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## But Is It Art?

# Female Performers in the Café-Concert

The Café-Concert as an object of study has tended to attract the interest of art rather than theatre historians, despite the fact that it was the major form of popular entertainment in France during the nineteenth century. Similar but not identical to the English music hall of the same period, the Café-Concert produced a number of stars of national importance, a large majority of whom were women. Through the writings of journalists and commentators of the period, this article explores how these female performers were perceived and constructed as objects of the public gaze. The author, Geraldine Harris, is a Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Lancaster, with interests in both popular and feminist theatre.

IN *Paris s'amuse* (1861) Pierre Véron wrote,

*There are two categories of women in the Café-Chantant, those who pose and do not sing and those who both pose and sing. Those in the first category are chosen from beauties, the second from here and there, milliners, provincial theatres, graduates from the Conservatoire fallen on hard times... what is demanded is a voice.*<sup>1</sup>

Four years later the Café-Chantant became the Café-Concert and for the rest of the century remained the dominant form of popular entertainment in France. This transformation, according to contemporary mythology, was brought about by the advent of Thérèse,<sup>2</sup> the first major star of the Café-Concert, a woman and an ex-milliner. Since the change was in the main purely nominal, Véron's comment may be used as an indication of the roles allotted to women within both incarnations of the form.

Like many other types of entertainment, the Café-Concert as an institution frequently exploited the female body, manipulated notions of female sexuality, and often functioned as an arena for the promotion of prostitution. Conversely, for women who had 'a voice' these establishments apparently provided a space where talent received recognition and the restraints of class and gender ceased to operate. The little milliner could become a great star.

In fact until the final years of the century, when the Café-Concert gradually began to cede to 'Le Music Hall',<sup>3</sup> public interest and attention

tended to focus upon the female performer. The general consensus of opinion accorded Thérèse and later Yvette Guilbert<sup>4</sup> the status of national institutions. They were praised by leading literary figures as much as by the popular press, and gave private performances in the most select salons. Even Paulus, who claimed to have made a serious impact on the political life of the Third Republic,<sup>5</sup> was overshadowed by these two and was hard put to hold his ground with Mme. Demay, Jeanne Bloch, Bonnaire, Polaire, and Mistinguett. With more than a hint of bitterness, he claimed:

*The female artist holds a trump card in the game, their beauty or their charm. We of the less beautiful sex do not enter the struggle with equal weapons. We must replace with work that which nature has refused to give us. The public quickly put in first place those whose arms are a pleasure to contemplate. A mouth that sings or speaks<sup>6</sup> in the most mediocre fashion will be saleable and applauded, so long as the lips are as red as cherries and as tempting to gather.*<sup>7</sup>

Yet none of the eminently saleable artists cited above was considered beautiful or even charming within the conventions of the age, and all were credited with singing or speaking in a far from mediocre manner. Possibly personal disappointment prompted Paulus to generalize, yet it is significant that both Véron's categories of women are described as 'posing', offering themselves up to the public gaze. This would

seem to suggest that for the professional singer as for the professional beauty, physical exhibitionism was part of the act.

Both Véron's and Paulus's remarks appear to indicate a predominantly male audience. While there is no precise evidence concerning the demographic construction of audiences in the numerous Café-Concerts dotted all over the country, social and economic factors indicate that this probably was the case. Women and sometimes whole families did attend, but obviously when I attempt to assess public interest and attention or judge a performer's popularity, I am relying on the limited sources of information concerning the Café-Concert still extant. And, apart from civil, legal, or police records, posters, programmes, and other ephemera or the rare, usually ghost-written autobiography of a performer, knowledge of Café-Concert derives from the journalists, critics, and writers of the period.

Although these sources speak as 'the voice of the public', in common with the concert owners and directors, the songwriters and composers, agents and publishers, and the government officials responsible for this area, they were almost exclusively male.<sup>8</sup> Further, whilst the Café-Concert was thought to be a working-class form and the performers were mainly drawn from that class, the majority of the commentators were bourgeois.

Despite the dominance of the female performer, therefore, the construction of the 'feminine' within the Café-Concert was mediated through a wholly masculine perception of sexual difference. It is how women performers were perceived and defined by this 'public' that I wish to explore.

According to most nineteenth-century chroniclers, the first performers of the Café-Chantant came from out of the fairground or were street entertainers employed by café owners to attract custom. As the name implies, this was purportedly a form devoted to the performance of popular songs, but many of the performers who were not singers could better be classified as *phénomène*, a term used to indicate a novelty-act or exhibition of physical oddity, such as fire-eaters, trained animals, puppets, bearded ladies – acts chiefly dependent on the visual or spectacular.

The Café des Aveugles, dating from the eighteenth century and frequently cited as a nascent Café-Chantant, was most famous for its orchestra of blind musicians from the Quinze-Vingt hospice. The patron of the Café-Borel in the Palais Royal under Napoleon entertained his customers with displays of ventriloquism, while the curious flocked to the nearby Café du Sauvage to see a cannibalistic 'savage'.<sup>9</sup> In the 1850s the Café Grand Concert des Arts became better known as the Café du Géant after the resident giant hired to exhibit himself amongst the tables.

At the same time, the vogue enjoyed by the Café Moka depended on its special attraction, Mme. Mathieu, the patron's wife. A number of sources related how the woman, remarkable only for her beauty, displayed herself on the café's small stage. As Paulus remarked:

*The originality of Mme. Mathieu was precisely that she did not possess any of those sovereign virtues (art, brio, spirit) because she did not sing. She was there for the eyes and not for the ears.*<sup>10</sup>

### Exhibition as Performance

Within the world of the Café-Concert, Mme. Mathieu's beauty placed her alongside the savage and the giant as a *phénomène* that could be exploited for profit. This conception of exhibition as performance redolent of the circus side show may be found throughout the histories of the Café-Chantant – and nowhere more so than with the *corbeille*.

The *corbeille*, found mainly in the larger and more successful concerts, were Véron's women who posed but did not sing, a group of a half-dozen to a dozen young women in evening dress who sat in a semi-circle on stage throughout the evening. In *Le Figaro Illustré* (1896), Gaston Jollivet nostalgically recalled 'the alluring sight of the *corbeille*, the supernumeraries deliciously *décolleté*, who in those days remained sitting immobile in a circle on the stage while their comrades of both sexes sang'.<sup>11</sup>

As 'supernumeraries', the *corbeille's* entire performance consisted of exhibiting their persons for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience. To describe them as immobile,

however, might have been inaccurate. Drawings such as Job's caricature of 1884, or Degas's Café-Concert paintings of 1876–77, invariably show them chatting amongst themselves, standing and turning away, or returning public attention in the form of flirtation. The singer, usually female, is depicted a yard or so in front, leaning forward as if to compel the audience's gaze. Paulus confirmed this impression that the *corbeille* provided a powerful distraction from the supposed focus of the evening's entertainment.<sup>12</sup>

Etymologically, the word *corbeille* comes from 'basket', usually of gifts or wedding presents, or the horticultural 'flowerbed'. Within the Café-Concert, the name derived from the days when the performers were not paid by the management but had to *faire la quête* – pass the basket (or hat in colloquial English) amongst the customers between songs. This occurred at half-hourly intervals. The youngest and prettiest members of the troupe were allotted this task, and so stayed close at hand on or near the stage. These women then became collectively known as the *corbeille*, in a word-play both functional and connotative.

As early as 1855, the *quête* was regarded as a suspect practice, described by Paulus and Le Chevalier as 'not absolutely in good taste and could be suppressed without inconvenience'.<sup>13</sup> Ten years later, according to *Les Café-concerts en 1866*, the *quête* had virtually disappeared from Paris and was 'a shameful refugee in the low concerts of the outskirts, amongst nomad fairground troops and in the casinos of the garrison towns and seaports'.<sup>14</sup>

E.A.D., the author of this publication, went to some lengths to stress the high professional and artistic standards now pursued within the Café-Concert. The *quête* was shameful since it was 'a souvenir of the wretched beginnings of the Café-Concert, a humiliating reminder of its miserable nature'.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout this work the concerts are shown to be gradually rising above their humiliating roots in the fairground and street performance. When E.A.D. refers to a performer as a *phénomène*, he intends a stinging insult. The use of this term to dismiss a performer's claim to be an artist recurs consistently within literature relating to the Café-Concert, even up to Jaques

Charles in *Le Caf'conc* (1966) or George Coulonges in *Le Chanson en son temps* (1969).

The *corbeille*, offshoot of the infamous *quête* and seemingly presenting women as *phénomène*, was generally accepted as a valid feature of the shows. There were detractors who demanded justification for its continued existence, and a frequent explanation was that it imparted an air of the private salon to the stage.

This rationalization failed to impress G. Coquirot, who in 1896 described it as 'the open brothel'.<sup>16</sup> In Jean Lorrain's description, 'The breasts are overpowdered with flour, the arms and face scored and shot through with red grease. This is the butcher's stall, a dull and sexual butcher's stall'.<sup>17</sup> And thus Victor Fournel: 'These poor dolls, dressed in lace, in velvet and in silk, who display themselves on the stage for three francs a night'.<sup>18</sup>

Alternatively, the restrictions of the theatre licensing laws were invoked. In the early days the concerts were not allowed to employ props, costumes, or scenery. The *corbeille*, it was claimed, compensated for the lack of other scenic decoration. The Doucet Law of 1867 relaxed those regulations, yet the *corbeille* was in evidence for another twenty years.<sup>19</sup>

### Relinquishing the Corbeille

Whether an alluring sight, a butcher's stall, dolls or stage dressing, the *corbeille* were clearly perceived as fetish objects. These women displayed, presumably, as the essence of feminine charm and beauty were transformed by the force of the public gaze into an unindividuated mass of sexual physical phenomena.

After 1867 some of the concerts did gradually begin to relinquish the *corbeille*, in the first instance to replace them with real scenery and then with an early form of the chorus line. It is interesting that the Ambassadeurs, an open-air summer Café-Concert – the most elegant, often frequented by the higher echelons of society – appears to have been one of the last to abandon this practice.

In 1886 Paulus contended that the Eldorado Café-Concert, a large indoor winter concert, had not employed a *corbeille* for three or four years, replacing them with *débutante* singers.<sup>20</sup> This statement could be misleading since,



Café-Concert at Les Ambassadeurs, by Edgar Degas, 1876–77 (Musée des Beaux Arts, Lyons). Part of the *corbeille* may be seen in this painting.

according to André Chardourne in 1881, the Prefecture had made an ineffectual attempt to suppress the *corbeille* by insisting that they

should all actually sing. To circumvent this regulation the concert managers sent them for singing lessons and had a different member of

the *corbeille* perform at the start of the programme each night. Since, as Chardourne put it 'they arrived with the gas', when audiences were minimal, they effectively performed to the orchestra, before resuming their place with the others for the rest of the night.<sup>21</sup>

It was, then, theoretically possible for a female singer to get a start in the Café-Concert through the *corbeille*, and it was common practice for new performers to start the evening. The singer who was also a member of the *corbeille* would, however, be disadvantaged by the traditional preconceptions concerning these women, as Victor Fournel indicated:

*Misfortune to the female singer who is thin or pock-marked, even if she has the voice of a Malibran. The most polite in the audience will, if they are wearing them, tap the ends of their gloves together three or four times and then she returns totally discomforted, to sit amongst her delighted companions.*<sup>22</sup>

The connotations of the *corbeille* inevitably effected the public perception of all women appearing on these stages. Apart from anything else, it was generally agreed that for those with enough money a closer liaison was possible with these women after the show. Jollivet claimed that messages could be sent to them through the concert doormen, while in 1902 Maurice Talmayer wrote that whilst even the lowliest male singer was at least there to sing, 'one cannot say the same for the female singer who represents there and in a clearly defined manner, an object of prostitution'.<sup>23</sup>

### The Links with Prostitution

Chardourne and Talmayer agree that prostitution was rife in the Café-Concerts, particularly in the provinces, and was encouraged by *Agences Lyriques* (lyrical or musical agencies – or, as Talmayer puts it, 'pimping' agencies). These agencies attracted young women looking to escape the sweat shops with advertisements for 'easy and lucrative work'.<sup>24</sup> They undertook to teach the women a small repertoire of songs learned by rote and provide them with sheet music and costumes: but these items had to be paid for by the performer and could be very expensive, and costs expended by the agents were defrayed against future earnings.

Heavily in debt to the agents, and likely to earn only two to three francs a night, these women were then sent out to provincial concerts run by directors notoriously willing to 'pass over vocal imperfections'.<sup>25</sup> Contracts sometimes included clauses demanding female artists' presence at private suppers and dances after the show, and Paulus warned that the rubric 'artists must conform to the house rules',<sup>26</sup> could lay them open to the most flagrant abuses.

Such conditions inevitably led to prostitution. Talmayer quoted from a court case between a concert director and an agent reported in *Le Matin*:

*It was one of the characteristic traits of this affair that not one of the artists engaged to dance had ever actually studied this art. They were all teachers, washerwomen, milliners, polishers, burnishers, everything except dancers. Yet it was proposed even so that they should appear in a ballet, without study or lessons, so long as they remembered that they were women.*<sup>27</sup>

Most of the women employed within the Café-Concert were young, working-class, and illiterate. André Chardourne asserted that although necessity forced a few 'respectable' women to work in these venues, such women were generally considered to be a 'caste apart', regarded as inferiors even by *demi-mondaines* and actresses.<sup>28</sup>

Towards the end of the century the concerts became more glamorous sites for prostitution when the high-class courtesans, the *grandes horizontales* such as La Belle Otero, Liane de Pougy, and Emilienne d'Aleçon, used a career in the Café-Concert as a showcase for their attractions.

### Legitimacy – and Abnormality

In this context it was very difficult for a woman to be recognized as a legitimate performer. It was first necessary to be distinguished from the passive fetishistic aspect of the *corbeille* and to gain an active and individualized identity. And any woman who thus set herself against the dominant framework of perception risked being perceived not only as less than 'feminine' but as a freak of nature.

There were class as well as gender considerations in operation. For example, to a writer like André Chardourne women appearing on a public stage, outside the private sphere of the home and family, were immediately defined as 'not respectable': they had already transgressed the norms of bourgeois, 'feminine' behaviour and exposed themselves to the brutalizing effects of the public domain. For Chardourne all aspects of life in this sphere were potentially damaging to a woman, and he describes how in the crowded dressing rooms, men and women mixed freely with the result that 'even the best brought up become blâsé, harden, pick up common manners, shrivel and are debased, become in a word masculine, that is against nature'.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, on stage, the most successful performers of either gender tended to be those who sang comic songs – and comedy generally deals with transgression of norms. Within the limits imposed by the social mores of the age, the comic performer is given licence to defy convention, but this licence is not without provisions. To transgress the norms, particularly in relation to sex, the performer is often required to present herself as existing outside those norms. This is most easily achieved in terms of physical appearance: hence the grotesque costumes of Greek and Roman comedy, the hunchback or dwarf court jester, the clown's make-up, or the transvestite male comic.

These attributes and disguises are not only comic devices in themselves but, through their bizarre or exaggerated nature, signal a sort of neutrality. Physical appearance in itself represents transgression, and places the performer outside the realm of 'normal' human relationships.

It is not surprising, then, to discover that many of the major female stars were considered to be of extraordinary physical appearance. Thérésa, Yvette Guilbert, Mme. Demay, Bonnaire, Jeanne Bloch, and Polaire were variously regarded as extremely fat, extremely thin, too muscular – in some way an exaggeration or even a denial of the conventional female physique. All these women mainly performed comic songs based on sexual allusion and *double-entendre*. Their physical unconventionality signalled their difference from the

*corbeille*, and granted them comic licence in terms of repertoire.

The male comic performers also operated through physical exaggeration, but this received less comment since, firstly, there were no norms – no male sexual objects within the Café-Concert – with which to make a comparison. Secondly, this exaggeration was nearly always through artificial means, and was recognized as such: Dranem's red nose and cheeks, his oversize shoes,<sup>30</sup> Mayol's quiff,<sup>31</sup> Paulus's short hair and tight clothing – all were indebted to the art of the make-up artist, the costumier, or the hairdresser. But Guilbert's thinness and Demay's fatness could not be removed in the dressing room. The body of the female was perceived as a major element of her art, just as the body of the *corbeille* member was the whole of her performance, the whole of *her* art.

### Attitudes to Thérésa

In 1891 Georges Montorgeuil compared Yvette Guilbert, then the newest and brightest star of the Café-Concert, with the legendary Thérésa:

*The coarse and powerful song of the Empire, degenerate, uproarious and loud mouthed with Thérésa; she muscular, solid, broad-hipped, the jaunty canteen manageress of the last Imperial battalion, has changed its nature. The Gardeuses d'Ours, the Femmes au Barbes, the Pompiers de Nanterres, with all their picturesque suggestion of the provincial fairground, have metamorphosed into a macabre, sceptical and dolefully insincere witticism that only lacked an interpreter, someone with a profoundly vicious ingeniousness. And the new Thérésa wished up expressly for the purpose, thin, pale, never gesturing, enclosed in a dress in the style of Besnard, a work of art in fact. How to name her? 'Fin de Siècle', she says.<sup>32</sup>*

The comparison of the song of the Empire with that of the Fin de Siècle is drawn through contrasting the physical attributes of the singers, the muscular with the thin, the solid with the pale: their bodies are at once synonymous with their repertoire and by implication their historical eras. Although, as Montorgeuil indicated, Guilbert wore a distinctive style of dress, like most of the female singers neither Thérésa nor Guilbert took advantage of the



Two versions of Thérèse. Above: posed photograph. Opposite: caricature by André Gill. (Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal.)

Doucet Law to employ costumes as such. Their performance was perceived as being articulated through their natural appearance.

At the start of her career, Thérèse's thin muscular body and large facial features were eagerly seized upon by visual and verbal caricaturists. This description by Louis Veuillot appears in a work condemning the singer and her repertoire as a pernicious influence on society.

*I did not find her quite so hideous as I had been told; she is of medium height, fairly well built, without any charm except that of her fame, which is to be sure of the first rank. She has I believe some hair, her mouth appears to go round her head, for lips large fleshy pads, like a negro, shark's teeth.*<sup>33</sup>

In her ghost-written memoirs, Thérèse is given to concede, 'I am not known for my beauty',<sup>34</sup> but this mouth, this lack of charm were the basis of her success. In *Les Lions du jour* (1867), Théodore de Banville is quoted as describing Thérèse as an antidote to the vogue for romantic songs and the infatuation with idealized beauty

that had dominated the French stage for half a century:

*The song that she sings scoffs at Romance and her face, her body, her gestures, her thin sturdy arms, her mouth open to swallow up whole Mr. Alexander and Mr. Bruyère Rose, scoff at the lithography of Romance.*<sup>35</sup>

Théodore de Banville also depicts her as 'good red meat swallowed bloody' by a public surfeited with romantic sweetmeats. The Café-Concert was even then the butcher's stall. All descriptions tended to dwell on the physical character of her performance. From Veuillot:

*She plays her song as much as she sings it, she acts with her eyes, her arms, her shoulders and her broad hips. There is no hint of gracefulness, she strives rather to lose all feminine grace.*<sup>36</sup>

Up to a late description by 'Severine':

*People to the marrow, the bust too full, the hips too large, the arms too short, the curves leaning forward with an air of good-natured teasing which weakens the threat and restrains the force.*<sup>37</sup>

Apart from constant references to her bold hips, there is little of the sensual, the sexual, or indeed (as indicated by Veuillot) the 'feminine' in these accounts. She was described as muscular, sturdy, solid, and jaunty, singing with her fists clenched or arms akimbo. The same sort of vocabulary recurs in relation to her voice, De Banville describing it as 'paradoxical, tyrannical, denuded of all known sex, a strange mix of high and low sounds',<sup>38</sup> and 'Severine' claiming:

*To any hammering trivial theme her voice gave the character of a hymn, her voice reminiscent of the thrilling cello, her voice suggestive of an orchestra where the bray of the trombone and the roar of the big drum dominate.*<sup>39</sup>

Hammering, braying, roaring and tyrannical: the adjectives constantly suggest an animal vitality, a 'masculine' forcefulness. Her body was without 'feminine grace', her voice denuded 'of all known sex'.

### A 'Woman of the People'

A large part of Thérèse's appeal was estimated to derive from her image as a 'woman of the



people' (*la canaille*). This was something of a novelty on stage at this period, and was regarded as both the natural expression of her own background and personality and also that of the majority of her audience.

Thérésa's memoirs colluded with this impression, and for the commentators Thérésa became a symbolic representative of her class. An obituary notice by A. D. Baisson, describing her in later years when she had gained a considerable amount of weight, stated that, 'The miseries and joys of the people were

expressed through the mouth of this fat woman with the massive body and the vulgar mouth'.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, on the one hand, her success was thought to depend on her empathetic relationship with the working-class audience of the *Café-Concert*: while on the other, it was widely recognized that it depended upon the interest she aroused in the press and the patronage of such powerful society figures as the *Princesse de Metternich*. Several accounts describe the carriages of the wealthy blocking the approach to the *Alcazar Café-Concert* when



Thérésa was performing, and an article of 1866, reacting to her memoirs, insisted:

*it is society, society without any divisions, high society, that made Thérésa famous. It was the great ladies. And when the diva pretends to belong only to the people, she is mistaken or forgetful.*<sup>41</sup>

The body delineated by Veillot, de Banville, and Montorgeuil was clearly that of a working woman, 'the canteen manageress of the last Imperial battalion'. The importance of Thérésa's *canaille* persona within her performance, and the emphasis on her 'vulgarity' as much as on her lack of beauty, disqualified her as a representative of 'femininity' outside her own class.

The *corbeille* could function as legitimate objects of desire across the classes because of their anonymity. Relegated to silence and 'immobility', they were identifiable only in terms of their gender – while for 'high society' and for the bourgeois commentators on the Café-Concert, Thérésa's blatant class associations effectively neutralized any possibility of her being seen as a public symbol of female sexuality.

Her repertoire took this a stage further. Although all the songs were written in the first person, and dealt directly with female sexuality, they did so with all the 'picturesque suggestions of the provincial fairground', and the speaking subject was usually identified not by name but in relation to work.

Thus, while the protagonist of *Rien n'est sacré pour un sapeur*<sup>42</sup> was 'only a poor servant', the occupations tended to be exotic. The song *La Gardeuse d'ours*<sup>43</sup> ('The Bear-Keeper') was actually an ironic treatment of the pastoral romance, but the job came from the circus. The subject of *La Femme au barbe*<sup>44</sup> was literally a bearded lady, who invited the audience to pull her beard to check that it was real. *L'Espagnolle du carton* – the cardboard (or fake) Spaniard born in Batignolles – was an acrobat who had also been a wild animal trainer.

The Café-Concert's relationship to the side show thus resurfaced. Thérésa recalled the *phénomène* on three counts – through her songs, through her unconventional physical appearance, and through her novelty value for 'high society', as a woman of the people. When Thérésa performed at the Tuileries for the

Emperor, did that public perceive her as an 'artist' or something more akin to the 'cannibalistic savage'?

*Les Café-Concerts en 1866* contained a lengthy and scorching criticism of Thérésa, including this comment on her earnings: 'Three hundred francs an evening, this is a phenomenal price. And it is the price of a phenomenon (*phénomène*).'<sup>45</sup> And even those who accorded her the status of an 'artist' tended, like Felix Jahyer in 1874, to qualify their statements:

*The language she speaks is that of the people, but it comes from the mouth of an artist, who, without betraying its true character, softens its vulgarity.*<sup>46</sup>

### Guilbert as 'Work of Art'

The 'new Thérésa' was regarded not just as an artist but as a 'work of art'. In 1889 Yvette Guilbert was virtually unknown, playing to unenthusiastic audiences at the Eden Café-Concert in Paris: but by 1890 she was *La Diseuse fin de siècle*. This alteration in her fortunes seems mainly to have been brought about through an alteration in her approach to physical presentations:

*It was while I was at the Eden that I planned to make myself a silhouette that would be in contrast to everything that had been done before. I decided at once that it must be unique and cheap. I found it promptly, and that silhouette has never been forgotten by people who saw it thirty-five years ago.*<sup>47</sup>

Unusually for a woman in the Café-Concert, Guilbert was extremely literate. She did actually write her own memoirs, and allowing for the autobiographer's teleological perception of the past, it would appear that she identified something of the 'phenomenal' nature of the female performer within the concerts.

This silhouette operated through negative rather than positive means. Guilbert chose to emphasize rather than conceal the unconventional aspects of her appearance. She abandoned the heavy cosmetics and elaborate hairstyles, the jewels and the gaudy dresses normally worn in the concerts. Instead she took pains to enhance her natural pallor and to display her unfashionable thinness in a tight dress of the



Yvette Guilbert. (Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal.)

simplest pattern and a pair of long black gloves. The effect produced was recorded by Jean Lorrain:

*She is tall, oh so tall and thin, oh so thin. Her skin is chalky white and the figure slightly rounded but she has no bosom to speak of and her chest is quite extraordinarily narrow. She has long, too long thin arms, clad in high black gloves that seem like flimsy streamers. ... The great originality of this very modern singer lies in her almost rigid immobility, the English appearance of her long thin body, the absence of gesture which contrasts with the almost diabolic rolling of her eyes and the grimaces and distortions of her bloodless face.*<sup>48</sup>

Lorrain tended to exaggerate, but this same image was depicted in Lautrec's numerous paintings and studies of Guilbert. Photographs actually show a much less bizarre if not rather ordinary appearance, but Guilbert's use of bold facial expressions and the distorting effects of gas footlights in performance must be taken into account. The Lautrec-Lorrain image appears to represent the manner in which she was publicly perceived at the time.

Thérésa's animal vitality had been supplanted by a diabolic immobility. The butcher's stall had given way to the morgue, and from the bearded lady we have descended into the chamber of horrors. Even the phlegmatic Arthur Symons was moved to remark, 'No she is not beautiful, a nose that had nothing of the Greek in it, eyelids rather satanic, a heap of reddish hair. There's the woman'.<sup>49</sup>

The woman or the *phénomène*? Lautrec's interest in Guilbert as a subject gave her valuable publicity but had a curious effect on her public image, prompting one journalist to state, 'Yvette Guilbert, she is a poster which sings, which moves, but a poster nonetheless, a great poster macabre and insolent that makes one shiver'.<sup>50</sup> While Thérésa performed her songs through her body, Guilbert's body was seen as so much a 'work of art' as almost to cease to be corporeal. The human, female presence was obliterated, leaving only a voice and that 'bloodless' face.

Guilbert claimed to have been fully aware of the potential impact of this image, and to have deliberately chosen it so that 'I should be able

to dare all in a repertoire'. She performed songs dealing with pimps and prostitutes, alcoholics, murderers, and thieves, with adultery, homosexuality, drug abuse, and miscarriage.

In Aristide Bruant's *À Saint Lazare*, a prostitute confined to the hospital for venereal diseases writes a letter to her pimp. *Le Fiacre*, by Xanrof, was a comic tale of death and adultery. *Eros vanné*, by Maurice Donnay, told of the 'spoilt' Eros who presided over sordid liaisons in the back rooms of shops and 'sapphic' love affairs. Jules Jouy's *Les Vierges* ('The Virgins') speaks for itself. MacNab's *La Danse macabre des foetus* dwelt on the sweet little foetuses lined up in the bottom of transparent glass jars, and Jean Lorrain's *La Morphinée* described the nightmares and torments of a morphine addict.

These songs were usually written in the third person and concerned protagonists of both sexes. This, added to the negation of her sexual identity through the inhuman neutrality of her stage persona, allowed her distance from the content. According to Arthur Symons,

*She brings you the real life drama of the streets, the pot house, she shows you the seamy side of life behind the scenes, she calls things by their right names. But there is not a touch of sentimentality about her, she is neither contaminated nor contaminating by what she sings. She is simply a great exponent of dramatic art, who sings realism as others write it.*<sup>51</sup>

The majority of these songs were, indeed, ironic black comedies, and the 'realism' of Guilbert's repertoire belonged firmly to the literary genre rather than the streets.

One of her most intelligent career decisions was to take her songs from the songwriters of the fashionable artistic cabaret, the Chat Noir.<sup>52</sup> Bruant, Jouy, Lorrain, Xanrof, Donnay, and MacNab were all part of the influential literary and artistic bohemia of the period: frequenters of the Chat Noir, they were writers and journalists or the close companions of writers and journalists, and so had both the power and the motives to ensure her first-rate, widespread publicity.

These songs about the 'outsiders' of society, the outcasts of the Faubourgs, were written under the influence of François Villon and Baudelaire, but they fed and reflected a popular

fascination with the *apâches*, the street gangs, and the criminal underworld. In a few years, Mistinguett<sup>53</sup> would discover the violent *apâche* dance as her route to fame, and Casque d'Or, a real-life gangster's moll, would appear as herself in a theatrical production, *Casque d'Or et les apâches*.<sup>54</sup> To the vast majority of the Café-Concert public, the characters of these songs were as much strange and excitingly curious *phénomène* as the bearded lady.

Guilbert always wanted to escape the Café-Concert and perform to more 'cultured' audiences in the theatre, or in private social clubs such as the Bodinière. In the late 1890s she developed a 'second manner' with this in mind. She abandoned the silhouette in favour of period costume, and built up a repertoire dating from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The reaction of the critics and commentators was unfavourable. Guilbert aspired to 'high art' but her public wanted the *phénomène*.

### Some Other 'Transgressors'

I have chosen to concentrate on Thérèse and Yvette Guilbert because they were the two most celebrated stars in the history of the Café-Concert (and also the best documented). A rapid examination of some other female performers indicates the same process of transgression, neutralization, and 'phenomenalization'. Starting in the early 1880s, Jeanne Bloch,<sup>55</sup> always identified as a 'fat lady', performed comic soldier songs signalling the impersonation of the male role by wearing a képi and a military jacket over her evening dress. Victorine Demay was also a 'fat lady', whose most famous song, *L'Femme athlète*, had the refrain 'Moi je caisse les noisettes en m'asseyant dessus' ('Me I crush nuts by sitting on them'). Mme. Faure who sang *chanson scies*, songs with repetitive refrains based on simple word play, was described by *Paris Illustré* in 1886 as 'somewhat the bearded lady in the Café-Concert'.<sup>56</sup> This same publication grouped together Demay, Faure, and Bloch with the comment, 'They caricature themselves as much as they are able'.<sup>57</sup>

Bonnaire, another 'fat lady', was known for her energetic and frenetic performance style, described by Paulus as having a 'devil in her



'Yvette Guilbert Taking a Curtain-Call', by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, 1894. (Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi.)

body'. Her other gimmick was to play the trombone between verses. Elise Devere, according to Jacques Charles, was 'not a pretty face', but became famous as La Nichonette (the little tit or titty) for reasons apparent in this song about her: 'On l'appel la Nichonette/A cause de ses seins fermes et pas tremblants'. ('They call her little tit, because of her large, firm breasts that do not wobble').<sup>58</sup>

Polaire,<sup>59</sup> who sang in the *épileptique* (literally, 'epileptic') genre, was also known as 'the wasp' due to her tiny, seventeen-inch waist. Polaire and Yvette Guilbert were the main targets of this lament by Fernand Weyl in 1899:

*The time of thin women has arrived. Today we like morbid faces, sunken eyes, savage pale lips, wiry*

*nervous bodies, bitter and whistling voices. This taste is a little disquieting.*<sup>60</sup>

If the *Grandes Horizontales*, Otero, de Pougy and d'Aleçon, may be taken as prototypes, the predominant taste was actually for a more languid and opulent style of beauty. But Weyl's remarks appeared in an ironic context: he was discussing the impressions that a visitor to the Universal Exposition would gather of the French people if they attended a *Café-Concert*.

I have no intention of denying the talent or denigrating the achievements of these female stars of the *Café-Concert*. My concern has been to explore how they were perceived as objects of public gaze through the only genre of discourses on the *Café-Concert* that remain. Further, I am interested in how it was that in the nineteenth century, in an otherwise male-dominated form – where many performers only had to remember 'that they were women' – their talents should not only have been recognized, but deemed superior to that of male performers.

### A Foot in the Fairground

The first ranks of *Café-Concert* were open air or cavernous halls. Customers constantly came and went, drinks were served continuously, and thick palls of tobacco smoke overhung the auditorium. In these venues, to be heard at all the singer had to have a powerful voice and perfect diction: to become a star, she had to hold the attention of an easily distracted, distracting audience, who chatted amongst themselves and were often more interested in the *corbeille*.

None of these conditions would seem to favour one sex over the other. But they *would*, perhaps, favour the *phénomène*, an act with enough novelty value to excite curiosity. It is important to remember that this is the form where, in the 1890s, *Le Pétomâne*,<sup>61</sup> 'the man with the musical anus', was a star. This was also the form that finally gave up the *corbeille* to replace them with *Le Coucher d'Yvette*.<sup>62</sup> one of the first strip-teases.

*Les Café-Concerts en 1866* provided a list of *phénomène* or 'exhibitions of the year' to be seen in the *Café-Concerts*. These included a

one-legged (male) dancer, a bird impressionist, and a man who imitated the flute on his fingers. This list was followed by the comment:

*Relegated amongst the 'curious spectacles' alongside the fairground marionettes, the Café-Concert has sometimes justified this injurious classification by these exhibitions in bad taste.*<sup>63</sup>

As far as the chroniclers were concerned, it seems that the 'exhibitions' were never entirely relinquished. The *Café-Concert* as a popular form was always seen as having one foot in the fairground. Even if some commentators described them as 'artists', the female stars were often perceived in the same light as the one-legged dancer, the savage, and the giant.

This curious public gaze defined the women who 'posed' as an exhibition of anonymous fetish objects – the female as spectacle. Those who both posed and sang could attain recognition as talented individuals at the expense of their sexual identity – at the cost of being perceived as 'unfeminine', unnatural, or freaks of nature.

There were, of course, exceptions: the 'respectable' women who came to the *Café-Concert* from the theatre or the opera, who had trained at the Conservatoire and sang serious songs. These included La Bordas, Amiati, and Anna Judic. There were also some comic female singers who were acknowledged to be both sexually attractive, 'feminine' women and talented performers, such as Anna Thibaud and Mme Guilberte, respectively described by *Paris Illustré* as 'cold' and 'reserved'. None of these performers excited the same interest as or attained the popularity of Thérèse or Yvette Guilbert.

Finally, this mode of defining successful female performers probably extended beyond the *Café-Concert*. It is significant that Sarah Bernhardt was noted for her extraordinary thinness at the beginning of her career, and was throughout her life frequently described as a *phénomène*.

### Notes and References

1. Pierre Véron, *Paris s'amuse* (Paris, 1861), p. 87.
2. 'Thérèse' was Emma Valadon (1837–1913).
3. The *Café-Concert* was an intensely parochial form that reflected historic attitudes towards the *chanson*, which always had

greater artistic status in France than the popular song achieved elsewhere. The music hall only developed in France in the late 1880s, one of the first being the Folies Bergère. 'Le Music Hall' was more spectacular than the Café-Concert. It was variety based, and had strong international influences.

4. Yvette Guilbert (1867–1944).
5. 'Paulus' was Jean Paul Habans (1845–1908). It was often claimed that Paulus helped give momentum to the Boulangerist movement that ended in an abortive *coup d'état* in 1886. On 14 July that year, he was appearing at the Alcazar d'Été Café-Concert. In a topical reference to the annual Military Review that took place on that day, Paulus sang Delormel and Garnier's *En Revenant de la revue*, slipping Boulanger's name into the chorus. The audience went wild with enthusiasm. This became one of Paulus's greatest hits, and a host of Boulanger songs sprang up in the Café-Concert, greatly enhancing the General's popular appeal.
6. *Diseuses/diseurs* (speakers) are recognized as a specific category of singer in France. A *diseuse* may lack a strong singing voice but tend to concentrate on words rather than music, and to be skilled in phrasing, variety of tone, and the conveying of emotion. Yvette Guilbert was a *diseuse* while Thérèse was a *chanteuse* (singer).
7. 'Paulus', *Trente ans du Café-Concert: souvenirs recueillis par Octave Pradels* (Paris, 1808), p. 189.
8. In the 1890s, Madame Saint-Ange was the owner-director of the Eden Café-Concert, and Madame Allemand co-directed a number of concerts with her husband and son-in-law, M. Marchand, including the Eldorado and the Scala. 'Severine', quoted in this article, was a woman journalist, and Yvette Guilbert wrote at least one of her own songs, *La Sôularde* ('The Drunkard'). These are the only concrete examples I have found of women connected with the Café-Concert who were not performers.
9. The 'savage' was said to be fake – an ex-coachman once employed by Robespierre, dressed up in feathers and paint.
10. Paulus, op. cit., p. 248–9.
11. Gaston Jollivet and Victorian Joncières, 'Numéro Spéciale: les Café-Concerts', *Figaro Illustré* June 1896, p. 101.
12. Paulus, op. cit., p. 124. 'It was difficult to keep attention whilst they [the *corbeilles*] were there, difficult to make oneself heard'.
13. Paulus and Le Chevalier, *Guide des théâtres de Paris* (Paris, 1855).
14. E. A. D., *Les Café-concerts* (Paris, 1866), p. 142.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
16. G. Coquiou, *Les Café-Concert* (Paris, 1896), p. 30.
17. Jean Lorrain, *Poussières de Paris*, 6th ed. (Paris, 1902), p. 126–7.
18. Victor Fournel, quoted by L. Hugonis, *L'Eldorado et le question des café-concerts* (Paris, 1875), p. 28.
19. Apparently Doucet, the Minister of Beaux Arts, changed the law under pressure from the press. Influential critics such as Fransieu Sacrezy took up the Café-Concert cause when the Comédie Française attempted to stop Mme. Cornélié, an ex-sociétaire, from performing extracts from Racine at the Eldorado Café-Concert.
20. Paulus, op. cit. p. 18.
21. André Chardourne, *Les Café-concerts* (Paris, 1889), p. 15.
22. Victor Fournel, op. cit., p. 28.
23. Maurice Talmayer, 'Café-concerts et music halls', *Revue de Deux Mondes* (Paris, 1902), p. 163.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
26. Paulus, op. cit., p. 187.
27. Talmayer, op. cit., p. 174.
28. Chardourne, op. cit., p. 44.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
30. 'Dranem' was Arnaud Menard (1869–1933).
31. Félix Mayol (1872–1941).

32. Georges Montorgeuil, 'Le Café-concert', *L'Echo de Paris*, 19 December 1893.
33. Louis Veuillot, *Les Odeurs de Paris* (Paris, 1866), p. 149.
34. Thérèse, *Les Mémoires de Thérèse (écrit par elle-même)* (Paris, 1865), p. 30. A number of sources insist that her memoirs were in fact written by two 'ghosts', Wolf and Blum.
35. Théodore de Banville, quoted by A. Delvau, *Les Lions du jour: physionomies parisiens* (Paris, 1867), p. 259.
36. Veuillot, op. cit., p. 150.
37. 'Severine', 'Obituary on Thérèse', *Gil Blas*, 16 May 1913.
38. Théodore de Banville, op. cit., p. 259.
39. 'Severine', op. cit.
40. A. D. Baisson, *Le Temps*, 19 May 1913.
41. 'Une Lettre au peuple de Marseillaise' (Paris, 1866). Uncredited article from press cutting collection on Thérèse at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris.
42. *Rein n'est sacré pour un sappeur* ('Nothing is sacred to a sapper'), by L. Housset and M. A. Villebichot, 1865.
43. *La Gardeuse d'Ours*, by 'Herve' (Florimond Rouge).
44. *La Femme au Barbe*, by Elie Frebault and Paul Blanguaire.
45. E. A. D., op. cit.
46. Félix Jahyer, 'Camées artistiques: Thérèse', *Paris Théâtre*, 17 September 1874.
47. Yvette Guilbert, trans. Béatrice de Holthoir, *The Song of My Life* (London, 1929), p. 60.
48. Jean Lorrain, quoted and translated by Peter Leslie, *A Hard Act to Follow* (London, 1978), p. 99.
49. Arthur Symons, *From Toulouse Lautrec to Rodin* (London, 1929), p. 86.
50. Henri Lavedon, quoted by Paul Clerouc, 'Yvette Guilbert, sa carrière ses chansons' (n.d.). Press-cutting collection on Yvette Guilbert, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris.
51. Arthur Symons, quoted by Myra Chapman and Bettina Knapp, *That Was Yvette: the Biography of the Great Diseuse* (New York, 1965), p. 129.
52. Le Chat Noir was opened in 1881 by Rodolph Salis, and was one of the first of the 'artistic cabarets'. These were essentially informal 'clubs' for writers and artists who often gave readings or performances of their work in these venues. Regulars at the Chat Noir included Ernest Chebroux, Emile Goudeau, Jehan Rictus, Georges Fragerolles, Willette, Steinlen, Henri Rivière, Charles Cros, Maurice Rollinat, Alphonse Allais, and Eric Satie, as well as those cited in the text.
53. Mistinguett was Jeanne Bourgeois (1873–1946). Like Maurice Chevalier, she started her career in the Café-Concert, but was really a star of the music hall. She created the *apâche* dance (or the *valse chalopée*) in 1909.
54. Casque d'Or (Amélie Hélie) was so-called because of her red gold hair, and rose to fame during the trial of a case of robbery with violence in the 1890s. She appeared in *Casque d'Or et les apâches* in 1902. (*Les apâches* was a slang term for street gangs.)
55. Jeanne Bloch (1858–1916).
56. M. Vaucaire, 'Les Café-Concerts', *Paris Illustré*, August 1886, p. 113.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
58. Jaques Charles, *Le Caf'Conc* (Paris, 1966), p. 37.
59. 'Pojaire' was Emilie-Marie Bouchard (1877–1939).
60. Fernand Weyl, 'Notre génie nationale et les café-concerts', *Revue d'Art Dramatique*, October 1899, p. 112.
61. 'Le Pétômane' ('The Farter') was Jean Joseph Pujol (1857–1945). Due to a physical irregularity, Pujol was able to perform an act that included animal impersonations and playing musical instruments, all achieved through his anus.
62. The Coucher d'Yvette was first performed at the Divan Japonais in Montmartre before reaching a wider public at the Alcazar d'Été in 1894.
63. E. A. D., op. cit., p. 36–7.