

INSTALLATION SALOMANIA

ALLA NAZIMOVA

Alla Nazimova emigrated from Russia to New York in 1906. She quickly became one of the most famous actresses on Broadway. She often starred in plays about the emancipation of women (especially those of Ibsen). Later she was under contract to Metro Goldwyn Meyer and became the highest paid actress of early Hollywood cinema. Her numerous affairs with other female Hollywood stars—such as Dorothy Arzner, Mercedes de Acosta, Eva le Gallienne, Glesca Marschall, or Jean Acker—were an open secret. Unhappy with the roles she was being offered (because of her background, she usually got ‘exotic’ roles in trivial heterosexual comedies), in 1923 she herself produced and directed *Salome*, a silent film that was to become one of the early experimental art films, even if it was not commercially successful and nearly ruined her career.

Performing *Salome*, the Jewish princess who died for her perverse desire, could be perceived as a layered act of coming out, since her publicly orientalized persona had veiled her Jewishness. Nazimova further discloses but also veils her lesbian authorship by restaging the authorship of Oscar Wilde and the discourse of aestheticism. The costumes were based on drawings that Aubrey Beardsley had made for Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*: the Syrian’s painted nipples, the Executioner’s bold S/M look, Jonaan’s uncanny asceticism and the drag queens at Herod’s court. Rumor has it that everyone involved in this film project was lesbian or gay.

OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*, written in French in 1891, had its premiere in Paris on February 11, 1896, starring and directed by Sarah Bernhardt. In his version, Wilde turned *Salome* into the focal point of the Biblical story, providing her with her own gaze and desire. He wrote the title role specifically for Bernhardt—an actress who often appeared in pants roles. A performance planned for London was cancelled.

Oscar Wilde himself was in jail at the time of the premiere. The father of his long-term lover Alfred Douglas had left a card at Wilde’s club calling him a ‘sodomite.’ When in defense he tried to sue him for slander, the trial quickly shifted and became an indictment of Wilde, during which not only were his writings described as ‘sodomitical’ and ‘perverse,’ but in which his relationships with (young) men were also presented in detail. The fact that these men often came from other (subordinate) classes also contributed to the conviction. After two years’ hard labor Oscar Wilde was released in 1897, his health highly compromised, and he died three years later in Paris at the age of only 47.

ALICE GUSZALEWICZ

This photo can be found in the Internet with two different captions implying two variant narratives of its history. One maintains that it is a photo of a Cologne performance of the Richard Strauss opera *Salome* with the singer Alice Guszalewicz. Wrongly labeled, it landed in a French photography agency and fell into the hands of Oscar Wilde’s biographer Richard Ellmann. He printed it in his book—as a photo of Oscar Wilde posing in a *Salome* costume. In the ensuing years, the photo – reprinted e.g. in Marjorie Garber’s book ‘Vested Interests. Cross dressing and cultural anxiety’—could quite accidentally instigate research and cultural production following the figure of *Salome* as ‘transvestic.’

“I want to argue that the dancer is neither male nor female, but rather, transvestic, – transvestism as a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture. That is the taboo against which Occidental eyes are veiled.” (Marjorie Garber)

KUCHUK HANEM

In his notebooks and journals about his voyage to Egypt in 1849-50, Gustave Flaubert referred to his affair with the professional dancer Kuchuk Hanem. Later, in his novel *Herodias*, he produced a famous description of the dance of Salome, probably inspired by the Egyptian dancer. For Edward Said, Flaubert's transformation of Kuchuk's material flesh into an occasion for poetic reverie forms a paradigmatic example of the mechanisms of Orientalism: the masculinized, penetrating West possesses for its own purposes the East's female 'peculiarly Oriental' sensuality. As Joseph Boone argues, Said overlooked the fact that the first exotic dancer to catch Flaubert's eye is not a female dancer but a famous male-to-female transvestite.

Kuchuk Hanem is not a proper name but means "little lady" in Turkish (*küçük hanım*), a term often applied to a child, a lover, or a famous dancer. It remains unclear if this was a name chosen by the dancer to address the colonial tourists, or if this is a careless, shorthand name used by a Western writer.

AIDA WALKER

Aida Walker worked as a director, choreographer and performer, improving Williams and Walker, her husband's vaudevillian comedy duo. She introduced her version of *Salome* in 1908, working it into *Bandanna Land*, a play performed by the company. It was highly unusual for a black Broadway show to include modern dance, but Walker deployed the figure of *Salome* successfully to position herself within the establishment of white female modern dancers, although her important role often goes unmentioned in historic accounts. At the same time she helped bring authentic Black songs and dances to a form of entertainment that had been dominated by demeaning minstrel shows. Walker and her husband became famous for their performance of the cakewalk, a dance, developed by enslaved Africans, that mixed European dance styles like the waltz with their own dance steps to perform for (and subversively mock) the slave owners. Thus, she always negotiated between her belonging to the Harlem Community and her belonging to the development of (white) modern dance.

In 1908 George Walker became ill and could not continue the run of *Bandanna Land*. Wearing her husband's male costumes, Aida Walker performed both his role and her own.

LOIE FULLER

Dancer Loie Fuller emigrated from the USA to Europe, where she was known for her sculptural costumes and her innovative and patented light design. Using special mechanisms to move huge swathes of cloth, each provided with its own color of light, she achieved cinematic effects, bringing together the human (female) body, machine, sculpture, and animal. Fuller lived with her French-Jewish partner Gabrielle Block (who always wore men's clothing) for twenty years without any negative impact on her career.

At the 1900 World's Fair in Paris, Loie Fuller was the only participant to get her own theater. While all around buildings and dwellings from the colonies were being reconstructed and women from North Africa were being paid to exhibit their daily lives at the fair and to perform traditional dances, Loie Fuller was dancing sections from *Salome*. Her technological innovations fit perfectly into the imagery of the world's fair, which was not only familiarizing the spectators with the 'foreignness' of the colonies, but was also seeking to justify colonial domination by presenting railways, telegraphs, and—especially importantly—electricity. The brutality of murder was addressed in Fuller's dance with blood red light.

In 1907 Fuller designed another play with the title *Salome* that explicitly referred to Oscar Wilde's version. She also toured with Maud Allan for a short time, helping her with her own *Salome* dance.

MAUD ALLAN

Maud Allan's *The Vision of Salome* was first produced in 1906. As a Canadian dancer, she was perceived as a foreigner in Germany and Great Britain, where she mostly performed. The visual juxtaposition of a mobile female body and a very immobile, trunkless male head was a most shocking element of her performance. 'Salome' and 'Maud Allan' became popular nicknames for queens and female impersonators of the Edwardian era and further confirmed the figure of Salome as a historical icon of 'sodomite' subjectivity.

In 1918, when Germany appeared to be winning World War I, Maud Allan, who was playing the title role in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, became involved—much like Wilde had—in a trial that ruined her career. Noel Pemberton Billing, a conservative member of the British parliament, had claimed that there was a black list in Germany that allegedly contained the names of 47,000 high-ranking 'perverts.' Among them, according to Billing, could also be found many British men who shared Wilde's preferences and who therefore could easily become targets of blackmail by German agents. Men could be convicted as sodomites merely on the evidence of having seen Salome and the 'perverse' dance of the seven veils.

Maud Allan's trial, for all of Salome's acknowledged depravities—incest, lust, murder, sadism, necrophilia—also marked the first time she had ever been accused of lesbianism. Paradoxically, it was one of a few sexual practices not present in Wilde's play.

In Britain middle-class women held all-female private theatricals—a movement called *Salomania*—to imitate Maud Allan's version of Salome's dance.

Translation: Daniel Hendrickson