civilizing of Denver's theatrical entertainment was Jack Langrishe, known as the "Father of Colorado Theatre," and his wife Jeannette.³² The key to their success lay in two factors. First, the couple had trained for decades on the east coast, traveling and performing with various theatre companies throughout their careers, therefore they *knew* the business. Second, because of their experience as actors and theatre managers, they knew that their success relied on attracting both male and female audiences by offering entertainment that was free of vulgarity or inappropriate themes.³³

Opening in September of 1860 for "six nights only," the Langrishes extended their stay for a month, and eventually settled into a semi-permanent engagement.³⁴ It's important to note that the forms of theatre which dominated the city's entertainment options at the time were variety and minstrel shows, presented in dark drafty spaces that had originally often been intended for other uses.³⁵ The Langrishes' theatre company, however, offered

³² In all fairness, Jeanette deserves to be called the "Mother of Colorado Theatre," but mid 20th century sources tend to mostly discuss Jeanette in relation to her husband; Alice Cochran, "Jack Langrishe and the theatre on the Rocky Mountain mining frontier," (Houston, MA thesis, Rice University, 1968).

³³ Margaret and Charles Lauterbach, *Comedian of the Frontier: The Life of Actor/Manager Jack Langrishe, 1825-1895, Kindle Edition*, (Jefferson, McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016), 178; Shoberlin, *From Candles to Footlights*, 50-53.

³⁴ "Theatre at Apollo Hall," (Denver, *Rocking Mountain News*, Sep 26, 1860); "Local Matters," (Denver, *Rocking Mountain News*, Oct 27, 1860); "Local Matters," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, Jan 10, 1861).

³⁵ Shoberlin, *From Candles to Footlights*, 19-31.

something new to Denver's audiences by presenting legitimate theatre, or theatre consisting of one or two full-length plays rather than a mixture of different medias. The city's stagnant growth during the 1860s, especially during the Civil War, and its overwhelmingly male population would seem to stimulate only a limited interest in legitimate theatre, however this was evidently not the case.³⁶ Both in Central City and Denver, laborers and businessmen alike packed theatres regularly to enjoy the talents of Mr. and Mrs. Langrishe.³⁷

Before long, Jeanette had become a local favorite, especially among the wealthiest ladies of the city, who in turn packed houses to capacity for her seasonal benefits.³⁸ A fan, writing to the *Rocky Mountain News* as early as 1861, voiced Jeanette's likeness to the middle-class feminine ideal: "When we can see all that is beautiful and amiable in a woman, in the most sacred and private walks of life, combined with the ease, elegance and genius of an actress, language fails to express our feelings."³⁹ Jeanette Langrishe, a female actor, had successfully traversed the vast social gap which separated respectable women from Denver's disreputable problem bodies, which included people of color, vagrants, prostitutes, and actors.⁴⁰ As if to complete her victory over the class-divide between actors and the elite,

³⁶ Ibid., 13-15.

³⁷ "Local Matters," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 4 January, 1861); "Local Matters," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 8 October, 1860); "The Montana," (Central City, *Tri-weekly Miner's Register*, 14 Apr, 1863).

³⁸ Benefits were performances at the end of a theatrical season, featuring a single star performer, for which the proceeds go entirely to the actor in question; "Amusements," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 20 March, 1866).

³⁹ "Local Matters," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, April 25, 1861).

⁴⁰ "Problem Bodies" is a term used by Clare Sears, defined earlier in this text. As Sears stated that actors, especially female, were considered similar to prostitutes, it's safe to assume that actors were included in the classification of problem bodies; Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 8.

Jeannette went on to host several ladies' socials among the wealthiest citizens of Denver.⁴¹ Perhaps it was because the city was only in its infancy, therefore the social boundaries of respectable society had not yet been reinforced, but the social elevation of the Langrishes demonstrated just how the theatre's access to both problem bodies and social elites positioned actors within a malleable class, neither fully rejected nor accepted according to the social boundaries of the nineteenth-century.

Even with such unusual access to upward social mobility, the Langrishes could not escape their own transient identities as actors, and by the arrival of Denver's first railroad in 1870, the Langrishes and their theatre company packed up and headed north to the mining towns of Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas.⁴² While it's difficult to decipher their reasoning for leaving behind a community that held them in such high esteem, the Langrishes mirrored the majority of successful theatre companies around the country by remaining in motion.⁴³ Even with access to social positions among the elite, they were still forced to live by the merit of their talents and could never fully identify with any single societal role, as they made their very living impersonating these roles for the entertainment of audiences.

⁴¹ Lauterbach, *Comedian of the Frontier*, 94.

⁴² Schoberlin, *From Candles to Footlights*, 10-22.

⁴³ Oscar G. Brockett, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since the Late Nineteenth Century*, (MA, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973).

Denver's local perspective on the social position of actors was tested once again with the creation of the Amateur Dramatic Association, a group of local residents who volunteered to rehearse and perform plays as fundraisers for the city's rising poor population. Opening with the play *Pizarro* in February of 1861, the company performed to a packed house and thus resolved to continue their efforts, as long as audiences kept showing up.⁴⁴ The creation of the ADA tells us two things about the early residents of Denver: that their own amateur efforts in theatre strove to mimic the work of the Langrishes by attempting *legitimate* theatre (as opposed to the perhaps easier forms of variety and minstrelsy), and that respectable or at least semi-respectable local women were permitted to violate society's gender boundaries in order to participate in the amateur productions. These women would have been neither prostitutes nor career-actors, and even under the guise of charity, this demonstrated the city's surprisingly liberal social view of their actors, likely due to the Langrishes' early efforts to dissociate their theatre company from lewdness and disreputable behavior.⁴⁵

The Langrishes returned to Denver periodically and continued to have their hands in the development and expansion of the city's theatrical entertainment until after the completion of the Tabor Grand Opera House in 1881, therefore the city's high standards for

⁴⁴ "The Amateur Performance," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, February 2, 1861); "Local Matters," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, February 5, 1861).

⁴⁵ I can assume that the two women listed in the reviews were not prostitutes because it would disqualify the attendance of respectable ladies at the performance. I can also assume that these two women were not career-actors because it was a self-professed amateur production.

theatre companies did not seem to fade with the rapid civic expansion of the 1880s and '90s.⁴⁶ Considering the ubiquity of celebrated female impersonators performing in Denver's premier theatres by the 1880s, one can assume that the city's celebration of actors as socially pliant commodities extended even to those who performed female illusions. Allowed to pseudo-anonymously admire the skilled contestation of gender boundaries safely on the other side of the fourth wall, audiences were permitted to witness the fragility of gender as a social construct while maintaining a certain level of anonymity. Evidence of a similar enduring fascination can be seen in the survival of skilled female impersonation within the homosexual communities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as its wider social appreciation today.

He's Called a Female Impersonator

When the anonymity provided by a darkened theatre was gone, however, social transgressions within public spaces had to be categorized as taboo in order to protect "normal" citizens from being associated with problem bodies, as well as to strengthen their own protected status as normal. In the summer of 1883, the *Rocky Mountain News* declared that "it is a very uncommon thing for a man to be caught in Denver masquerading in the

⁴⁶ Even though the Langrishes remained an instrumental part of Denver's theatre development until 1885, they spent much of their time touring the region after 1870; Schoberlin, *From Candles to Footlights*, 210-241; Denver's population went from 4,759 in 1870, to 107,000 by 1890, to more than 133,000 by 1900; Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, "History of Denver," updated 19 Oct, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Denver#cite_note-22.

clothes of a woman.”⁴⁷ While perhaps it was true that female impersonation rarely graced the open streets of the Mile High City, gender illusion was certainly present throughout the region. Outside of the professional theatre, female impersonation took on many forms, from nickel-saloon-singers to gun-wielding criminals.⁴⁸

In fact, very few cases in Denver during the nineteenth-century appear to be similar to one another, aside from the fact that all cases exclusively involved lower or working-class men who practiced female impersonation. One likely link between these individuals was a limited access to (or violation of) private space, as opposed to the carefully preserved privacy enjoyed by the middle and upper-classes.⁴⁹ Whether the act of female impersonation was the very reason for a legal encounter, or whether the practice was exposed after an unrelated arrest, all cases seemed to be tied to an impersonator’s criminal attempts to obtain money and/or the violation of their limited private space. Above all, it appeared that these disparate figures were linked through their heightened vulnerability to the law, which in turn became the very reason for their visibility within the historical records.

The arrest of Edward Martino serves as one of the most publicized examples of amateur female impersonation in nineteenth-century Denver, but it was also a very unusual case. On the evening of July 1st, 1883, officers of the Merchants’ police followed a

⁴⁷ "Personating a Woman." (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 3 July 1883).

⁴⁸ "Female Impersonator Evans." (Denver, *Evening Post*, 3 Jan. 1898); "Masculine's in Petticoats," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 7 March, 1886).

⁴⁹ While I found six different examples of amateur female impersonation in area in and around Denver during the nineteenth-century, all of them were lower or working-class individuals.

flamboyantly dressed young woman through the city streets on the suspicion that the subject in fact was a man impersonating a woman. After making several “‘mashes’ on the hearts of tender young men,” the subject was arrested and taken down to police headquarters to confirm his identity. The following day, the curious citizens of Denver packed into the courtroom to gawk at the defendant’s evidently convincing display of female illusion. Permitted to dress in his full female attire during the trial, Edward Martino claimed to be wearing the clothing of his sister, whom he alleged was missing and he was searching for. Neither the judge nor the press found this to be a convincing defense, and after paying “\$25 and costs,” the accused was released and disappeared from the historical records.

Martino is the only evident case of a man being arrested solely on the charge of impersonating a female, but it is likely that other less-publicized cases also occurred during the period. The element that seemed to have separated Martino’s gender-transgression from others was the consciously public display of his female impersonation, occurring throughout the city streets during the early hours of the evening. The Merchants’ police evidently knew of his crossdressing habits, since an officer was sent to watch and follow the young man *before* he donned a female “disguise.” As Martino admitted in court, this was not the first time that he dressed in this manner. On the contrary, he regularly ventured into the city streets wearing female attire, impressing onlookers as having made “a very handsome woman [who] had made himself up in the most ravishing and fascination style.” It’s no wonder then

that the officers saw his flirtations with various young men as potentially dangerous to the established boundaries of gender comportment.⁵⁰

Since Martino was watched and pursued by officers for quite some time before the arrest, they were evidently waiting for him to violate some unspoken rule, hinted at but not fully confirmed by his female impersonation. Once they could confirm that his reasons for donning female attire were an indication of his intention to flirt with other men, he became a threat to Denver's gender norms within the public realm, which were the only spaces that society and the government could mostly control.⁵¹ If Martino had restricted the visibility of his female impersonation to the later hours of the night, or to the cordoned-off places where "vices" were allowed to co-exist with one another, safely out of sight from "polite" society, it is likely that he would not have caught the attention of the law enforcement.⁵²

However, what Martino's exhibitionistic approach to his female impersonation truly highlights is the turning point when projected gender-inversion crossed a boundary from mere spectacle to a perceived threat to society's gender or sexual boundaries. While Martino's nationality did not take center-stage in the press' analysis of the arrest and court proceedings, they made an effort to repeatedly point out that he claimed to be a "Spaniard," perhaps providing their readers with a racial justification for his behavior, as it did not neatly

⁵⁰ "In Female Attire," (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 2 July 1883); "Personating a Woman." (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 3 July 1883).

⁵¹ While one could certainly argue that Edward Martino may have been practicing or attempting male prostitution, there is no sound evidence to confirm this.

⁵² "Personating a Woman." (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 3 July 1883).

fit within the framework of the era's regional mindset. However, one of the *Rocky Mountain News* articles that detailed the trial called him an "alleged Spaniard," perhaps suggesting that he was a compulsive liar, and thus further distancing the subject from normal and honest society.

But while Martino served as one of the most public and unabashed examples of amateur female impersonation, most cases involved individuals who attempted to keep their crossdressing practices *out* of the public eye. In fact, the case that gives us the most vivid picture of the personal lives of female impersonators involved an individual who fell under legal investigation for very different reasons. The *Evening Post* article from April of 1895 grabbed at the attention of readers with the headline "A Queer Case, This," following it up with enlarged capitalized lettering stating that "JOE GILLIGAN IS PECULIAR." Even though Gilligan was arrested alongside an ex-convict named Elmer Brown in the boarding house at which they were lodging, his accomplice received a fraction of the press coverage for committing the very same crime as his partner. Why? Likely because of what was found among Gilligan's belongings when the officers searched their room. Both men were charged with the crimes of burglary and forgery, but only Gilligan was found to possess a complete wardrobe of lady's clothing, including make-up, undergarments, and accessories.⁵³

While the *Evening Post* article provided only a quarter of its space to recount these men's crimes and their subsequent arrest, the remainder of the article examined Gilligan's

⁵³ "A Queer Case, This." (Denver, *Evening Post*, 25 Apr. 1895).

“girlish” behavior, the contents of his lady’s wardrobe (which were immediately brought down to the station), and three personal correspondences that were found on his person. One of the letters, an apparent love-letter to Gilligan from another man, was printed in its entirety within the article, while only excerpts that hinted at his homosexual practices and relationships were printed from the other two. However, none of these social peculiarities had anything to do with the criminal charges against Gilligan. He was not caught in the act of impersonating a woman, nor was he witnessed engaging in sexual behavior with another man. The *Evening Post’s* focus on Gilligan’s alleged gender and sexual transgressions were purely fueled by a cultural condescension with the subject, as the crimes of burglary and forgery held far greater criminal sentences than crossdressing, and therefore should have been the primary focus of the article. Instead, proof of his gender-transgressions were hauled needlessly down to the station, while both officers and members of the press proceeded in an examination of his feminine behavior.⁵⁴

The tone of the article did not treat the subject of Gilligan’s “inversion” as particularly dangerous to society, instead framing the event as an unusual and pathetic spectacle. Printing the statement that “Gilligan occupies cell No. 5 at police headquarters” immediately after showcasing his personal correspondences seemed almost to invite curious onlookers, hoping to gawk at such an unusual specimen, safely displayed behind bars. While the mainstream

⁵⁴ “A Queer Case, This,” 25 Apr. 1895; “Sentence Day.” (Denver, *Rocky Mountain News*, 14 June 1896); While the penalty for public female impersonation appeared to be a \$25 fine, Gilligan was sentenced to eighteen months in the penitentiary for burglary and forgery.

culture of Denver evidently found even amateur female impersonation to be a worthy spectacle, the need to sensationalize Gilligan's feminine behavior and potential homosexuality demonstrated the local press' compulsion to brand him as a societal outsider. This choice to highlight his alleged gender-transgressions and unconventional relationships with other men indicated what readers would find more interesting because the social taboo, even in the face of unequal legal repercussions.⁵⁵

What was likely a more common example of amateur female impersonation, and perhaps a limited exception to the active enforcement of anti-crossdressing laws, were those who dressed up for a night out at the saloons. Easily invoking the image of contemporary drag queens and urban gay nightlife, these examples differed from the modern archetype because of the lack of designated queer spaces in nineteenth century Denver. This is not to say that cultural attitudes at the time toward homosexuality would not have allowed such venues to operate, because the concept of sexuality along a homo-hetero binary simply did not exist during the period. Therefore, it is unlikely that gatherings of self-aware homosexuals occurred within nineteenth-century saloons. While evidence of Turkish Baths catering exclusively to male-homosexual activity had been found to exist in New York City as early as the 1880s, data has yet to be uncovered that such establishments existed in Denver

⁵⁵ Even though the homosexual-heterosexual binary did not exist until well into the 20th century, I am referring to the strong evidence that Joe Gilligan potentially engaged in romantic or sexual relationships with other men. This does not take into account the possibility of Gilligan having a transgendered identity; such a speculation would require further scholarship and examination which I cannot do justice to within the limitations of this paper.

during the nineteenth-century.⁵⁶ In what capacity, then, did the female impersonators in Denver's early saloons resemble their modern counterparts?

The case of Robert Evans illuminated a curious view into the possible acceptability of female impersonation within the confines of the city's underbelly. Arrested in 1898 for "vagrancy and drunkenness," the arresting officer explained that while frequenting saloons, Evans "sings songs of all sorts in them and is called a female impersonator." However, female impersonation was not the crime that he was charged with, and when Evans denied the accusation of vagrancy, he also claimed to believe that the cops were picking on him because of his performances in saloons. When asking if "they [got] down on everybody who [sang] in saloons," the officer seemed to have hinted at the defendants' proclivity to excessive drunkenness over others who did the same, namely other female impersonators who performed at saloons.⁵⁷ This could indicate a general legal acceptance of female impersonation as long as it remained within the appropriated realm of vice, specifically the saloon-oriented nightlife within close proximity to the city's Red Light District.⁵⁸

This type of reluctant acceptance, as long as a person avoided attracting public attention to themselves, seemed to have possibly extended to female impersonating prostitutes as well. The evidence of male prostitution in Denver during the nineteenth-

⁵⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 207-227.

⁵⁷ "Female Impersonator Evans." (Denver, *Evening Post*, 3 Jan. 1898).

⁵⁸ Noel describes Denver's Red Light District during the period as being located between nineteenth and twenty-third streets along Holladay (now Market) street; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Denver, Denver County, Colorado*. Sanborn Map Company, 1887. Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00985_001/; Thomas Noel, *The City and the Saloon*, (Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 87.

century is skeletal at best, but limited sources suggested that it did indeed exist.⁵⁹ Though lacking detailed descriptions of Denver's male prostitutes, the studies of Chauncey into male prostitution in New York City during the era claimed that such individuals donned at least feminine make-up, and likely wore female attire.⁶⁰ Sodomy laws at the time were defined as "the penetration of a man's penis inside the rectum of an animal, of a woman or girl, or of another man or boy," and therefore did not technically target male prostitutes, who nearly always took a passive or "feminine" role in the coupling.⁶¹ When it came to an infringement of the anti-crossdressing laws, one might assume that the same unspoken rules which applied to people like Robert Evans also applied to female impersonating prostitutes. However, as long as they avoided drawing public attentions to themselves (likely by containing their business within the walls of a bordello), their crossdressing practices were apparently overlooked as a natural casualty within already-established realms of vice.

Conclusion

What Denver's nineteenth-century society seemed unable to accept about amateur female impersonation was what such a practice could indicate about an individual's racial differences, mental faculties, or the possible "inversion" of their male identity. With minimal legal repercussions or targeting by police, the penalty for gender transgressions within

⁵⁹ Mangan, "The Gay West," 21-25 ; "City and Vicinity," (Denver, *Daily Rocky Mountain News*, 28 Apr. 1877).

⁶⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 33-46.

⁶¹ William N. Eskridge, Jr., *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America, 1861-2003* (New York, Viking, 2008), 28; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 55-61.

Denver's respectable public spaces was primarily a social one, sensationalizing the practice as a sign of one's insurmountable peculiarities, and therefore their incompatibility within the socially acceptable norm. Likewise, actors suffered from a similar classification as a "problem body" because of their proximity to prostitution and seedy saloons during the first half of the nineteenth-century. Even with the feminization of American theatre during the 1840s and the subsequent elevation of actors to a somewhat heightened social class, their immutable tie to working-class conditions backstage and on the road, as well as the need to live by the merits of their talents, kept actors within an ambiguously malleable class of society. As long as a theatre company could make an audience forget about the semi-lewd situation backstage and focus solely on the *onstage* performance, then actors were able to convince audiences of their apparent respectability.⁶²

Though fragile, this form of almost-honorary respectability seemed to have granted actors certain societal allowances because of the popularity of their art. All of this combined to create a certain air of mystery which appeared to have generated both admiration and distrust among the social elite. Female impersonators were therefore permitted (as long as they belonged to a reputable theatre company) to transgress gender, race, and class boundaries because of their ambiguously-defined position within society as actors. When Alison Kibler described how theatre spaces "drew high and low together onstage and in the

⁶² When I refer to a semi-lewd situation backstage, I am referencing the unpolished surroundings, intersection with manual labor, and the frequent occasion when actors were forced to change costumes directly in the wings because a lack of time to return to their gender-appropriated dressing rooms.

audience, uniting the fractured cultures,” she illuminated the mutual boundary transgressions occurring for both audience members and actors alike through the invisible fourth wall.⁶³ As long as this highly trafficked barrier remained metaphorically intact, actors were permitted to skillfully transgress the prescribed social limitations regarding their class, race, or the outward expression of their gender.

⁶³ Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 8.

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