

# On the Appeal of Authenticity: The Dance of the Seven Veils in Early 20<sup>th</sup> - Century London

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One of my research projects for some time has been on the Windmill theatre in Soho, London, which became both famous and notorious for its posed nude *tableaux* between 1932 and 1964. Something of the history of the theatre was popularised in the film *Mrs Henderson Presents* (2005) with Bob Hoskins and Judy Dench and there was subsequently a stage musical. As a historian, mainly of twentieth century theatre dance, I have been fascinated by the longevity of this theatre that created over 300 editions of its variety show during a period of rapid social and cultural change. One survival strategy was in the way the management stayed on usually polite terms with the theatre censorship of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. Nudes were allowed as long as they did not move.<sup>1</sup>

The stricture on the moving body is interesting for me because it raises such a tension between the nature of dance in movement and its antithesis in stasis. Throughout its history the Windmill tried to challenge censorship by finding ways that tantalising nudity could be covered by skilled manipulation of costume accessories, thus making it possible for a nude to dance. The most lasting of these was the fan dance in which the principal dancer was nude behind her fans and only revealed herself in the finale, in perfect stillness in the split second before the lights went off. In this and other acts of this type, the hook to the viewer was the knowledge that the dancer was completely naked; that only her skill with her props - fans or a very large hat or shawl - prevented the revelation of her nudity; and that there might be a moment she accidentally revealed more than she should!

In advertising and in its interactions with the censorship, the Windmill's defence was often that it claimed itself on the side of the arts rather than entertainment, a cultural product more akin to nudes in an art gallery or museum. This trait is illustrated by the introduction of 'The Dance of the Seven Veils'. On 26 April 1937 the dance was introduced into a sketch at the Windmill Theatre called, 'Lost in the Legion'. Taking the title literally, a dancer, appearing as in a dream to an inebriated legionnaire, removed one after another of coloured draperies from around her body to be finally revealed naked.

One of the most curious aspects of this stage act was the way it was flagged by the management's publicity as an authentic dance, straight out of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (c.1353), and verified by research at the British Museum, which would make it an authentic early dance!<sup>2</sup> The spurious nature of this claim is obvious to dance scholars but begs the question of why it was disseminated and how it could be considered legitimate. There is no

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Note on sources: Primary Source Material was accessed from the Theatre and Performance Collections, Victoria and Albert Museum (hence V&A).

<sup>1</sup> The Lord Chamberlain's Office dispensed censorship under the 1843 Theatres Act, but some of the rules that developed were *ad hoc*. See: Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama 1900 – 1968* (University of Exeter Press, 2003). For the Windmill Theatre see particularly Vols. 1–3.

<sup>2</sup> See for example 'Latest Strip-tease', *Sunday Dispatch*, 25 April 1937, Windmill Cuttings Book 33, V&A.

Dance of the Seven Veils in the Decameron. Much dancing is implied, presumably of the fourteenth century Italian dances that the fictitious young participants in the storytelling would have practised. However the reference to the *Decameron* has a double significance in early twentieth century Britain: on the one hand it connotes a known historical source that has some cultural significance; on the other, some people would know that it also had the reputation for racy stories and some passages so erotic they were deemed untranslatable into English.<sup>3</sup> If the dance came from the *Decameron*, it was justified because it was authentically historic and if it was erotic, then that was because it was authentically foreign.

I cannot find any evidence that this connection was ever questioned at the time. But indeed there had been a musical play, *Decameron Nights*, at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane for nearly a year, 1922 – 23. In this, there certainly were dancing girls and veils.<sup>4</sup> It is likely memories of this production persisted in 1937. As a former cinema manager, the Windmill's general manager, Vivian Van Damm, would most likely have known also of the silent film *Decameron Nights* made in 1924 (dir. Herbert Wilcox). The title of *Decameron Nights* harnessed together the fourteenth century Italian *Decameron* with the Arabic, *One Thousand and One Nights* in popular imagination, thus capitalising on the orientalist flavour. Orientalism has been, and still persists, as characterisations of a homogeneous 'East' in Western arts and popular culture. It diminishes Middle Eastern and Asian cultures through its indiscriminate reduction of its huge variety into 'types', the sexualised dancing girl, object of Western male fantasy, being one.

There is another important context to the whole episode. In citing the *Decameron*, the Windmill was confronting the possibility of losing audience to a new alien dance act. The Prince of Wales Theatre, run in competition to the Windmill, was threatening to bring in a new act from America —striptease. This raised the prospect of a brash American act, engaging the gaze of the audience in the act of disrobing rather than the subtle discretions that had made it possible for the Windmill to negotiate the scrutiny of the law.<sup>5</sup>

Institutional anxiety was exacerbated by this being the Coronation Year of King George VI, father of the late Queen Elizabeth. The British Empire was still in place, and London's implied moral leadership over quite a lot of the globe was under the microscope as visitors came for the coronation celebrations. What would Empire visitors think of some entertainments on offer? There was considerable press coverage and the possibility of further tight restrictions on exotic acts.<sup>6</sup> The *Daily Sketch* set out to be the voice of the anti-nudity campaign. 'Nudity is Crudity', said one headline; 'stamp on it'.<sup>7</sup> But some other popular papers were more likely to make light of it. 'More Nudity for Stage Shows: No Law Against It and Public Don't Complain', said the *Sunday Dispatch*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> My own English copy of 1870 claims that one story is too arcane to translate into English, but gives a translation in French in footnotes!

<sup>4</sup> See Drury Lane Theatre File, 1922–23, V&A.

<sup>5</sup> For analysis of striptease as a dance genre, see work of Judith Lynne Hanna, including 'Undressing the First Amendment and Corsetting the Striptease Dancer', *TDR*, Vol. 42 (2) (1998), pp. 38-69.

<sup>6</sup> The London County Council also held some responsibilities for censorship. 'L.C.C. Drive Against Nudity Shows in West End Theatres', *Daily Sketch*, Wednesday [?] May 1937, Windmill Theatre Cuttings Book 33, V&A.

<sup>7</sup> Reported in *The Era*, 14 May 1937, Windmill Theatre Cuttings Book 34, V&A.

<sup>8</sup> *Sunday Dispatch*, 28 March 1937, p.3, Windmill Theatre Cuttings Book 33, V&A.

If there was going to be any restrictions, then the Windmill had to explain itself clearly, so the press release went out—a dance straight from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* researched in the reading room at the British Museum!<sup>9</sup> This fact should prove its artistic authenticity! As Marie, the first Seven Veils dancer is reported to have said, 'There is no comparison to Striptease. This is real art.'<sup>10</sup>

### The Wilde connection

SALOMÉ                      I am ready, Tetrarch.  
[*Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils.*]<sup>11</sup>

The most problematic aspect of this stage direction from Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* of the 1890s is the definite article ('**the** dance of the seven veils') since it implies a genre of dance that could be defined by its identifiable attributes: like a waltz or a ballet solo or a dance of a specific ethnicity, we know what '**the** dance of the seven veils' is, don't we? It is a problem that successive producers of Wilde's play and its derivations such as Richard Strauss's opera *Salomé* (1905),<sup>12</sup> or the silent film of 1923<sup>13</sup> have had to contend with ever since. What is **the** Dance of the Seven Veils? What is **a** dance of the seven veils? Was there such a thing before Wilde wrote those words and did those words, by being written, make it possible that such a genre could exist?

In Wilde's play, consumed with rejected lust, Salomé seduces Herod into giving her the head of John the Baptist. The idea of the seven veils appears to be an invention of Wilde himself but his Salomé came into a western European culture that was already replete with 'Salomés' in literature and fine art. It is relevant that this seductive Salomé becomes such a central cultural image in conjunction with Western men beginning to explore the Eastern world as a source of pleasure. So French author Gustave Flaubert took a dancing girl companion in Cairo, and we get a very erotic version of Salomé's dance in his story *Herodias* (1877) focussing on her movements and their effects on men.<sup>14</sup> Not only is she physically unbridled but sparkling with jewels as often depicted in the paintings of French symbolist Gustave Moreau. I do not imply this fascination with the oriental female dancer was new in Western culture at the end of the nineteenth century but that it took a new form. This combination of sexual availability and access to mineral wealth are typical of the way Salomé and her sister dancers were being portrayed: they become in a way what the East meant to the West, simultaneously a source for imperialist plunder and the symbol of a lost spontaneity within Western cultures.

Wilde's play, which was published first in French in 1893, was banned by the censor in Britain but achieved a French staging in 1896. The Strauss opera with its long musical interlude for the dance was premiered in 1905 by which time dancers in the character of Salomé were

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<sup>9</sup> See for example 'Latest Strip-tease', *Sunday Dispatch*, 25 April 1937, Windmill Theatre Cuttings Book 33, V&A.

<sup>10</sup> 'Seven-Veils Girl Dances in London: "This is Not Striptease"', *Daily Mirror*, 26 April 1937, Windmill Theatre Cuttings Book 33, V&A.

<sup>11</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Salomé, a tragedy in one act: translated from the French of Oscar Wilde* (London, 1907).

<sup>12</sup> Daria Santini 'That invisible dance: Reflections on the 'Dance of the Seven Veils' in Richard Strauss's "Salome"', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, Vol. 29 (2) (2011), pp.233-245.

<sup>13</sup> Directed by Charles Bryant in USA.

<sup>14</sup> Udo Kultermann, 'The "Dance of the Seven Veils". Salome and Erotic Culture around 1900', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 27 (53) (2006), pp.187-215.

prominent.<sup>15</sup> Loie Fuller, with her technical achievements of innovative lighting and draperies, performed as Salomé in 1895 in Paris, inspired by Massenet's opera *Herodiade* (1881) that had in its turn been inspired by Flaubert's novel. She staged another working as *La Tragedie de Salomé* in 1907.<sup>16</sup> Exotic dancer Mata Hari,<sup>17</sup> later to become infamous, and probably innocent as an executed spy, coveted the dancing role in the opera, and Canadian Maud Allan first performed her *Vision of Salomé* in Vienna in 1903, then at the Palace Theatre London from 1908 for two years.<sup>18</sup> This is the period of 'Salomania', when dancers good and bad took to the stage in this character and one such Salomé set up a school for aspiring 'Salomés' in New York in 1907. For the most part these were Western women appropriating a presumed character from the East without knowledge of the culture they were assuming.

One important point is that these 'Salomés' did not necessarily employ the veils, so a Salomé's dance is not necessarily a Dance of the Seven Veils. Wilde's insistence on the seven veils is difficult to pin down. The number seven is significant in many cultures, not least in Freemasonry, into which Wilde had been inducted. The most frequently cited explanation for the seven veils comes from the Mesopotamian myth of the goddess Ishtar/Inanna who had to descend into the underworld and at each of seven gates gave up an article of covering. The translation from cuneiform had been published in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1873,<sup>19</sup> so Wilde may have known of it. The story and the notion of the veils has complex implications: shedding of worldly things but also a deepening into the realms of the psyche, into things hidden, good or bad, perhaps into a self that would rather remain hidden, but is ultimately truthful. Nakedness thus acquires symbolic meaning.

### **The Dance Re(un)covered**

So now we leave the 'Salomania' of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century behind, pass through the trauma of World War One, to the inter-war period. It is April 1937, the Windmill Theatre in Soho, on the stage of the 91<sup>st</sup> edition of the non-stop revue show *Revudeville*. It is a comic sketch about some hopeless recruits to the French Foreign Legion. The stage is set with a poster, café table and chair to indicate that this is a North African French colony. After some silly conversation between the comic recruits and the recruiting officer they leave the stage. An absinthe drinker enters and sits at the table alone. He sings a song called 'Desire':

I live in a world of unreality  
Where passions burn in me  
Like flames of fire.....

It ends:

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<sup>15</sup> For an overview see: Toni Bentley, *Sisters of Salome* (Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Rhonda Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism* (University of Princeton Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Stage name of Dutch woman Margaretha Zelle. See: Romita Ray, 'Orientalizing the Bayadère/Fabricating Mata Hari', *Photographies*, Vol 5 (1) (2012).

<sup>18</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, 'The Vision of Salome: Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Dancing in Central London, 1908-1918', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 108 (2) (2003), pp.337-376; Amy Koritz, 'Dancing the Orient for England: Maud Allan's "The Vision of Salome"', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 46 (1) (1994), pp.63-78.

<sup>19</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* sponsored the archaeologist George Smith on collecting expeditions to the Tigris Valley. There were many published reports, so quite a current interest in the topic. 'The Daily Telegraph Assyrian Explorations', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 August 1873, p.3.

In chains  
Of my own illusion  
I am a slave of desire.<sup>20</sup>

His head drops to the table and a veiled female figure drifts onto the stage, implicated as the product of his delirium. The stage directions tell us she dances ‘The Dance of the Seven Veils’ after which the absinthe drinker awakes and staggers off, reprising his song.

It is possible to delve deeper into what was actually performed as the Seven Veils dance onstage because it was so thoroughly covered in the press. An important series of photographs (see *Fig. 1*) was taken by well-known theatre photographer Angus McBean, collaged in *The Sketch*,<sup>21</sup> actually revealing something of the process of the uncovering. Other photographs appeared in the daily press.<sup>22</sup>

From the photographs I would say the dancer appears poorly clothed, perhaps a slave, with a tunic stopping at mid-thigh, bare legs, bare feet and one shining anklet as her only jewellery. Her costume appears tied together with light fabrics in contrasting colours<sup>23</sup> wound around arms, neck, chest and hips. This dance seems much less exotic in costume than a Salomé dance. More so she fits into the story world of the sketch, combining in one image both the ‘Slave of desire’ as a subject of the absinthe drinker’s song, and its object as the enslaved, submissive, but ultimately elusive object of desire.

As the dancer entered, it would be standard practice for lights to dim as one of the Windmill’s claims to ‘artistry’ was to frame the unclothing or unclothed figure as withdrawn from easy visual consumption by the audience. (Opera glasses were also banned). This differs from striptease acts where the collusion of audience and performer is essential to the relationship. It would be useful to know what music she has, because that would give some clue to the dynamic of the performance, wanton or discrete, orientalised a little or a lot. She might dance to a reprise of the ‘Desire’ song. At all events we must remember that in the pit were two pianos and a drum kit: this gave the sound texture. She ‘dances to the low throb of Eastern music’, one press report says,<sup>24</sup> suggestive of a fairly restrained orientalising in the music.

The first veil covers her head and is easily removed. The second covering runs across her upper chest, from left shoulder to right underarm and must fix at the back and the third covers her throat at the front and falls down the back. This implies I think that she must turn in order to show the back of the costume as she unties and draws away the pieces of material. So, turning must be part of this choreography. This is supported by the words of a review in the popular magazine, *The Tatler*, which comments, although the expression is satirical: ‘She winds herself out of two or maybe three of her veils.’<sup>25</sup> The fourth layer includes wrapping around her arms

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<sup>20</sup> Scripts have been preserved because they had to be sent in advance to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office for scrutiny. Script, *Revuedeille No. 91*, V&A.

<sup>21</sup> *The Sketch*, 5 May 1957, p.221.

<sup>22</sup> e.g. *Daily Mirror*, 26 April 1937; *Sunday Dispatch*, 25 April 1937.

<sup>23</sup> All available photographs are in black and white, but *The Star* writes that: ‘three [veils] were patriotically red, white and blue’ in ‘Dance of the 7-6-5-4-3-2-1-0 Veils’, *The Star*, 26 April 1937, Windmill Cuttings Book 33, V&A.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Seven-Veils Girl Dances in London: “This is Not Striptease”’, *Daily Mirror*, 26 April 1937, Windmill Cuttings Book 33, V&A.

<sup>25</sup> *The Tatler*, no. 1872, 12 May 1937, Windmill Cuttings Book 33, V&A.

so we can suppose sinuous movements with her arms to encourage the loosening of the fabric. Number five is the important area around her hips, tied at the front. At this point the undergarment will flair, allowing light to illuminate the dancer's upper legs. How does she do this? Again, from *The Tatler* there is some suggestion of hip movements but not excessively erotic: she just about manages 'to imitate the *danse du ventre* of the Ouled Nail'. Penultimately, she sheds the covering across her right shoulder and breast which ties near her left hip. Now her nipples and groin are more exposed.

The seventh veil, her last, is her tunic, clearly pinned under her right shoulder in photographs. She must remove the pin and slip it in front of her. She sinks to her knee now. Photographs show the drape across her upper thigh although she is otherwise nude. She must now be perfectly still, required by censorship. As the sardonic *Tatler* says, using an architectural metaphor, 'she holds the last bit of covering politely over her mezzanine and first floors; sits down, casts off the ultimate veil and Bares All for the two ticks before they black her out.' As a standard practice at the Windmill in order to allow a nude to move, they kill the lights, and she gathers her veils to cover her and exits the stage in semi darkness. It all seems very restrained. Our Windmill's Seven Veils dancer is not a Salomé who provokes the action in a story. She only serves as a dream to the absinthe drinker.

### **The Appeal of Authenticity**

What essential concept of an authentic 'Dance of the Seven Veils' was the Windmill management adopting in 1937? Only the magical number of seven seems to connect the Windmill dancer with Wilde's Salomé or indeed any of the dancers of that outburst of 'Salomania'.

In dance in general we are never very far from avowing our adherence to the real thing: the descent from a revered teacher; the authentic style etc. In early dance we value the authenticity of sources while respecting alternative interpretations. We adhere to principles of right way and less right way, even when the rules that guide those principles might vary. We value what might be considered a right performance of that style or this dance genre.

So, the claim to authenticity is appealing. As we have seen in the case of the Seven Veils at the Windmill, it enabled good publicity against a 'foreign' import of striptease. Yet also the claim of authenticity cast a veil (pun intended) over the fact that there was no authentic dance to which to claim adherence. Wilde's invention, despite its shreds of Mesopotamian myth, was not an authentic dance. Its confusion with the fakery of 'Salomania' and some reinventions of *Decameron* tales, allowed the idea to have some cultural resonance so that the claim of authenticity gained some credence. But the fine line trod by the Windmill in its relationship with theatre censorship also made it difficult to fulfil the full erotic potential that came with that history. So, the Seven Veils dancer at the Windmill does not flaunt sexual availability. She conforms to notions of artistry and restraint.

It is intriguing as to why this dance, so thoroughly advertised and covered by the press, did not become a favourite act at the Windmill. It had just one more outing, in an Egyptian sketch, and was never seen again. Was it because the veils were difficult to work with, or did the need for the fake historical associations dissipate quickly? That is another story.



Figure 1. Angus McBean, 'The Dance of the Seven Veils' at the Windmill, *The Sketch*, 5 May 1937, p.221.