

## **TITLE :SEDUCTIVELY ROUNDED AND PADDED TO PERFECTION: RE-EVALUATING 'VICTORIAN' BEAUTY IDEALS**

### **Abstract**

This article uses music hall performer Kitty Lord (1883-1972) and her padded 'symmetricals' as a vehicle through which to explore and challenge popular conceptions of beauty ideals in Victorian Britain - particularly the misconception that anyone identifying as female had to strive for a slender and delicate figure, with a painfully narrow waist. As it will discuss, the preference for a more voluptuous silhouette (at least within the world of popular performance) has been obscured by a recurring focus on myths surrounding the oppressive nature of corsets and the obsession with tight-lacing. Through the analysis of specific examples from amongst the wide range of bodies appearing on the nineteenth century stage and – as importantly – of the costumes which shaped them, it argues for a more nuanced understanding of attitudes towards race, class, gender and beauty during this period.

Whilst this article focuses on the ways in which performers assigned female at birth shaped their bodies to appeal to popular taste, it will also touch on the experience of those who adopted - temporarily or otherwise – a female identity on the stage and highlight the significant scope – and need – that exists to expand the discussion further.

### **Introduction: 'Seductively Rounded'**

#### **[Image 1\_Kitty Lord Full Length.jpg placeholder]**

As she posed for this publicity shot in the early 1900s, music hall singer Kitty Lord (1883-1972) may have worried about flattering lighting, wrinkles in her costumes, or whether the wages from her next engagement would pay for her lavish ensembles and the photographers fee. Perhaps she silently rehearsed the act she was due to perform that evening, and fantasised about the fame and fortune which could be hers if the next international tour was successful, or – better still - she caught the eye of the right gentleman in the audience? One thing which she certainly wasn't longing for, however, was a flat stomach and an obvious 'thigh gap.' This was a performer who wanted the answer to that ill-advised, yet perennial, question - "Does my bum look big in this?" – to be a resounding yes!

Still only in her early twenties, by 1904 Lord had already spent a decade on the stage, and could have confidently declared that sylph-like silhouettes were not in vogue – at least not amongst her audiences. In the extraordinary worlds to which audiences were transported by late nineteenth century Burlesque, Music Hall and Pantomime, it was often – as Lord was well aware - a women's legs – and not her face – which made her fortune.<sup>1</sup>

The specific costuming conventions associated with these genres of performance signalled that these were realms with their own - distinct - social rules and etiquette. Within the walls of Music Halls, and during specific productions – in particular the Drury Lane Christmas Pantomime - female performers were permitted to reveal the legs they usually took such care to conceal. The display of these taboo body parts wasn't limited to the mere flash of an ankle: it encompassed both the shapely calf and, by the 1880s, most, if not all, of the upper thigh.

The costumes devised to showcase these shapely limbs centred on three key elements: a closely fitting bodice (the shape of which echoed – and evolved in conjunction with – the fashionable silhouette); a pair of short trunks (though these trunks – and the semblance of modesty they

offered had been largely dispensed with by Lord's time) and, most importantly, a pair of knitted tights, known as 'symmetricals.'

[IMAGE 2\_fairies alladin2009CA6843.jpg \_placeholder]

### **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. As her career advanced 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 reputation, 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.<sup>2</sup> 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. Lord 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.

This article focuses on the costumes Lord adopted during the last decade of her professional career, between around 1904 and 1915 (when she retired from the stage). Looking closely at the 'signature look' Lord devised for her stage appearance, it examines the 'body' she presented to her audiences and the tools she employed to create this seductive silhouette. As it will show, the outfits Lord developed for her performance consciously combined the established tropes of costumes developed for Principal boys in Burlesque, Music Hall and Pantomime, with deliberate references to the latest trends in fashionable dress. Taking Lord's spectacular ensembles as its starting point, this article seeks to challenge popular preconceptions about 'Victorian' beauty ideals and to raise awareness of the full range of bodies deemed desirable by nineteenth century performers and their audiences.

### **The Complex Connotations of the Corset**

When considering body shaping in the nineteenth century, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which discussions on this theme have tended to focus almost exclusively on, or, at the very least foreground, the corset. Given the crucial part this particular piece of underwear played in moulding the body to align with the fashionable silhouette this preoccupation with the corset is understandable. It is equally important, however, to recognise the degree to which popular perceptions of the corset as instrument of repression – even torture – need to be dispelled.

[IMAGE 3: Tight-lacing: Death on the Stage. Wellcome Collection, London. 35496i. The figure of a skeleton in a shroud is pulling the laces on a girl's stays. Process print. placeholder]

Alison Matthews-David's 2015 book *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* represents a continuing effort to demonstrate that the dangers presented by fashionable dress extend beyond the threat of a tightly laced corset. As she shows '[...] fashion did not discriminate, harming men and women, young and old, producers and consumers, rich and poor' and the risks represented by 'clothing that transmitted contagious disease, leached chemical toxins, caught workers in moving machinery and went up in flames' have often been overlooked.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite the attention Matthews-David draws to these wider threats, the fixation

on the corset as a metaphor for the constrained nature of nineteenth-century women's lives endures, and is repeatedly perpetuated on screen and in print.

The potency of the myths surrounding this undergarment continue to present a barrier to a more nuanced understanding of beauty ideals during this period. These prejudices persist, despite compelling arguments from fashion historians such as Valerie Steele, that far from being a '[...] monolithic, unchanging experience that all unfortunate women experienced before being liberated by feminism', corsetry was a 'situated practice' which meant 'different things to different people at different times.' As photographs, surviving garments, and advertisements show, a huge range of corsets were produced, they could be laced tightly, or not, depending on the wearer's preference and body shape. Furthermore, as Steele has established, for many wearers the corset had 'positive connotations – of social status, self-discipline, artistry, respectability, beauty, youth, and erotic allure.'<sup>4</sup>

Nineteenth century performers would have been far more anxious about the danger uncovered gas lights posed to flammable skirts (many dancers were seriously and even fatally burned when their tutus caught fire), or the risks associated with high wire acts (performed without safety nets until the 1890s): In 1897 'Alar the Human Arrow' was knocked unconscious and narrowly avoided falling to her death when the giant crossbow - which was supposed to propel her through a paper target and into the arms of a catcher on a trapeze - malfunctioned.

**[Image 4: Mary or "Pansy" Murphy, one of the three Flying Zedoras who performed under the stage name of 'Alar the Human Arrow'. 'Stunned the Human Arrow'. Newspaper illustration. 1897. Wikimedia. Placeholder.]**

Far from an uncomfortable instrument of repression, for the majority of performers, corsets simply provided a practical tool with which to shape and support their body. Boning channels were, for instance, deliberately incorporated into the bodices of costumes worn by dancer Marie Taglioni and generally assisted, rather than impeded her performance – helping her to maintain an upright carriage and providing vital support for the bust when in movement.<sup>5</sup>

**[Image 5: Marie Taglioni in Flore et Zéphire. Lithograph coloured by hand by R J Lane after a drawing by A E Chalon. Published in London by J. Dickinson in June 1831. E.5055-1968 © Victoria and Albert Museum. Placeholder.]**

Furthermore, the fact that the corset had become a sign of respectability and an indication of social status, made these distinctive and ubiquitous undergarments an ideal vehicle through which to 'lampoon high class culture': a recurring theme within both Burlesque and Music Hall acts.<sup>6</sup> By adopting costumes which covered their bodies from neck to thigh, performers heightening the impact and allure of parts they did reveal: specifically the legs. Ensuring that cut and fit of these close-fitting bodices and tunics aligned directly with the fashionable silhouette, created a clear – and deliberate - visual connection between their titillating ensembles and the lavish gowns donned by women in the highest ranks of society. Fantasies about the legs (and other body parts) concealed beneath the skirts of fashionable dresses were no longer restricted to audience's imaginations – these erotically charged body parts were now on full display.

**[Image 6. Kitty Lord (1881-1972) 'Chanteuse Excentrique Anglaise' c.1900-1910. 8001215539. Harvard Library. Placeholder.]**

**The Marvels of the Music Hall**

The pressure to satisfy the diverse and demanding audience which Music Halls attracted, was another factor influencing Lord's costuming practices. The origins of these – often rowdy-entertainments can be traced back to informal performances of songs and comic turns in 18<sup>th</sup> century taverns and coffee houses. These 'free and easies' gradually became more orderly, and during the 1830s taverns started opening specific 'musical rooms.' In 1852 Charles Morton opened the first purpose built music hall – The Canterbury Hall – in Lambeth. Audience members would sit around tables with access to food - and drink - throughout the performance: many evenings became rather raucous as a result!<sup>7</sup>

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 gentlemen, they tended to be '[...] accompanied by prostitutes rather than by women of their own class.'<sup>8</sup> In some venues prostitutes would actually walk up and down the aisles of the auditorium or wait outside the halls in search of customers. The 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.<sup>9</sup>

By the late 1860s, highly 'developed and professionalized halls' had established a 'distinctive performance space and style.' 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.<sup>10</sup> As Jacky Bratton observes, however, these venues were part of, and existed alongside, '[...] a network of professional entertainments.'<sup>11</sup> 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.

Within just over two decades (1875) there were over 375 halls in Greater London and an extensive range of comparable performance venues had been built in cities and towns throughout Britain.<sup>12</sup> Many theatres, such as the Tivoli Theatre of Varieties on The Strand (where Lord later 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 by clients who wished to entertain 'special' guests).

**[Image 7. Illustration of the exterior of the Tivoli, c.1890. Featured in Victor Glasstone. Victorian and Edwardian Theatres: an Architectural and Social Survey. London: Thames and Hudson. 1975. Placeholder.]**

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.

As a performer still building her reputation Lord would frequently have travelled to different venues (sometimes during the same evening) in pursuit of short-term and one-off engagements. The wide range of skills Lord would have been expected to include within her repertoire, far

exceeded the pleasing singing voice and graceful dancing demanded from performers appearing in the ‘musical comedies’ which became increasingly popular from the late 1880s onwards.<sup>13</sup> Whilst Lord might never aspire to the couture gowns Lucile Ltd created for stars such as Lily Elsie (1886-1962), she could certainly 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!<sup>14</sup>

### **The Gaiety Theatre and the Gaiety Girl**

Another important performance venue throughout the 1860s, and well into the early 1900s, was the Gaiety Theatre. Erected on the former site of the Strand Music Hall (near Wellington and Catherine Street in central London), the Gaiety Theatre opened to audiences in December 1868. It charmed audiences with Burlesque Comedies and Operatic extravaganzas; distinguished by their spectacular sets, sumptuous costumes and equally stunning performers.

Many of the performers gracing the Gaiety’s stage, also had careers which intersected with the world of Music Hall and pantomime. Skirt dancer Letty Lind, for instance, appeared at respectable ‘after dinner theatres’ such as Daly’s, but also risked her reputation on ‘the halls,’ receiving ten pounds a night for singing at the Alhambra.<sup>15</sup>

**[Image 8: Photograph of Letty Lind as Donna Elto in Ruy Blas and the Blase Roue at the Gaiety Theatre. S.136:412-2007. Victoria & Albert Museum. Placeholder]**

What set ‘Gaiety Girls’ apart however, were the distinctive ensembles developed for their cross-dressing roles. These centred on an beautifully cut and elaborate decorated bodice, which was worn with a pair of short, full trunks/shorts. The legs exposed by these abbreviated shorts were carefully enclosed within a perfectly fitting pair of knitted tights, and outfits frequently included matching hats, boots and other accessories: Kate Vaughan became known for her trademark elbow length kid gloves – prompting male-identifying fans to wear black gloves, and female-identifying enthusiasts, black stockings, in tribute to (and as signal of their enthusiasm for) their favourite ‘Gaiety Girl.’<sup>16</sup>

**[Image 9: Photograph of Kate Vaughan as Princess Badroulbador in Aladdin at the Gaiety Theatre. S.135:275-2007. Victoria & Albert Museum. Placeholder]**

As Peta Tait and Tracy C. Davis have shown, whilst the costumes ‘Gaiety Girls’ donned for ‘male’ roles incorporated elements of masculine clothing, they actually worked to highlight the wearer’s femininity and gender. Unlike the costumes male-identifying performers developed for female drag roles – which cruelly satirised the decay or absence of feminine beauty – Gaiety and Burlesque costumes were designed to showcase it. In fact, the success – and public acceptance - of these ensembles rested, on what Tait terms, ‘calculated femininity.’ Wearing bodices which echoed the fashionable silhouette and emphasised both bust and hips ensured that wearers remained ‘recognisably female even though they referenced male identity.’<sup>17</sup>

**[Image 10: Nellie Farren in the title role of *Little Robin Hood*, Gaiety Theatre, 1882. S.135:125-2007. Victoria & Albert Museum. Placeholder].**

**[Image 11: Connie Gilchrist (1864-1946) as Abdallah in *The Forty Thieves*, Gaiety Theatre, 1880. S.135:398-2007. Victoria & Albert Museum. Placeholder]**

Danger arose, however, if performers transgressed these carefully negotiated gender boundaries and the licence for display was constrained to the parameters of official performances spaces. When an 1890 poster of the aerialist Adelaide Wieland (stage name Zæo) appeared to show her in an ensemble revealed both thigh, hip bone and what a magistrate termed her ‘fork’, it provoked public condemnation, particularly as it appeared that Wieland might not be wearing tights. Although modifications – including the introduction of blue – rather than flesh coloured – tights were proposed the poster was eventually banned on grounds of public decency.

**[Image 12: 'Zæo Triumphant', poster for the Westminster Aquarium, from a supplement to The Music Hall and Theatre Review, 16 August 1890. S.555-2011.Victoria & Albert Museum. Placeholder]**

Even greater, and more vicious, censure followed the exposure of the true – masculine – identities of the ‘He-She- Ladies’ Fanny and Stella [birth names Ernest Boulton (1847-1904) and Frederick Park (1847-1881)]. As Neil McKenna relates in *Fanny and Stella: The Young Men Who Shocked Victorian England*, they were cruelly mocked by both the crowds who gathered to watch their trial (on a charge of the ‘abominable crime of buggary’). They were also physically abused by the police – and ‘medical experts’ - called upon to imprison and examine them. Though acquitted, the lives of both were overshadowed by this public shame and physical violation. Yet, Fanny and Stella had appeared in female garb in public before, in pro-amateur theatricals and would revive performances of plays, such as *A Comical Countess* and *A Morning Call*, after the trial.<sup>18</sup> The justification for their mistreatment in 1870, lay in the fact that they had failed to confine their ‘personation of women’ within the parameters of the stage but daring to appear in private boxes and even to use the ladies lavatories (a space that remains politically- charged even today).

**[Image 13: Fanny and Stella, photographed in Chelmsford by Fred Spalding, c.1870 (D/F 269/1/3712). Essex Record Office. Placeholder]**

While Fanny and Stella were mocked for their female attire, male corsetry was not unknown. Indeed, as Alanna McKnight has shown, corsets for men provided crucial assistance with body-shaping, creating ‘the illusion of an ideal masculine physique, by holding the stomach in and pushing the chest out.’ They were marketed as underwear which would heighten, rather than undermine, their masculinity, stating that ‘the manliest men of the period employed them in their masculine pursuits.’<sup>19</sup> Again, public willingness to sanction the adoption of an undergarment traditionally coded ‘female’ rested on the retention of characteristics and behaviour deemed sufficiently ‘masculine.’

**[Image 14: Advertisement for “The Carlton” from Mme. Dowding. *The Ladies Field*. 24<sup>th</sup> March 1900. Copyright holder TBC. Placeholder]**

### **The Gibson Girl**

Lord’s ability to adopt clothing which – in other contexts would have provoked condemnation - lay in her understanding of the subtle socio-cultural rules which operated within performance spaces, together with an awareness of the level and nature of the transgression her audiences would demand and sanction.

Whilst the inspiration for her costumes can be traced directly to the ensembles developed for Gaiety’s Burlesques, the commencement of her professional career actually coincided with the advent of a new form of entertainment – the musical comedy. The Gaiety premiered its first

example – *The Shop Girl* – in 1894, and by 1903 it had abandoned both its original home and the Burlesques with which it had once achieved such success.

A new archetype of feminine beauty was now attracting public attention – “the Gibson Girl.” Popularised in, and taking their name from, illustrations by American artist Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944) the elegant and beautiful ‘Gibson Girl’ was an aspirational icon with international appeal.

**[Image 15: Woman in Black Evening Dress, Charles Dana Gibson, 1901. Pen and Ink on Paper. LC-DIG-cai-2a12819, Library of Congress,. Placeholder.]**

In common with the heroines of musical comedies captivating audiences on Broadway and in central London, she had a perfect figure, fashionable wardrobe, and exhilarating lifestyle. Tall and slender, but with a full bust and wide hips, the exaggerated hourglass silhouette which distinguished the ‘Gibson look’ was epitomised by performers such as Camille Clifford (1885-1971).

**[Image 16: Camile Clifford. Photographed by Bassano. 1906. National Portrait Gallery. NPGx83027. Placeholder]**

The success Clifford enjoyed on both sides of the Atlantic owed more to her impressive physique than any particular acting talent. Her performances in musical comedies at the Lyceum and Vaudeville Theatre in London attracted the attention of the Honourable Henry Lyndhurst Bruce. In 1906 he sacrificed a generous allowance and broke with his father – Lord Aberdare – to marry Clifford at a London Registry office.

### **Silk, spangles and sparkles**

The cut and construction of Lord’s abbreviated tunics advertise her understanding – and successful 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 visible. These direct and deliberate connections between fashionable dress and stage costume would have intensified the excitement aroused by the body parts that Lord’s outfit ‘revealed.’

**[Image 17: Kitty Lord (1881-1972) ‘Chanteuse Excentrique Anglaise’ c.1900-1910. 8001215431. Harvard Library. Placeholder]**

Her short-sleeved tunics fitted closely to the body and were scandalously short - finishing high on the thigh, curving over her hips. They were made from lustrous silk-satin and covered with metallic spangles and cut glass jewels which would have sparkled enticingly under stage lights. 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.’<sup>20</sup> Recognising the importance of investing in this spectacular signature look, Lord commissioned tunics in an array of colours (examples in pale pink, crocus yellow and leaf green survive in the Museum of London). These were often paired with shoes and boots made from matching fabric and covered with equally lavish embellishment.

**[Image 18: Yellow silk satin shoes, embroidered decoration. ‘Made in Vienna for J. Jacobus’ c.1900. Museum of London. Placeholder]**

The Burlesque costumes which inspired Lord's outfits, were far more tightly fitted than Lord's body-skimming 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. In Lord's case however these shorts have been dispensed with and the tunic, through concealing key areas when static, would have left little to the imagination when Lord moved. The ermine trimmed cloaks which also formed part of Lord's ensembles 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.

Perhaps to preserve a degree of modesty, or possibly with more salacious motivations in mind, Lord's ensembles also included a carefully designed belt. At the centre front of these belt there 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.<sup>21</sup>

**[Image 19: Kitty Lord (1881-1972) 'Chanteuse Excentrique Anglaise' c.1900-1910. 8001215548. Harvard Library. Placeholder]**

The 'fork' which had attracted public outrage which depicted in posters of Zaeo in 1890, had an added significance for nineteenth-century spectators. Both the cotton drawers initially introduced to fashionable wardrobes in the early nineteenth century, and the delicate 'combinations' popularised by couturiers such as Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon) (1863-1935) from the 1890s, continued to feature an open-crotch. This design feature stemmed from practical, rather than salacious considerations. High fashion at the turn of the century was characterised by multiple layers of clothing, often with complex asymmetrical fastenings and the open crotch eliminated the need to remove several layers of clothing every time the wearer needed to use the bathroom – a problem anyone who's ever worn dungarees or a jumpsuit will have wrestled with!

**[Image 20: White cotton lawn combinations, c.1890-1910. MT.2441. Chertsey Museum. Placeholder]**

From around 1908, the need for open-croched drawers became more pressing, as the S-bend silhouette was replaced by a corset which sat below the bust and extended over the hips. Suspenders with metal clips for stockings usually hung from the base of these corsets which shaped the body into a long smooth line, and made sitting challenging and slouching virtually impossible.<sup>22</sup>

**[Image 21: Advertisement for the London Corset Company in 'The Bystander', 6 April 1910, page 2. 10222717. Mary Evans Picture Library. Placeholder]**

Far from being restrictive and frustrating, Lord's costume with its abbreviated corset and tights was in many ways liberating. Though thick and unalluring to contemporary eyes, Lord's tights freed her from stockings, suspenders and open-crotch drawers/combinations. More importantly, they gave her control over who gained access to her crotch. This was an area of the body which, as Fern Riddell's biography of suffragette and performer Kitty Marion (1871-1944) - *Death in 10 Minutes* - makes apparent, remained vulnerable - even beneath layers of petticoats.<sup>23</sup>

### **Padded to Perfection: The Symmetricals**

Given the crucial role they played in sustaining Lord's allure, it was essential that the legs she exposed to public scrutiny looked suitably voluptuous. Lord's legs certainly 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 shapely and full.

**[Image 22: The interior of Kitty Lord's symmetricals c.1905-1915. Museum of London. Placeholder]**

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, though for men the practice was more commonly associated with roles in which they sort to cultivate a more 'feminine' appearance. Malcolm D.W. Greene, a member of an all-male theatre company performing in Boston between 1891 and 1906, recalled how his: 'legs were put into symmetricals which made them shapely, and gave me the regulation female hips and rump.'<sup>24</sup> 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.'<sup>25</sup>

Symmetricals could be purchased ready-made and, as 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.'<sup>26</sup> The fact that Lord owned a magnificent pair of pink silk-satin heeled boots, decorated with silver braid and ruby spangles, and labelled H.M.Rayne, indicates that she was definitely amongst their customer. It is highly probable that Lord also purchased her symmetricals from Raynes too.

**[Image 23: Pair of pink silk satin boots, made by H.M.Rayne and decorated with gold braid and spangles, c.1900. Museum Number 71.142/4 d & e/008261. Museum of London. Placeholder]**

However, 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 her thirty shillings a week (income the family desperately needed), then her legs needed to 'satisfy the theatre patrons and the eagle eye of the manager.'<sup>27</sup>

**[Image 24: Costume design for a Principal Boy by Wilhelm (William John Charles Pitcher), unidentified production, 1881. S.791-1983. Victoria & Albert Museum. Placeholder]**

## **Conclusion**

Whether in the chorus line or centre stage, the pressure to supply spectators with a pair of ‘seductively rounded thighs’ was clearly intense. In almost all the images of Lord - barring the occasional photograph where her ‘costume’ includes a skirt or is restricted to a chemise (the hem tantalisingly raised) – her legs were on display. Her knitted silk symmetricals, padded with fleece from hip bone to ankle would have added at least an inch to the circumference of her thighs. Similarly, whilst the smooth lines of her tunic, together with her slightly forward tilt and clearly defined waist, could not have been achieved without a corset, her figure is curvaceous rather than skeletal – an appealing armful!

**[Image 25: Kitty Lord (1881-1972) ‘Chanteuse Excentrique Anglaise’ c.1900-1910. 8001215266. Harvard Library. Placeholder]**

Lord’s costuming practices, and those adopted by her predecessors and peers – suggest that within nineteenth century popular performance bigger was definitely better. The desirability attached to fuller-figured performers complicates repeated presentations of the Victorian era, as period during which women sacrificed health and comfort in order to obtain a 20 inch waist - lacing corsets so tightly that they damaged organs, and fainting became a regular hazard. In actuality, as Kate Strasdin has discussed, even an aspirational figure such as Princess Alexandra (1844-1925) was condemned for being too thin and fragile because her slender ‘frame did not suit the British taste.’<sup>28</sup>

Such beauty standards were very specific to Britain and the ‘Victorian era’, and governed the idealised white, western, feminine body. More time, and further research is needed to explore and establish attitudes towards bodies which did not fall within this racial and gender category, or which were physically different or ‘disabled.’ Despite being billed as ‘The Black Venus’, the costume aerialist Olga Albertine Brown (1858-c.1919) adopted for her high wire and trapeze acts, aligned with those worn by fellow circus performers. It was designed for practicality – rather than to highlight her race - Brown’s abbreviated shorts keeping her legs free to perform her signature act: which included hanging from a trapeze upside down with a cannon weighing 150 pounds between her thighs (this was then fired!)

**[Image 26: Edgar Degas. Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando. Oil on canvas. 1879. National Gallery, London. NG4121. Placeholder]**

Other stars, including Charles Sherwood Stratton (1838-1883) – who performed under the stage name - ‘Tom Thumb’ - amassed a wardrobe of ‘costumes’ which showcased his short stature (for much of his life he was less than 70 centimetres tall). This included familiar items of fashionable dress, such as the pale yellow flannel waistcoat now held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, alongside an outfit with bicorne hat, military jacket and over the knee boots – worn for his comic impersonation of Napoleon Bonaparte (1760-1821).

**[Image 27: Charles S. Stratton known as General Tom Thumb, as Napoleon. c.1844. Lithograph. S.1052-1984. Victoria & Albert Museum. Placeholder]**

As long as performers with ‘exotic’ or disabled bodies were willing to subject themselves to scrutiny and fascination, they were welcomed on the public stage. It was when individuals whose

bodies or lifestyles were viewed as ‘different’ sought to resist, or transgress the regular ‘othering’, ‘erasure’ and ‘appropriation’ integral to British popular culture, that they became subject to censure. So whilst Gaiety Girls and Principal Boys could masquerade as men on the public stage, anyone adopting clothing which departed from their biological gender outside the theatre was taking a significant risk.

In the wake of the – welcome – rise of the Body Positivity movement, some encouragement can be drawn from Lord’s body and wardrobe. Whilst silk satin and spangles may not be to everyone’s taste, it is inspiring to see an idealised figure which centres on the promotion of a robust and healthy body. In the nineteenth century, being able to afford a good diet was a sign of financial success, and the physical transformation of a sylph-like girl into a well-fed, matronly woman (who had usually given birth to multiple children) was accepted, and – to an extent – celebrated. Anyone regularly bombarded with adverts for extreme diets, body-sculpting underwear and plastic surgery, may actually find the prospect of showcasing their curves in a pair of padded symmetricals and a made-to-measure corset, quite appealing!

**[Image 28: Kitty Lord (1881-1972) ‘Chanteuse Excentrique Anglaise’ c.1900-1910. 8001215546. Harvard Library. Placeholder]**

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