

KITTY LORD'S PADDED 'SYMMETRICALS'

Introduction

This final post was inspired by a pair of pale pink knitted tights worn by the music hall singer, Kitty Lord (1883-1972) in the early 1900s. Part of a collection of Lord's costumes held the Museum of London these 'symmetricals' were carefully padded with wool to ensure that her thighs and calves looked suitably shapely and voluptuous [Figure 1]. As these padded symmetricals reveal, and this post will discuss, in late nineteenth century Burlesque and Music Hall, it was often a women's legs – and not her face – which made her fortune.¹

Kitty Lord (1883-1972): 'Etoile Excentrique Anglaise'

Born Kate Anna Emma Burbidge in 1883, 'Kitty Lord' was an English singer, dancer and comic artist, who performed between 1894 and 1915. She made her stage debut aged 11 in a pantomime at The Grand, Islington and as her career developed she appeared at a range of major London music halls including: The Tivoli Theatre of Varieties (on The Strand), The Oxford Music Hall (Oxford Street) and The Paragon Theatre (Mile End).

She also built an international career, with engagements in South America in 1905 and 1906, a performance at the Moulin Rouge, Paris, in 1907 and multiple appearances at the Théâtre des Nouveautés du Caire, in Cairo.² She returned to Paris in 1910, sharing a stage with French singer and entertainer Maurice Chevalier (1888-1972) at the Ambassadeurs Theatre. In the same year she also performed at the Salone Margherita in Naples. She continued working even after her marriage to a respectable bank clerk, Cyril Parker (1884-1962) in 1913, and in 1914 she went on a brief, unsuccessful, tour to Brazil. By 1915, however, her professional career was declining and Lord retired from the stage.

Further research (currently prevented by COVID-19) is required to discover the full extent of Lord's performance repertoire. What is clear, however, is that Lord could dance and sing well enough to obtain regular work and, by the early 1900s had earned enough to invest in a lavish stage wardrobe. Both playbills and photographs describe her as 'eccentric', suggesting that comedy played an important part in sustaining her popular appeal. The fact that, 'a tickling stick' (decorated with a red and black ostrich feather) formed part of her stage wardrobe, certainly indicates that Lord included at least one 'comic turn' in her act!

From cramped coffee houses to magnificent music halls

Originating in 18th century taverns and coffee houses, Music Hall evolved from informal performances in which singers sought to make themselves heard over crowds who would either continue eating and drinking during the song or, in many instances, join in. The atmosphere at these 'free and easies' often became raucous, and unsuccessful singers or performers were pelted with food, bottles and even iron rivets!³

In the 1830s some taverns opened more respectable 'musical rooms' designed to cater to a middle-class clientele. Women were generally not permitted in these 'song and supper rooms', but young working class women continued to visit 'penny gaffs': the penny fee exchanged for access to a warm room, plentiful supplies of gin and an evening's 'sing-song.'⁴

By the 1850s taverns such as The Eagle, in East London, were regularly presenting musical entertainment and in 1852 Charles Morton opened the first purpose built music hall – The Canterbury Hall – in Lambeth.

¹ Gertrude Lawrence, *A Star Danced* (London: W.H Allen and Co Ltd, 1945) 40.

² Collaço, Gwendolyn. "Miss Kitty Lord and Her Egyptian Tours: A Burlesque Artist in Cairo, 1908-1912". 2017.

³ "Music hall and variety theatre". Victoria & Albert Museum.

⁴ Lisa Picard. "Popular Culture". British Library. 14 Oct 2019.

Up to 700 audience members paid sixpence for a ‘refreshment ticket’ and were seated at tables - with access to food - and drink - throughout the performance.⁵ **[Figure 2]**

Although some venues aspired to respectability, a class divide endured between music halls and more expensive dramatic theatres, with audiences at the former generally being from the working or lower-middle-class. Furthermore, whilst promotions such as Morton’s “Ladies’ Thursdays” might attract middle- and upper-class men, these gentlemen tended to be ‘[...] accompanied by prostitutes rather than by women of their own class.’⁶ In some venues prostitutes would actually walk up and down the aisles of the auditorium or wait outside the halls in search of customers.⁷ The large number of trouser fly buttons discovered in the balconies at the Britannia Panopticon, Glasgow, indicates that certain services were also provided inside venues and during performances.⁸

Despite this scandalous association, music halls remained popular and by 1875 there were over 375 halls in Greater London.⁹ As the industry expanded, auditoriums - if not audiences - were changing, and throughout the 1880s and 1890s vast sums were lavished on renovations and rebuilding. The Grand Theatre Islington, where Lord made her first stage appearance in 1894, had, for instance, been entirely refurbished following a serious fire in 1887. As a report in *The Era* from December 1888 describes, the rebuilt interior was painted in ‘tints [of] duck’s-egg green, cream, and terra cotta, with heavy gilt mouldings and reliefs, the upholstery being of crimson velvet.’ The improved theatre could seat up to 3,000 in the stalls, dress circle, gallery, amphitheatre and private boxes. Electric lighting (first used in theatres in 1881) was installed, both on the stage and in the auditorium, with ‘electric lights in ground globes’ at the fronts of balconies and scattered across the ceiling. The stage was also enlarged and framed by a proscenium arch decorated ‘in the Louis XV style’ and featuring a trio classical figures: Thalia and Melpomene illustrating the drama; Clio and Euterpe standing for music; and Erato and Terpsichore evoking dancing. Importantly for aspiring performers, the backstage spaces were not neglected and they had access to ‘capacious dressing-rooms and a fine green-room.’¹⁰

Many theatres, such as the Tivoli Theatre of Varieties on The Strand (where Lord also performed) continued to offer audiences well-stocked bars and, in the case of the Tivoli, an elegant three-storey restaurant complete with private dining rooms (should they be required). **[Figure 3]** First opened as the Tivoli Beer Garden in 1876, the Tivoli expanded in the late 1880s, adding a proper Music Hall to the original restaurant. In 1891 the famous theatre architect Frank Matcham (1854-1920) (who had also worked on the Grand Theatre Islington) was engaged to re-design the theatre’s interior. Matcham focused on improving the previously poor sightlines to the stage and adding ventilation with a large ‘sunlight’ window in the centre of the auditorium ceiling. Audiences were also treated to an entirely ‘re-upholstered and re-furbished with luxurious carpets, tip-up seats re-covered with plush.’¹¹ Furthermore, by redistributing the electric lights, adding ‘handsome mirrors’, re-painting the walls, and adding ‘artistic’ highlights in gold, Matcham created the impression of light and space: enabling audiences to admire not only the entertainment, but each other.¹²

A ‘mixed bill’

By the late 1860s, highly ‘developed and professionalized halls’ had established a ‘distinctive performance space and style.’ As Jacky Bratton observes, however, these venues were part of, and existed alongside, ‘[...]’

⁵ “Music hall and variety theatre”. Victoria & Albert Museum.

⁶ Jacky Bratton. “The Music Hall.” *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*. Ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 166-7.

⁷ “Music hall and variety theatre”. Victoria & Albert Museum.

⁸ Judith Bowers. “Britannia Panopticon Music Hall – Life in Old Ghost”. n.d. Web.

⁹ “Music hall and variety theatre”. Victoria & Albert Museum.

¹⁰ *The Era*, 1st December 1888, quoted in “The Second Grand Theatre Islington”. Arthur Lloyd.co.uk.

¹¹ *The Era*, 4th July 1891, quoted in “The Second Grand Theatre Islington”. Arthur Lloyd.co.uk.

¹² *The Era*, 4th July 1891, quoted in “The Second Grand Theatre Islington”. Arthur Lloyd.co.uk; Bratton, “The Music Hall,” 168.

a network of professional entertainments.¹³ Performers did not obtain proper contracts until the end of the century and often had to maximise their earnings by rushing across London to appear on in several venues a night. Depending on their specialist skills, they might continue to do turns at the older singing saloons, work in travelling circuses and fairs, or even appear in popular dramatic productions staged at licenced theatres.¹⁴

A typical music hall bill would offer a wide variety of entertainment, with acts ranging from verbal and physical clowning, exhibitions of extreme strength and daring acrobatic feats, to short dramatic sketches and numerous comic and sentimental songs.¹⁵ **[Figure 4 and 5]** An evening at the Paragon Theatre in 1893, for instance, included: celebrated star Miss Marie Lloyd (1870-1922) singing *Oh, Mr Porter*; a short melodramatic sketch about the rescue of a captive prisoner; further comic songs (lampooning past – and current – fashions) and performances from ‘comedians in galore.’ The ‘Sisters Tilley also created something of a sensation with their vigorous dancing and high kicking in skirts’ but audiences were calmed by musical selections ‘on the bells’, and a ‘cornet solo.’ Further dramatic tension was introduced to the bill through ‘an extraordinary and daring exhibition of tumbling’ from the Mitsutas (Japanese acrobats) and the appearance of ‘the Two Macs, in a knockabout show.’¹⁶

Music halls reached the peak of their popularity between about 1890 and 1910. By this point they were presenting shorter programmes and generally repeating the bill twice in one evening. Whilst many performers still travelled in search of work (both within, and beyond, London) star acts could expect top billing and were now regularly given formal contracts, binding them to a single theatre or hall.

Spangles and Symmetricals

All performers, regardless of their status, would be expected to wear appropriate costumes for their acts. Although poorer singers might be able adapt street dress to suit the theme of their songs, many invested in more elaborate outfits. Dancers, clowns, acrobats and male impersonators all required specific, and potentially costly, costumes for their performances.

Some licensed theatres had in-house wardrobes, and music hall performers fortunate enough to feature in productions like the annual Drury Lane pantomime would be provided with stunning outfits by the theatre (spectacle was, after all, a core part of the pantomime’s attraction).¹⁷ There was significant crossover between music hall and pantomime acts, indeed the comedian Dan Leno (1860-1904), already an established star of ‘the halls’, cemented his fame through guest appearances in pantomimes, establishing the role of the pantomime dame **[Figure 6]**.

However most performers, particularly those without long term contracts, had to provide their own stage wardrobe. This was the experience of the anonymous author of *The Diary of An Actress or the Realities of Stage Life* (1885), who regularly moved from one company to another.¹⁸ Cecily Hamilton (1872-1952) had a comparable experience, she described how ‘[...] if their dresses were not considered suitable the management looked at them askance.’¹⁹ Though Hamilton worked in licensed theatres, rather than the music hall, her memoirs highlight the importance attached to appropriate costumes. Whilst in some

¹³ Bratton, “The Music Hall.” 169.

¹⁴ As Bratton notes “After the 1843 Theatre Licensing Act any performance containing narrative, whether expressed in dialogue, song or dance, was supposed to be the preserve of the theatres” but “throughout the century charges were brought against individual halls for encroachments on this right in the form of ballets d’action, spectacular and melodramatic scenas or comic sketches” Bratton, “The Music Hall,” 165.

¹⁵ Bratton, “The Music Hall,” 165.

¹⁶ Review from the *Era*, 1893. Reprinted in Mander, Raymond, and Joe Mitchenson. *The Lost Theatres of London*. London: Hart-Davis, 1968.

¹⁷ “The Story of Pantomime”. Victoria & Albert Museum.

¹⁸ Alma Ellersie[?], ed. H.C.Shuttleworth *Diary of an Actress or the Realities of Stage Life*, (London: Griffin, Farren & Co, 1885) 155, 159.

¹⁹ Cecily Hamilton, *Life Errant* (London: J.M. Dent, 1935) p.44.

instances generous theatrical managers or performers might ‘make the dresses a free gift to poorer [colleagues],’ in the majority of cases individuals would have had to purchase their own garments.²⁰

Kitty Lord’s costumes

Kitty Lord certainly recognised the importance of investing in spectacular costumes and understood the visual impact of an eye-catching signature look. In Lord’s case this ‘look’ centred round a short sleeved tunic which fitted closely to the body and finished high on the thigh, curving over her hips. The ensemble also included a ‘v’ shaped belt and was usually worn with a long, heavy, cloak and, of course, a pair of padded symmetricals [Figure 7].

At least three iterations of this costume survive in the Museum of London: two made from pale pink and yellow silk-satin and one a darker green brushed cotton. Both these tunics, and their matching belts and cloaks, are lavishly embellished with metal spangles, beadwork and cut glass ‘jewels.’ The sleeves are formed from lengths of silk velvet stitched together in a diamond pattern which, as Christopher Breward notes, ‘[drew] attention to the exposed flesh of [Lord’s] upper arms.’²¹ The belts which encircled her waist were designed with equal care. At the centre front of each one is a small hanging panel, resembling a small purse or a lock, which draws the eye directly to Lord’s groin: perhaps an ironic allusion to sixteenth century chastity belts and their nineteenth century imitations.²²

This element of Lord’s costume, and also her abbreviated tunic, align with costuming practices established within Burlesques, and specifically venues like the Gaiety Theatre. As Joanne Cormac has observed, though similar to music hall ‘burlesques were unique.’ The variety performances included songs, dance and comedy which ‘[...] lampooned high-class culture – especially opera, Shakespeare and those who revelled in their classical educations – and often targeted plays or operas then running at Covent Garden or Drury Lane.’ In their efforts to appeal to ‘repressed middle-class gentlemen’s sexual appetites’ these productions developed costuming conventions which centred on revealing erotically charged areas of the body: specifically the legs.²³

The bodices of the Burlesque costumes which inspired Lord’s outfits, were far more tightly fitted than her tunics. They also incorporated a pair of full shorts, or trunks which ensured that, whilst the wearer’s legs were exposed, their derriere was not [Figure 8]. In Lord’s case however these shorts are missing and the tunic, through concealing key areas when static, would have left little to the imagination when Lord moved. Lord’s belts and the ermine trimmed cloaks were therefore not simply used for decorative effect but were in fact enabling her to retain control over how much of her body was on display and when.

In some instances, particularly for circus and dance, abbreviated skirts and full shorts fulfilled a practical purpose – keeping limbs free for dynamic and, in the case of circus acts, potentially dangerous, feats of physical skill. However, on the stages of music hall and in the Burlesque productions presented at the Gaiety Theatre, costumes were being employed more strategically and, as Tracy C Davis suggests:

‘Female performers were commodified as the wearers of revealing costumes, but it was the revealed parts, not the costume themselves, that were the real spectacle: the places where costumes were not took focus over where they were.’²⁴

The cut and construction of Lord’s abbreviated tunics advertise her understanding – and effective fusion – of both the specific costuming practices permitted on music hall stages, and the latest developments in fashionable dress. Although Lord’s costumes exposed the lower half of the body to scrutiny, the upper part of her torso was consistently concealed by a tunic which echoed the fashionable silhouette. Indeed, beneath all her outfits, whether a silk-satin tunic or lavish dress, the lines of her fashionable s-bend corset are clearly

²⁰ “Discarded Stage Costumes,” *Evening Post*, Volume LXVI, Issue 64 (12 September 1903), 10. The Papers Past. [n.d].

²¹ Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) 75.

²² Examples of ‘fake’ chastity belts, created for nineteenth collectors exist in the British Museum.

²³ Joanne Cormac, “Victorian burlesque: cheap thrills for the chattering classes.” *History Extra*. April 2019.

²⁴ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their social identity in Victorian culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 112.

visible [Figure 9]. These direct and deliberate connections between fashionable dress and stage costume would have intensified the excitement aroused by the erotically charged parts that Lord's outfit 'revealed.'

The Symmetricals

A key element of Lord's allure, lay in the shapely legs exposed beneath her tunic. These legs owed some of their appeal to the pale pink/peach coloured padded tights – known as 'symmetricals' – which encased them. The upper part of the tights (which would have been concealed by Lord's costume) are made from wool, with a fine silk used from the thigh down. Cream wool fleece padding has been added to the interior of the knitted tights at the thigh and calf. This padding has been carefully graduated to alter the silhouette and ensure that the wearer's legs look suitably voluptuous. [Figure 10]

The wearing of these padded tights was not unique to Lord – in fact it was part of a wider – accepted practice. Both male and female performers wore padding, even the great actor, Sir Henry Irving, padded his calves before his stage partner, Dame Ellen Terry, persuaded him not to.²⁵ Similarly, Malcolm D.W. Greene member of an all-male theatre company that performed in Boston from 1891 to 1906 recalled that 'My legs were put into symmetricals which made them shapely, and gave me the regulation female hips and rump.'²⁶ Indeed, as an account of the guests at the 1897 Bradley Martin Ball in New York reveals, symmetricals were also an accepted part of fancy dress:

[...] Some of them looked enviously at the fat calves of the flunkies. Some regarding their own with apprehension. They were padded outrageously, and everyone knew it, but so long as the "symmetricals," as stage people call them, did not get out of place it didn't matter.²⁷

Symmetricals could be purchased ready-made and as Christopher Breward discovered, 'establishments such as Mr Reid of Longacre and Burnets of Covent Garden machined a small quantity of hosiery on their premises for rushed and special orders.' Similarly H.M. Rayne Theatrical Stores on Waterloo Road sold both tights and symmetricals made in 'cotton, worsted and the finest Italian silk.'²⁸ Lord was definitely a customer of Raynes. Her magnificent pair of pink silk-satin heeled boots, decorated with silver braid and ruby spangles, and labelled H.M.Rayne, survive in the Museum London [Figure 11]. It is therefore possible that Lord also purchased her symmetricals from Raynes too.

However, these ready-made symmetricals - like Lord's silk-satin boots - were expensive, particularly if multiple pairs were required. Performers on a tighter budget might therefore adapt an existing pair of tights. Gertrude Lawrence (1898-1952) remembered helping her mother do so, when she got a part in the chorus in a Christmas production of *Babes in the Wood* at the Brixton Theatre, describing how:

[...] she came home with the flesh-coloured tights supplied by the wardrobe mistress. Putting them on, she instructed me how to pad the legs of this garment with cotton wool to give her the much-desired and seductively rounded thighs which she unfortunately lacked.'

Lawrence was very conscious of the importance of sewing in the padding 'smoothly so that it would not be detected.' As she noted, if her mother was to keep the engagement and earn the thirty shillings a week the family desperately needed, than her legs needed to 'satisfy the theatre patrons and the eagle eye of the manager.'²⁹

²⁵ Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1908) 150.

²⁶ Malcolm D.W. Greene quoted in Anne A. Barnet. *Extravaganza King: Robert Barnet and the Boston Musical Theatre* (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 2004) 26.

²⁷ "The Bradley-Martin Ball," *Timaru Herald*, Volume LX: Issue 2379 (27 April 1897), 4.
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²⁸ H.M. Rayne, advertisement, "Advertisements & Notices." *Era*, 28 Apr. 1900. British Library Newspapers.

²⁹ Lawrence, *A Star Danced*, 39-40.

From Music Hall to Musical Comedy: The Legs disappear

Lord's career coincides with the zenith of the music hall. Her retirement from the stage in 1915 signalled a pragmatic acceptance that its popularity was waning. By 1913 comic singers and performers, like Lord, were struggling to find a place for their acts. Many music halls (including The Oxford Music Hall where Kitty had once appeared) were being converted into Variety Theatres and musical comedies with a single, sustained, narrative were replacing the mixed bills favoured in previous decades.

Stages were transformed into catwalks for the latest couture creations and female performers became living mannequins and aspirational role models.³⁰ Indeed, successful actresses such as Constance Collier (1878-1955) and Mary Moore (1861-1931) were provided with entire wardrobes of opulent couture gowns free of charge and could, as Moore observed, 'afford to dress well.'³¹ Whilst these couture inspired costumes were exquisitely made and extremely beautiful, there were significant restrictions on the agency performers could exercise over their garments. By contrast, Lord's costumes, though far less sophisticated and respectable than these fashionable gowns, had at least expressed both her personal style and personality.

However, the focus was now on elegance and refinement, rather than spangles and spectacle, and the abbreviated skirts and tunics (cut to frame and enhance bust and waist, and reveal seductively padded legs) were banished to pantomimes and the wardrobes of principal boys. As performer's legs disappeared beneath trailing skirts, the fun and frivolity, which was such an integral part of the music hall's appeal, vanished with them. [Figure 12]

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³⁰ For further detail see: Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and Majer, Michele et al, Lenard R. Berlanstein, Marlis Schweitzer, and Sheila Stowell. *Staging Fashion, 1880-1920: Jane Hading, Lily Elsie, Billie Burke* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2012).

³¹ Breward. *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis*, 88, 94.

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