

## Sanctuary or Sissy?

### Female Impersonation as Entertainment in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945

Emma Vickers and Emma Jackson

In June 1945, the first official naval production of the Second World War, *Pacific Showboat*, opened at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith. Some of the revue's performers were men, specifically naval personnel performing as women. The producer of the show called it 'a sensation' and claimed that 'People fought for tickets, especially the queers who were mad about us.'<sup>1</sup> This popular enthusiasm was not confined to *Pacific Showboat*. Following the end of the war there were countless glowing newspaper reports that detailed revues performed by ex-service personnel in drag. In Hull and Derby for example, the local press extolled the 'clever',<sup>2</sup> 'deceptive',<sup>3</sup> 'seductive ... [and] realistic'<sup>4</sup> performers and called the shows 'good fun'.<sup>5</sup> At the Stoll theatre in London, in July 1945, a group of airmen who were all former inmates of Stalag Luft III delivered 'quality' impersonations, with two of the men being described by a reviewer writing for the *Observer* as 'especially persuasive in their maiden meditation'.<sup>6</sup>

Following the end of the Second World War, revues such as *Pacific Showboat*, *Soldiers in Skirts*, *Forces Showboat*, *Misleading Ladies*, and Ralph Reader's *Gang Show* (which had also run successfully during the war) capitalized on the appetite of audiences for ex-servicemen in drag. Over time, and owing to the popularity of the shows, most servicemen were quickly replaced by professional artists but the premise of the shows remained the same.<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to explain this popular fervour, Lawrence Senelick emphasized the British public's insatiable appetite for drag shows populated by servicemen, in part because they 'borrowed from the prestige of patriotic war work ... [and] combined nostalgia for the camaraderie of the conflict

with an avidity for glamour in a grey, heavily rationed world'.<sup>8</sup> This chapter will consider how the populace of post-war Britain acquired their affection for ex-servicemen in drag through an examination of men in the British armed forces who informally cross-dressed to entertain their colleagues during the Second World War. It will focus in particular on how those performances were decoded by those who viewed them.

### **Female impersonation in the British armed forces**

Men donning female clothing as a means of entertainment has a long and celebrated history, both in music halls and in celebrations and events such as university rag weeks. For working-class men and women in particular, bawdy drag acts were an important cultural trope. In the armed forces, female impersonation undertaken by personnel for their colleagues dates back to at least the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> During the First World War, entertainment in the trenches took many forms but men often mimicked civilian drag performances. It was estimated by the historian J. G. Fuller that 80 per cent of the divisions that served in active war theatres during the war had an established concert party attached to them.<sup>10</sup>

During the Second World War, service personnel found it necessary to supplement the official entertainment that was provided and formed their own concert parties, often with a female impersonator at the helm. Numerous organizations were set up specifically to entertain the troops, including Stars in Battledress, the Army Welfare Players, and the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA). The latter, ENSA, was the biggest and most active wartime organization. Founded in 1939 by Basil Dean and Leslie Henson, and with logistical support from the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI), ENSA staged over 2 million concerts during the Second World War. However, it could not deliver performances in sufficient quantity, especially to units stationed overseas and in areas considered to be dangerous, and

there was too much variation in the quality of what it could deliver.<sup>11</sup> Not even the appearance of a stellar performer could satisfy all audiences. Patrick Barry, a veteran of Bomber Command, singled out Vera Lynn in particular as having a detrimental impact on his morale.

They were terrible; they made you weep all the time. Songs like ‘We’ll Meet Again’ and ‘The White Cliffs of Dover’, they were disheartening, they made you feel rotten, you know. We just thought let’s get the war over, let’s get back to civvy street. It was good of her [Vera Lynn] to do it but it didn’t do anything for morale, imagine it, you’re waiting to go to war and she’s coming along singing songs like that, Christ almighty.<sup>12</sup>

ENSA’s close links with the War Office and the church also meant that entertainment was, more often than not, conservative and restrained. According to one performer, ENSA ‘was just after dinner stuff. What the troop wanted was tits and tinsel.’<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, unofficial concert parties made use of local talent and were free to deliver material that suited the tastes and temperament of each individual unit, whether that was a ‘straight’ play or a colleague dressed in female clothing reciting a ‘blue’ song. The maintenance of morale was essential, and unofficial performers based within their units frequently knew how best to keep it up. One performer known as ‘Tommy’, who was called up in 1944 and served with the Royal Air Force (RAF) in Burma, was cajoled into singing and dancing for his colleagues because ‘ENSA hadn’t hit that part of the world’. He went on: ‘I had a fair voice ... they started inviting me into the officers’ mess. I’d perch on top of the piano with my legs crossed doing Helen Morgan numbers, singing “You’ll Never Know” or “The Man I Love” from the bottom of my heart.’<sup>14</sup> Later on in the war he joined his unit’s band and performed as Carmen Miranda in full drag.

As this chapter goes on to explore, unofficial performances frequently included elements of female impersonation. This should not, however, be taken to suggest that female impersonation was absent from official offerings but that there were limits on how frequently

such performers could appear and the kind of material that was deemed acceptable. Billy Wells served in the RAF and toured with ENSA as a female impersonator and the duos Bartlett and Ross, Ford and Sheen, and Barden and Moran all performed for the organization as drag artistes.<sup>15</sup> Clearly these performers supplemented the unofficial entertainment laid on by individual units rather than the other way round. Moreover, female impersonators who performed for their units were not under the duress of the War Office or ENSA, or subject to the limitations imposed on artists when it came to performing in dangerous zones.

### **‘My girl back home’: female impersonation as entertainment**

Men performing as women formed a large part of the unofficial entertainment laid on by theatrical subunits, whether organized as part of an evening’s entertainment or merely as a means of passing the time. Richard Buckle, an officer in the army, amused his colleagues by dressing as a prepubescent girl and singing an ‘obscene’ song called ‘My Little Pussy’. The comedy of the officer’s routine lay in the unsubtle double entendre created by his prepubescent persona and the vulgar content of the song that he performed. To a contemporary audience, this is a disquieting juxtaposition, not least because it hints at paedophilic desire, yet it fell within a comedic trope very familiar to the men, exemplified, for example, by Donald McGill’s bawdy seaside postcards.<sup>16</sup> This genre of humour also survives well past the war, an obvious example being the *Carry On* films that began in 1958. Moreover, however sexually suggestive and discomfiting the performance might appear to a modern-day observer, its favourable impact on Buckle’s colleagues was indisputable. He proudly claimed that his performance ‘boost[ed] the morale of the Central Mediterranean Force and expedite[d] an Allied Victory’.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, along with the men in his unit, R. C. Benge would create ad hoc officers’ messes and nominate some of the batmen to serve as waiters. Wearing cosmetics and christened with female names,

the ‘waiters’ would serve the officers with vermouth – or whatever was available – in a bucket. Such parodies ‘provid[ed] color to an existence which would otherwise have been emotionally drab’.<sup>18</sup> Bengé believed that these performances contributed to the *esprit de corps* of his unit and provided welcome respite from the tedium and destruction of daily life. In this sense drag allowed men to escape the reality of war and break away from many of the ‘restrictive social conventions that usually governed everyday life’.<sup>19</sup>

There are obvious questions here of exploitation and abuse of rank which resonate quite profoundly when Bengé’s vignette is understood in the context of unofficially sanctioned sexual contact between batmen and officers, some consensual and some not, and in the context of men being forced to wear cosmetics and female clothing as a shaming tactic. However, taken at face value, Bengé’s anecdote demonstrates the important function served by such performances in cementing kinship and in providing officers and other ranks with a clear indication that playful manipulation of gender identity was welcome.

Although some performers, like Buckle, relied on parody and exaggeration of the female form, known as mimicry, others sought to emulate women as closely as possible, thereby challenging the fundamental premise of drag, which is that the audience is aware the ‘women’ before them are actually men. Arguably, mimicry was the least disruptive of gender identities, and the easiest type of performance for audiences to decode as there could be no doubt that the impersonation was just that, an impersonation. However, as Bloomfield argues, authenticity was actually preferred by personnel, and in this spirit some performers went to great lengths in their preparation.<sup>20</sup> The dressing room scene shown in Figure 3.1 depicts Stoker A. J. Barnes in a makeshift bra, cami knickers, and half a face of makeup, while behind him a colleague appears to be having powder applied to his face. Such was the preparation by some performers that the men in this dressing room scene would have been considered amateurish. Indeed, newspaper articles from the time outline how female impersonators were entertaining

their colleagues 'expertly' and testimony from performers themselves reveal detailed preparatory regimes.<sup>21</sup> Keele, whose career in army concert parties spanned both world wars, described how he would prepare for a female role: '[H]alfway down my chest, to be technical, I used to put a dark red line and then shave that line off so the side on was slightly pink, and then put a little darker one down the centre ... from a distance it looked like the cleavage of a woman.'<sup>22</sup>

Figure 3.1 J. A. Hampton, Christmas Entertainment in the Home Fleet, 18 December 1942.<sup>23</sup>  
© *Imperial War Museum*.

Performances themselves frequently involved men emulating women as authentically as possible, not only in terms of aesthetics but also female gestures and movement. The author of a review of 'The Boy Comes Home', a 'straight' comedy play written by A. A. Milne (whose most famous creation was Winnie the Pooh) wrote appreciatively about the authenticity of the army personnel playing the female parts: 'The part of Aunt Emily, played by W. R. Briggs, showed a keen understanding of feminine roles. His movements, particularly his hand movements, are a joy to watch. Mrs Higgins (Aubrey Gracie) was the boisterous overbearing cook, and Mary, the Maid, (Richard Maynard) the typical timid domestic.'<sup>24</sup> What is interesting here is the admiration shown towards these female impersonators for their authenticity; there is no discomfort, just appreciation and a sense of beguilement that the performers are able to mimic the femininity of women so seamlessly. It is also interesting to note that although the play was labelled as a gentle comedy it offered a serious commentary on the challenges of returning from military service at the end of the First World War.<sup>25</sup>

There can be no doubt that female impersonators reflected a range of gendered stereotypes. In a programme reporting one camp's concert party, there were accounts of a farce taking to the stage in 'Lord Babs', a play written by Keble Howard and adapted into a film in

1932. The author of the review reported that cast member John Bradbrook ‘went off at a tangent in this show and played a feminine part – [the] Countess of Sawbridge. A Blue-blooded old bitch, always thrusting her ever-ready-to-be-shocked modesty in front like a whitlow.’<sup>26</sup> Another actor, Charles McDowall, was said to be able to ‘play large parts or small, as producers demand, and his buxom Bible-quoting, whiskey-gulping Nurse Rounce was very effective’. The review went on to say that Ivor Lipscombe’s performance as Clara, ‘the secret wife-cum-parlour-maid, and later Baby’s nurse, gave the quietly efficient female impersonation’.<sup>27</sup> There is nothing in the author’s account of the performance to suggest that audiences objected to these parodies of women. Indeed, they were enjoyed for their accuracy and for their evocation of female relatives and acquaintances. For men away from home, such constructions were familial *and* familiar and would have played an important role in entertaining servicemen and bonding them together in shared memories of home.

This was, however, not the only style of impersonation. Some performers went to great lengths to inject glamour and overt female sexuality into their acts. Charles Pether was one such performer. Pether was a postman and a female impersonator in the RAF. In the absence of anybody ‘vivacious’, and mindful that as an effeminate and androgynous young man he ‘stuck out like a sore thumb’ in his unit, Pether volunteered to take part in his unit’s concert parties. He did not perform in ‘straight’ dramatic performances and instead delivered ad hoc performances for his colleagues, usually in the form of bawdy songs, which he delivered with as much Hollywood glamour as possible. ‘I used to strut on the stage and I made costumes out of nothing, out of parachute silk, mosquito netting. I used to cut my plimsolls ... cut the top part off where the shoe laces would be then someone in the workshop would silver them for me ... I adored it.’ Pether’s *pièce de résistance* was a song called ‘The naughtiest girl in the forces’:

I’m the naughtiest girl in the forces

The fellows declare I'm a lad,  
The things that I show to our youngest M.O.  
I wouldn't never show to my dad,  
I'm a devil for going on courses  
I know all the tricks of the trade,  
And I'm always the one for a bit of clean fun,  
For I'm out every night on a raid

There isn't a single station to which I haven't been  
With signs of acclamation the sentries let me in  
When I appear the air men cheer, my charm undoes all locks  
The only place I never grace is in the married blocks.<sup>28</sup>

Although Pether's character stopped short of challenging the fidelity of the married blocks, he was frequently followed back to his quarters after his performances, which suggests that the suspension of disbelief continued off stage and into the dressing room. By counting how many men were queuing outside his door following each performance, Pether was able to gauge just how convincing his impersonation had been. Not every individual performed as authentically as Pether on stage and off it, but there could be no doubt that Pether's colleagues wanted to interact not only with his female character but also with the male body underneath it. This goes beyond the suspension of disbelief and hints more at a conscious expression of queer desire. Another example of a queer man involved in unofficial female impersonation is Dennis Prattley, a naval rating who spent much of his wartime service in drag entertaining his matelots and fulfilling the role of a sexual surrogate. For him, and for his sexual partners, the line between onstage and offstage persona was deliberately unclear, and he was frequently informed that he reminded his sexual partners of their 'girl back home'.<sup>29</sup>

In this way, some servicemen were proactive in taking female impersonation to the limits of possibility and their colleagues were more than happy to reimagine them as women both on- and offstage. Dennis Boast, a British private who served with the Second Battalion Royal Norfolk Regiment, described how men in his camp believed that the impersonators ‘were women in their own right’.<sup>30</sup> This view is reinforced by Maurice Driver who asserted that he and his colleagues ‘were quite prepared to treat these people as being women ... as ... in their acting roles we took them to be what they purported to be’ and went on to say that ‘to [their] women starved lives, they looked absolutely great ... they were wonderful’.<sup>31</sup> As performers, these men were integral to their units. Fred Rolleston, a British private who served with the Second Battalion Royal Norfolk Regiment, reminisced about a time when a general reinforced the importance of the job being done by the division’s entertainers, including men who performed as female impersonators: ‘The job we were doing was absolutely vital to the well-being of the division, that after all the time we’d been in the concert party, they’d now consider ourselves as untrained soldiers.’<sup>32</sup> This meant that Rolleston and his fellow performers were unofficially exempt from service on the front line. Dennis Prattley was also deemed to be indispensable to his ship. His success as a drag queen while serving in the navy seemed to suggest that he could make a career of it. However, when he tried to leave the navy, he was denied dismissal. After three appointments with naval psychiatrists, three declarations of homosexuality, and three outright refusals, Prattley gave up trying and resigned himself to the fact that the navy would retain him until the end of the war for the sake of his ship’s morale and as an acknowledgement of his abilities and experience.<sup>33</sup>

There is, of course, a duality in the way that audiences read and interpreted male bodies performing as women. Some were evidently comfortable with their colleagues performing as women, and were able to ‘get into’ the shows, even to the point of expressing desire for the men underneath the costume. Maurice Driver for example claimed the impersonators ‘excited

hearts',<sup>34</sup> and highlighted how the lack of female interaction throughout the duration of the war meant that he was 'ripe ... for ... getting into the show, [and] getting into the theatre'.<sup>35</sup> Other men found female impersonation challenging because it blurred the binaries between male and female: colleague and attainable woman. This blurring is summed up by a remark made by the editor of a journal circulated within an Allied POW camp in Italy. The day after a drag performance given by Private Jones, the editor remarked that the soldier had given 'an excellent representation of flowering womanhood; so excellent in fact that it made you want to go into the lavatory and think'.<sup>36</sup>

In this sense, while performances could be comforting, their reliance on (and exploitation of) homosocial relations could be unsettling. To claim, as does Laurel Halliday in reference to the Canadian armed forces, that men viewing other men dressed as women did not sexualize their bodies is too reductionist.<sup>37</sup> There were clearly those, like the men who queued outside Charles Pether's quarters, who were motivated by curiosity and desire, not just for the 'surface' characters that had been portrayed but for the body underneath the masquerade. Indeed, the suspension of disbelief could travel far beyond the stage.

Why were some men able to immerse themselves in this way? Joshua Goldstein's concept of women as a 'metaphysical sanctuary' to fighting men is perhaps one way of understanding why. Drag, and particularly mimesis, evoked and reintroduced a female element into a segregated institution. Performances such as those provided by the male actors in 'The Boy Comes Home' emulated traditional gender roles and provided familiar and therefore comforting evocations of mothers, sisters, and female partners which did not disrupt conventional understandings of gender but actually worked to restore and reinforce those understandings. Servicemen in drag were, to quote S. Schacht and L. Underwood, 'symbolic representatives of the cultural ideals associated with the feminine and women'.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, such performances were part and parcel of peacetime entertainment; if anything, they allowed

men more of an opportunity to play around with performance in the safety provided by their friends and colleagues and away from the gaze of family, church, and workmates. That some men could perform authentically with limited access to female clothing and makeup was largely admired for its resourcefulness, regarded as an extension of the wartime philosophy of 'make-do-and-mend'. Crucially, too, by entrenching female impersonation as a form of entertainment, the services were demarcating very specific boundaries on behaviour that was, for most men, temporary, not least because it was bound to a stage and limited to a specific time frame, but also owing to the fact that the majority of men fulfilled official roles as part of their operational units. This emphasis on the transitory nature of performance helped to neutralize any threat that might have been posed by female impersonation. So, while drag could have real subversive potential and frequently narrated the proximity of homosociability and same-sex desire, it was also profoundly normative in terms of how it presented sex, gender, and sexuality. It is also interesting that the versions of femininity invoked by female impersonators could be viewed by audiences as more enjoyable than that of female performers themselves.

In this sense, female impersonators could be powerful brokers of morale, and their accurate renderings of femininity demonstrated a determination to be better women than women themselves. Moreover, the effective incorporation of these men and their performances into contemporary renderings of martial masculinity confirms what Sonya Rose describes as 'the assimilation to masculinity of what, in other contexts and articulations, might be considered soft, feminine traits'.<sup>39</sup> Such assimilation suggests that performers could play around with a multiplicity of potential identities in what was otherwise a deeply gendered, inflexible, and traditional institution. It also questions the rigidity and singularity of martial masculinity in the British armed forces during the Second World War.

## **‘Poofy and gay’: same-sex desire and female impersonation**

The final theme that this chapter will explore is same-sex desire. Various historians and academics have concluded that male to female cross-dressing, both on and off the stage, was, by 1939, linked unproblematically to same-sex desire and more importantly, identity. For example, Marybeth Hamilton believes that, in the 1930s, ‘this form of theatre was stigmatized in as “queer in itself”.’<sup>40</sup> Boxwell claims that the high-profile trial, in 1870, of the theatrical cross-dressers Boulton and Park helped to solidify the connection between ‘homosexuality, the world of theatre and transvestism’, a claim that both Harry Cocks and Alan Sinfield decisively unpick.<sup>41</sup> Finally, Lesley Ferris argues that, by 1939, female impersonation was ‘thoroughly demonized. Impersonators were no longer seen as performers – they were performing homosexuals.’<sup>42</sup> By 1939, there is some evidence to suggest that there was indeed a connection between same-sex identity and in-service theatre. In the navy during the Second World War, impromptu theatrical performances were known colloquially as ‘Sod’s Operas’ because of the performers that flocked to take part. Seemingly, there was never a shortage of volunteers for the female parts. Charles Stringer, who served in the navy, overheard one man claiming, ‘it’s the only opportunity to be myself’.<sup>43</sup>

Such an association between female impersonation and same-sex desire was not lost on some. Sidney James Harper, who served in the Far East and the Pacific, expressed disdain at the ‘absolutely hairy-arsed ... [and] ridiculous’ acts performed by his unit, and lamented that that such men were ‘on the wrong side of the tracks’.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, RAF pilot George Biggs described the cross-dressing performances that he witnessed as ‘poofy’ and ‘gay’, and recounted a situation where a female impersonator was forced to ‘get undressed and get in bed before [the other soldiers] ... [and] put [his] head under a pillow, [so he was not allowed to] look at them. They didn’t want [him] lying in bed watching them undress.’<sup>45</sup> This seems to

suggest that some men felt distinctly vulnerable when the gaze was reversed and was experienced outside of the 'safe' confines of the stage. Moreover, it is clear that some audience members found the alignment of on- and offstage personas threatening, not least because that alignment breached the temporariness of the onstage performance. This alignment was a choice rather than a given, and would have depended on the extent to which individuals felt able to perform their gender identity off stage.<sup>46</sup> For Biggs, the lack of authenticity, or poor gender blending, was perhaps more the issue than the same-sex desire that he decoded from the performances. This is confirmed by Terry Gardener, who served in the Royal Navy and spent much of his service life in drag. After the war he joined the revue *We Were in the Forces*, and remarked that 'the general idea of the first show was to put men into dresses to make them look dreadful, [for comic effect] but that soon started to change because the audiences like the prettiest ones best'.<sup>47</sup>

This tension is most interesting when it is narrated by ostensibly heterosexual men performing female parts. Tommy Keele, a British non-commanding officer claimed that he 'always hated playing a girl, [as those playing] ... all these girls parts ... were nearly all poofs, they were nearly all Nancy's [sic] ... pansy bloody noises all the time ... all those sissy sort of sounds coming from them'.<sup>48</sup> Keele went on to say that he was afraid of being 'lumped' as a sissy, a comment which suggests that there was a much firmer cultural association between same-sex desire and female impersonation by the middle of the 1940s. Men like Keele could parry accusations of queerness by proclaiming their disdain for the 'poofs and Nancy's [sic]' and lamenting the requirement to play the female roles too frequently. Others could be protected from accusations of queerness by recourse to the wartime necessity of finding men who would play female roles because of the absence of women.<sup>49</sup>

So, while there was, by 1939, a much stronger cultural connection between male bodies in female clothing and queer sexuality, it would be unwise to overstate its knowability, first because of the strong theatrical tradition of dames in Britain and second, because the war upended the pre-war cultural association between drag and same-sex desire. The Second World War provided men with a safe space where they could experiment with dress and performance in the quest for entertainment and in the spirit of wartime deprivation. There were obviously some queer men who used performance as a means of exploring and expressing their sexuality and gender identity and who played around with the boundary between onstage and offstage. However, to claim that this was hankered for by all performers is too reductionist. Moreover, each audience member decoded cross-dressing performances subjectively and brought their own meanings and subtexts to bear on what they saw. The connection between queer identity and cross-dressing was not explicitly problematized unless it was disruptive to morale and detrimental to efficiency. When we do hear of men such as Biggs protesting at the presumed queerness of female impersonators and protecting his body from the gazes of other men, this in no way reflects an institutional discomfort with same-sex desire, but rather, a subjective one.

## **Conclusion**

Between 1939 and 1945, cross-dressing performances were sanctioned by officials within the armed forces as essential to the maintenance of morale. These performances did not permanently destabilize gender boundaries but actually reinforced them through the active production of femininity. So while cross-dressing may have, in some cases, provided magnified, almost carnivalesque parodies of women, and in others, exceptionally sincere and authentic portrayals, they were performances that were familiar and unsurprising. Another contradiction is that while performers were able to 'queer' their environment, their

performances were seen as necessary because of the absence of women and because they fell into a celebrated tradition of men taking female parts. Rather than emulating women these men were emulating a theatrical tradition of men playing female parts. Finally, by entrenching female impersonation as a form of entertainment, the services were demarcating very specific boundaries of temporary behaviour, behaviour that was bound to a stage and limited to a specific context and time frame. Cross-dressing performances, in the context of the British armed forces did not pose a threat to the established order, civilian or military, because they were bound to specific perimeters. When such activity occurred *out* of those boundaries, it could be perceived as more of a threat, not least to the comfort of the audience.

### **Recommended reading**

Boxwell, D. A. (2002) 'The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914–18', *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 1–20.

Eldridge, S. (2014) "'We Girls' Female Impersonators in POW Entertainment on the Thailand-Burma Railway During the Second World War', *Popular Entertainment Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 74–99.

Fuller, J. G. (1990) *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Halliday, L. (2003) 'A Lovely War: Male to Female Cross-Dressing and Canadian Military Entertainment in World War II' in Schacht, S. and Underwood, L., (eds) *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators* (London: Routledge) pp. 19–34.

Hamilton, M. (1993) 'I'm the Queen of the Bitches', in L. Ferris, (ed.) *Crossing The Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* (London: Routledge).

Kirk, K., and E. Heath (1984) *Men in Frocks* (London: Gay Men's Press).

Mackay, R. (2003) *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain During the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

Rachamimov, I. (2006) 'The Disruptive Comforts of Drag: (Trans) Gender Performances among Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–1920', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 1–23.

Senelick, A. (2000) *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (New York: Routledge).

Vickers, E. (2012) *Queen and Country: Same-Sex Desire in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press).

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<sup>1</sup> Ronnie Hill, quoted in A. Senelick (2000) *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (New York: Routledge) p. 367.

<sup>2</sup> Author unknown (1946) 'Tivoli Variety', *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 May.

<sup>3</sup> Author unknown (1946) 'Follies' Bright Show' *Hull Daily Mail*, 18 June.

<sup>4</sup> Author unknown (1946) 'Around The Shows: Ex-Forces "Lovelies" Are Good Fun', *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 1 October.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> J. C. T. (1945) 'Back Home', *Observer*, 22 July, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> K. Kirk and E. Heath (1984) *Men in Frocks* (London: Gay Men's Press), p. 18. In wartime and post-war cinema female impersonation was an established trope. Take for example *You're*

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*in the Army Now* (1941) and *Abroad with Two Yanks* (1944), both of which involved servicemen in drag. The British film *Skimpy in the Navy* (1949) starred Vic Ford and Chris Sheen, two of the most famous female impersonators in Britain at that time.

<sup>8</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room*, p. 367.

<sup>9</sup> See S. Eldridge, (2014) ‘“We Girls” Female Impersonators in POW Entertainment on the Thailand-Burma Railway During the Second World War’, *Popular Entertainment Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 74–99, here p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> J. G. Fuller, (1990) *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p.188. See also J. Bourke (1996) *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books), p. 233, D. A. Boxwell (2002) ‘The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914–18’, *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 1–20 and I. Rachamimov (2006) ‘The Disruptive Comforts of Drag: (Trans) Gender Performances among Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–1920’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 1–23.

<sup>11</sup> Groups like Stars in Battledress and the Army Welfare Players went some way in addressing this shortfall. The former consisted of a group of servicemen with performance skills who, unlike ENSA, could perform closer to and on the front because they had been trained to defend themselves if they came under attack. Importantly, they were not subject to the collective censorious power of Dean and the War Office.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Barry interviewed by Emma Jackson, 6 January 2013. It may not have pleased Lynn to know that the comedian Dick Emery created a parody character called ‘Vera Thin’ while he was working as an entertainer in Ralph Reader’s Gang Show. See A. J. Woodward, ‘Dick Emery’ at <https://www.woodysnet.co.uk/people/dick-emery/>, date accessed 18 July 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Nicholson (1976) ‘A Matter of Morale’, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 16 August, cited in Bloomfield, ‘Veterans Cross-Dressing Revues’, p. 4.

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- <sup>14</sup> Cited in Kirk and Heath (1984) *Men in Frocks*, pp. 14–15.
- <sup>15</sup> Author unknown (n.d.) ‘It’s Behind You – Bring On Those Wonderful Dames!’, <http://www.its-behind-you.com/damesarticle.html>, date accessed 17 July 2015.
- <sup>16</sup> See A. Calder-Marshall (1966) *Wish You Were Here: The Art of Donald McGill* (London: Hutchinson).
- <sup>17</sup> R. Buckle (1981) *The Most Upsetting Woman* (London: Collins), p. 195.
- <sup>18</sup> R. C. Bengé (1984) *Confessions of a Lapsed Librarian* (London: Scarecrow Press), p. 51.
- <sup>19</sup> C. Johnson (2007) ‘Camp Life: The Queer History of “Manhood” in the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1937’, *American Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 19–36, here 29.
- <sup>20</sup> See Bloomfield, ‘Veterans Cross-Dressing Revues’.
- <sup>21</sup> Author unknown (1941) ‘The Soldiers’ “Sing-Song”’, *The Times*, 15 April.
- <sup>22</sup> Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (hereafter IWMSA) 9428, interview with Tommy Keele, Reel 9.
- <sup>23</sup> Imperial War Museum Department of Photography A13436, J.A. Hampton, Christmas Entertainment, 18 December 1942. © Imperial War Museum.
- <sup>24</sup> National Army Museum (hereafter NAM) 9307-222-7, *Theatre Article*, date unknown.
- <sup>25</sup> See <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnline/37786/>, date accessed 18 July 2015.
- <sup>26</sup> NAM 9307-222-7, *Theatre Article*, date unknown.
- <sup>27</sup> NAM 9307-223-14, ‘Lord Babs’, Theatre Willenberg, date unknown.
- <sup>28</sup> Transcript of interview with Charles Pether, 3bmtv, *Conduct Unbecoming*, Channel 4 (1996), p. 8.
- <sup>29</sup> Dennis Prattley, Timewatch, *Sex and War*, BBC2 (1998). For a discussion of homosex between men during the Second World War see E. Vickers (2012) *Queen and Country: Same-Sex Desire in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press).

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- <sup>30</sup> IWMSA, 17535, Dennis Boast, Reel 5.
- <sup>31</sup> IWMSA 27064, Maurice Driver, Reel 12.
- <sup>32</sup> IWMSA, 17764, Fred Rolleston, Reel 7.
- <sup>33</sup> Dennis Prattley, Timewatch, *Sex and War*, BBC 2 (1998).
- <sup>34</sup> IWMSA 27064, Maurice Driver, Reel 12.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., Reel 12.
- <sup>36</sup> Wellcome Library, RAMC 466/49, Captain Mustarde, 'Adjustment and mal-adjustment within the camp', talk at Psychiatrists conference, 7–8 October 1944.
- <sup>37</sup> L. Halliday (2003) 'A Lovely War: Male to Female Cross-Dressing and Canadian Military Entertainment in World War II' in S. Schacht and L. Underwood (eds) *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators* (London: Routledge), pp. 19–34.
- <sup>38</sup> S. Schacht and L. Underwood (2004) Introduction to special edition of the *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 46, no. 3–4, pp. 1–17.
- <sup>39</sup> S. O. Rose (2004) 'Temperate Heroes: Concepts of Masculinity in Second World War Britain' in S. Dudink, K. Hagermann, and J. Tosh (eds) *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 192.
- <sup>40</sup> M. Hamilton (1993) 'I'm the Queen of the Bitches', in L. Ferris, (ed.) *Crossing The Stage: Controversies on cross-dressing* (London: Routledge), p. 108.
- <sup>41</sup> A. Boxwell (2002) 'The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914–18' *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 10.
- <sup>42</sup> Hamilton (1993) in Ferris, p. 119.
- <sup>43</sup> E-mail from C. Stringer to Emma Vickers, 29 November 2005.
- <sup>44</sup> IWMSA 23376, Sidney James Harper Reel 5.
- <sup>45</sup> George Biggs interviewed by Emma Jackson, 3 January 2013.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Kirk and Heath (1984) *Men in Frocks*, p. 19.

<sup>48</sup> IWMSA, 9428 Tommy Keele, Reel 9.

<sup>49</sup> See S. Eldridge (2014) 'We Girls'.