

## THE UPSIDE DOWN LADY

*As her body rolled over and over, the effect was saved from monotony only because the crowd counted the turns ... And when she returned to the ring and curtsied as prettily as a princess, the audience applauded because so little a girl had proved herself at once so dainty and so strong.'*



A female acrobat, at first glance, appears to be merely an amusing sideshow in American cultural history. But the career of Ruth Budd, an acrobat who performed in circuses, vaudeville and films, actually takes historians and cultural critics to the centre of American social and cultural life from around the turn of the century to the rise of the first wave of feminism and the cohesion of new commercial amusements into a mass culture. At the height of Ruth Budd's career (in 1920) the 'woman movement' achieved its most pressing goal in the United States: the passage of the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution, granting women the right to vote.<sup>2</sup> Ruth Budd herself was known as a champion of women's suffrage; to prove that women were equal to men, she invited observers to touch her steely biceps and bragged that she could 'pick up any man twice [her] own weight and set him out on the sidewalk'.<sup>3</sup> While Ruth Budd's somersaults and swings suggested the promise (and power) of women's political activism in the early twentieth century, Budd was also a warning to

women who pursued careers, athletics or education outside domesticity. Much of the publicity surrounding Ruth Budd, for example, was a multi-layered backlash against the women's activism. The responses to two aspects of her career, in particular, cast Ruth Budd in a negative light. As Darwa—the 'female Darwin'—in a 1919 silent film, *A Scream in the Night*, she appeared to be an animal, and in her well-publicized and controversial engagement to a female impersonator, Karyl Norman in 1921, she was sexually 'deviant'.

The social status of the New Woman ('the independent, athletic, sexual and modern' woman exemplified by Ruth Budd) was closely linked with the growing business of commercial leisure around the turn of the century, including the popular institutions of vaudeville and motion pictures where Ruth Budd earned her living.<sup>4</sup> Vaudeville, a collection of disparate acts (comedians, jugglers and acrobats) marketed mainly to a family audience, emerged in the 1890s and quickly became

a national industry, with chains of theatres, controlled by a few businessmen, extending across the country.<sup>5</sup> And, in the early twentieth century, short silent films (often only a minute long) became the central attraction at movie theatres, known as nickelodeons because of the usual admission charge of a nickel. Both vaudeville and film focussed on female patrons as the key to gaining a respectable status in the early twentieth century; these industries had to transform the traditional notion that women did not belong in the public space of theatres (seen as masculine and immoral) to broaden their audiences and uplift their reputations.<sup>6</sup> As commercial amusements recruited female patrons they encouraged women's search for autonomy, public adventure and romance; young working girls sometimes defied their parents and brothers to meet their dates at vaudeville houses or movie shows, and social reformers were alarmed at the possibility of women's unchaperoned sexual activity in these public spaces.<sup>7</sup> But while these new amusements eroded patriarchal authority and Victorian notions of white women's passionlessness, they also established the sexual objectification of women as a primary pleasure of mass culture: women, as consumers and sexual spectacles to be consumed, were the currency of mass culture. In this context, a female acrobat's body and her seemingly masculine tricks are indeed a rich cultural canvas.

Historians and cultural critics have already identified the acrobat as a contentious

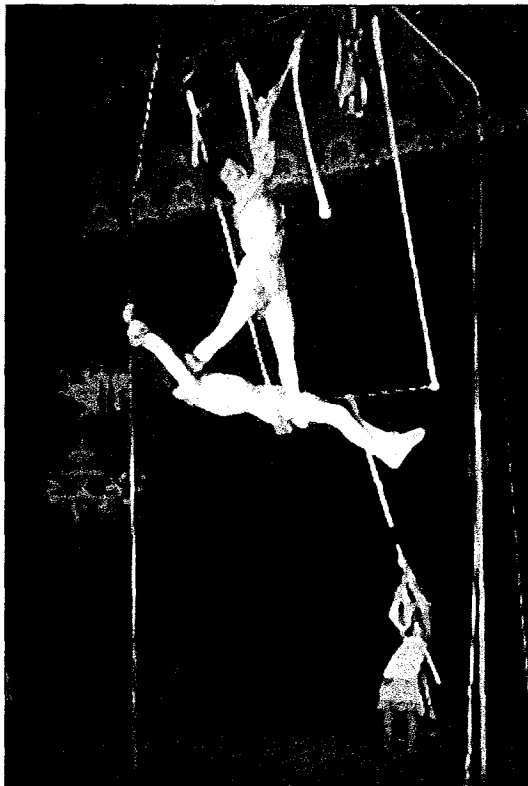
cultural symbol. As female acrobats defy—momentarily—physical limitations by flying through the air, they seem to rise above social constraints. But the female fliers return to the ground; they are drawn back into the social structures that their soaring feats seem to resist. In her analysis of the promise and perils of the New Woman, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes Djuna Barnes's fictional acrobat—Frau Mann—from her 1936 novel *Nightwood* as a symbol of the possibility of flying free of all gender codes as well as the penalty imposed on women for soaring above these codes. Frau Mann 'violates all social categories and gender restraints', while her name also suggests the label 'Mannish Lesbian', the category used to marginalize many New Women.<sup>8</sup> Ruth Budd's career reveals the tensions between freedom and restraint in mass culture, but, even more precisely, this acrobat, widely known as the 'upside down lady', embodies questions about the inversion of gender hierarchy and the social order, from notions of sexual deviancy (which were tied to gender inversions) to assertions of white women's biological duty to their race in the battles for evolutionary progress.

Ruth Budd and her brother Giles, known as the Aerial Budds, first performed in circuses and fairs around the United States in the early 1900s, and later in their career they appeared regularly in vaudeville. Their juvenile act featured Ruth Budd in the traditionally masculine position in an

aerial routine. Because Ruth Budd was several years older and many pounds heavier than her brother Giles, she undertook the tasks of carrying and manipulating her brother in the act. Giles, on the other hand, displayed his body more passively, frequently posing. While Ruth's and Giles's ages made their positions in the act 'natural', they nevertheless exploited the reversal of gender roles. A 1910 advertising pamphlet shows Giles Budd dressed as a girl, and publicity about the Aerial Budds often commented on Giles's vulnerability and Ruth's strength. One reviewer observed, "The little fellow is juggled about by the

FIGURE 1

*Ruth and Giles Budd (the Aerial Budds) circa 1910.  
Courtesy of the Allen County-Fort Wayne  
Historical Society.*



girl in a manner that makes the audience hold their breath, lest he should fall to his death.'<sup>9</sup>

In this way, Ruth and Giles Budd reversed the gender division of labour in acrobatic acts. Women were supposed to remain largely dependent on the manoeuvres of male acrobats, who were expected to be the muscular anchors of the stunts. Women usually posed while men held, twisted and swung them.<sup>10</sup> The masculine role—including stationary poses—was to undergird these moments of feminine spectacle. In his unpublished review of an acrobatic act, one vaudeville manager stated this division quite clearly: "The man in this act does some very good contortion work and some novelties in the way of acrobatic dancing ... the woman is excess baggage".<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, many performers, including Ruth Budd, often reversed this gender hierarchy with great success. A vaudeville theatre manager, for example, noted that one act was a 'hit' largely because of the novelty of the act: "[T]he woman [is] doing the work usually performed by the male partner and doing it well".<sup>12</sup>

In fact, many vaudeville acrobatic acts contained a 'sexual enigma', a tradition extending back through the history of the circus. In the late nineteenth century, as theatre historian Laurence Senelick explains, the acrobat Farini made-up one of the boys in his troupe as a woman, billing him as 'M'lle Lulu'. He sang a song in his routine that included the line, 'Wait till I'm a man!' and was celebrated as an

amazing female gymnast for seven years until a medical examination revealed the truth.<sup>13</sup> Acrobatic performances were often the occasion for gender reversals in which women undertook 'masculine' feats of muscle while men often dressed in women's clothes. Feminine apparel and display were thus central to these acts for men *and* women. Given this context, it is not surprising that Ruth Budd incorporated the reversal of gender roles in her act along with a manipulation of feminine sexual spectacle; both elements brought Ruth Budd attention, but also some disrepute.

Giles Budd's series of accidents, beginning in 1912 and ending with a broken leg in 1915, demonstrate that his vulnerability was more than inflated advertising rhetoric. Giles had four serious falls, the last forcing him out of the act. Giles Budd's 1915 injury precipitated many changes in the Budds' routine. Yet even if Giles Budd had not left the act, the Aerial Budds would have faced questions about how to make the transition from juvenile to adult performers. At the time of her brother's final accident, Ruth Budd was twenty years old, stretching the limits of a juvenile performer, and Giles Budd's maturity meant a change in the weight distribution in the act. Ruth Budd, in 1915, explained that their different weights and his leg injury made the routine increasingly difficult: 'Giles can't work very well since his leg was broken and I have to help him so much and he is quite heavy. He weighs 120 and I only weigh 106.'<sup>14</sup> Even without

Giles, however, Ruth Budd continued to structure her acrobatic act around gender inversion. Juxtaposing masculine athletics with feminine display, Ruth Budd found greater success as a single performer in vaudeville than the Aerial Budds had ever achieved, emerging as a 'feature' act in vaudeville by 1919.<sup>15</sup>

To embellish her solo performance Ruth Budd extended the song-and-dance segments and slowed down her acrobatic work; she also began to present herself in a more conventionally feminine way.

FIGURE 2

*Publicity photograph of Ruth Budd in her white union suit, circa 1916. Around this time Ruth Budd began her solo act by adding new dances and songs, such as 'The Girl with the Smile'. Courtesy of the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society.*



Appearing at a dressing table and singing about make-up, Ruth Budd began her act as a pleasing young woman eager to show-off her beauty. Yet this feminine display, similar to other women's acts in vaudeville, was only temporary in her routine, for Ruth Budd discarded her vanity and dainty persona when she launched into her aerial performance. She began her act with her new trademark song, 'The Girl with the Smile', which referred to her 'little song and dance', and did not mention acrobatics at all.<sup>16</sup> When Ruth Budd was mistakenly billed as Queen of the Air' in 1916 she complained that 'It spoils my opening. My opening song is "The Girl with the Smile" and then if I am billed like an aerial artist they wonder why I am singing and dancing'.<sup>17</sup> By contrasting her song and dance opening with her acrobatic work, Ruth Budd increased the audience's awe at her athletic feats. A 1917 *Variety* review by Sime Silverman described the disjunction between Budd's femininity and her athleticism: 'The house is surprised when they see the girl go from dresses to acrobatics and that surprise is intensified when noting what a finished gymnast Miss Budd is'.<sup>18</sup> Whereas Ruth Budd had played the masculine role in contrast to her younger brother, she created the split between masculinity and femininity chronologically in her new solo act.

With her new feminine and erotic songs and dances, Ruth Budd tried to exploit the sexualization of female athletes for her own ends in vaudeville. Historians have

noted that women's athleticism early in the twentieth century was often interpreted and marketed as sexual display. Journalists and spectators in the early twentieth century often focussed more on women's clothing and appearance than their skill.<sup>19</sup> By introducing herself as 'The Girl with the Smile', Budd may have been trying to define herself as a 'lady' athlete. The 'lady' athlete and the 'mannish' athlete were two characterizations of the sportswoman that emerged from the late nineteenth century and continued into the 1920s. In the 1880s and 1890s when middle-class and elite white women, including reformer Frances Willard, became involved in the bicycle craze, they were able to claim their femininity and refinement in contrast to rough, working-class women. Later, in the 1920s, glamorous stars in acceptably 'feminine' sports such as tennis publicly espoused sport's ability to enhance women's beauty and charm, as opposed to the dangers of masculine sports and the image of the unkempt, 'mannish' female athlete. Tennis champion Suzanne Lenglen epitomized a modern feminine ideal—active, sensual, trim, and less inhibited than the older generation of women. And she promoted this ideal not only by winning tennis matches but also by offering fashion tips and make-up advice. By emphasizing her feminine appearance in the first part of her act, Budd may have been trying to appropriate the fresh sexuality of 'lady' athletes such as Lenglen. Whatever her intentions, it is clear that her masculine identity, built on

her gender inversions, overpowered the 'ladylike' dimensions of her act. She remained primarily a 'mannish' athlete associated with the taint of sexual immorality and circus animals.

Many observers felt that her disrobing and sexual innuendoes did not match vaudeville's public notion of refinement. Her pert song and dance at the start of her act may have offered a more conventional woman than the young female acrobat who twirled her brother in mid-air; but the 'new' Ruth Budd also introduced elements of sexuality that remained somewhat controversial in vaudeville, an industry which marketed itself largely as moral entertainment for women and their families. Like Ruth Budd, other female acrobats included disrobing as a salacious element of their acts; such scenes were sometimes cut because they were too controversial. Emerie and Silvern's acrobatic routine, for example, contained an innovative disrobing scene that the manager found to be provocative. The woman, Emerie, and her male assistant, Silvern, began their act in evening clothes, and after her partner pretended to drug her glass of wine on stage, she kicked off his hat and climbed up to her trapeze where she began to strip down to tights. The manager of a prominent vaudeville theatre in Philadelphia concluded that 'This part of the act is a little tart, but, on the whole, inoffensive.'<sup>20</sup> Another manager, however, found that the disrobing in this couple's routine went too far: 'We were compelled to cut out the

disrobing act of the lady member of the team', concluded the Cleveland manager.<sup>21</sup>

It is not surprising, then, to find viewers focussed on the sexual nature of Budd's disrobing: 'We waited, we saw,' wrote one critic, 'It was worth the time ... Ruth is billed as the girl with the smile. I didn't notice the smile. Her ankles are lovely.'<sup>22</sup> An audience member's letter to Budd on 13 October 1917, points to her lack of refinement because of her sexual suggestions and appearance on stage. Criticizing her trapeze work as second-class and declaring 'Just listen, Ruth! You can't sing,' this disgruntled patron was most upset by Budd's 'immoral' attempts to arouse the audience. He refers specifically to the transition to her acrobatic uniform, beginning at the end of her 'make-up' song when her maid starts to unzip her dress: '[T]hat make-up business spoilt our idea of your act and your character. What you chanted and what you did was silly enough, but the last part of the thing was disgusting (I am no wowser—but a soldier, an officer and a man). Of course the whole thing was specially devised for that smack of immorality. There was nothing wrong with your acrobatic dress', he concluded, 'but come on like that. The dirty part is the disrobing.'<sup>23</sup> The use of sexual spectacle was thus complicated for Budd. She could reveal a sexual knowingness in contrast to her previous juvenile identity and in keeping with the sexual assertiveness of the New Woman. But these additions also left her open to charges of immorality. For Budd, respectability was indeed tenuous.

As Ruth Budd earned success with her single act in vaudeville, she also gained notoriety outside of vaudeville in a film about Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, and in her engagement to a female impersonator. These events articulate two interlocking strands of anxiety about shifting gender roles and the proper boundaries of sexuality in the early twentieth century: the consternation over 'racial' suicide and the rising attention to sexual 'deviance'. While Darwin had been optimistic about natural selection in 1871, by 1899 he pessimistically looked at America and saw 'beaten men from beaten races'.<sup>24</sup> Such cynicism and xenophobia laid the foundation for the notion of 'race suicide'. Theodore Roosevelt and others believed that women of the better classes were squandering their reproductive energies on careers and politics, while women from less civilized races produced more unfit children. The birth control movement, for example, drew on these theories, as Margaret Sanger, the movement's leader, argued that birth control would bring 'more children from the fit, less from the unfit'.<sup>25</sup> This concept was so popular that comedians joked about it on the vaudeville stage; in fact, one theatre manager ordered a performer to cut his 'Roosevelt squib regarding race suicide'.<sup>26</sup> Women who entered the traditionally male realms of sports, politics and education increasingly faced the criticism that they were wasting their reproductive capacity and injuring the 'race'.

On 14 March 1919 Ruth Budd wrote from Miami, Florida: 'You will be surprised when I tell you ... I am down here working in a picture ... It is to be called the *Female of the Species* and I am Darwa'.<sup>27</sup> Eventually retitled *A Scream in the Night*, Ruth Budd's film examined women's place in Darwin's scheme: was Darwa a mother fit to advance the race? A scientist, Professor Silvio, kidnaps a small girl, Darwa, and places her in the jungle near the Amazon River for eleven years in an attempt to prove Darwin's theory of evolution.<sup>28</sup> When Darwa returns to society, she is soon engaged to an aristocrat, but Professor Silvio disrupts the marriage plans by exposing Darwa as a 'crossing of the species, not a true woman'.<sup>29</sup> In Silvio's view Darwa's successful assimilation into society was proof of Darwinian theory. But still unsatisfied, Silvio again abducts Darwa and imprisons her with an ape. Her intellect triumphs over the ape as she tricks the ape into shooting himself. After Darwa points the gun at her head and 'pulls the trigger against the empty chamber', the ape imitates her with a loaded chamber. Darwa resists the crossing of the species or, as one publicist wrote, she escaped 'a thing worse than death'.<sup>30</sup> A *Variety* review recognized that the film was confusing, pointing out that Darwa's survival in the woods and in high society offers no proof of evolutionary theory: 'What [Silvio] seeks to prove by the experiment is hard to fathom'.<sup>31</sup> The filmmakers seem to have sacrificed scientific consistency for

'sensationalism'.<sup>32</sup> Promoters of the film, however, tried to clarify the confusion about the film's message by emphasizing that the film refuted Darwin's theories. The advertisements that they suggested for the film said that Darwa's intellectual superiority over the ape (her ability to think creatively as opposed to the ape's limited, imitative skills) disproved Darwin's connection between monkeys and humans: 'He did not consider the fact that mankind's mentality is a God-given gift unto itself', stated one editorial that publicists recommended printing in newspapers to create interest in the film.<sup>33</sup>

FIGURE 3.

*Ruth Budd as Darwa, the female Darwin, from her feature film, The Scream in the Night, 1919. She complained about being treated like a monkey on the set. Courtesy of the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society.*



While some advertisements pointed out that Darwa distinguished herself from any ape ancestry at the film's conclusion, other accounts of Ruth Budd as well as her vaudeville and circus associations clearly positioned her as a monkey. This acrobat continued to convey the darker side of athletic women and evolutionary scenarios: she was a monkey in the hierarchy of civilization. A newspaper headline, for example, proclaimed that 'Movies Made Ruth Budd Real "Monkey"'. In the article Budd complained about the ape costume she wore, the swinging acrobatics she performed and the real monkeys on the set who threw coconuts at her. 'I had to drop twenty-five or thirty feet from the top of a banyan tree into a palm tuft and swing by my improvised tail, which threatened to come out at any moment', Budd explained in the article.<sup>34</sup> Budd's previous association with the circus also suggested her affinity with animals, for the circus was considered disreputable partly because of its reliance on animal acts and partly because of its popularity with rural ('unsophisticated') America. Some vaudeville performers, in fact, attempted to uplift their reputations by declaring that they would not appear on a vaudeville bill that included any animal acts.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in the early twentieth century several vaudeville acts featured monkeys in acrobatic work, solidifying the sense that acrobats were monkeys. In 'The Monkey Hippodrome', for example, monkeys played in an orchestra, juggled with their feet, performed feats of strength



and disrobed during their aerial act, according to a manager's review in 1913.<sup>36</sup>

The correlation of women and monkeys had been established earlier by Victorian scientists in their accounts of evolution. Although *A Scream in the Night*, released in 1919, should not be considered in a Victorian context, this film about evolution starring a woman swinging through trees in the jungle was a powerful reminder of this late nineteenth-century framework. In the evolutionary scheme, a woman often appeared as an 'arrested male', occupying a position beneath European men in the evolutionary hierarchy and seething with the race's 'base' characteristics. Victorian scientists often saw women as children and as savages; they pointed out that women, like children, were physically smaller and more delicate than men, and they argued that women's skulls, skeletons, and behaviours resembled 'savages'. Unlike men, but like primates, they were apt to 'resort to biting and scratching', according to one scientist.<sup>37</sup> The woman/monkey may have solidified the status of European men, many of whom were troubled by the implications of evolution. 'Kinship with animals', explains historian Cynthia Russett, 'raised disturbing reflections, not least the possibility that civilization was no more than a thin veneer over the savage self.'<sup>38</sup> Women like Ruth Budd, then, symbolized an evolutionary stage that white men had already surpassed, and they provided evidence of 'masculine excellence'.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, as these examples show, Budd was probably the wrong performer to disprove the human connection with a primate past. Her inversion of gender roles in the film and in vaudeville marked her, for example, as a 'less civilized' creature. As Gail Bederman has demonstrated, the stages of evolution from 'simple savagery' to 'advanced and valuable civilization' were distinguished by the extent of their 'sexual differentiation'. While 'civilized' men and women embraced divergent spheres of activity and had different identities, gender differences were not as pronounced among 'primitives'. 'Savage women', explains Bederman, 'were aggressive, carried heavy burdens, and did all sorts of 'masculine' hard labor'.<sup>40</sup>

This film's close resemblance to the popular Tarzan narratives of the early twentieth century implies that Budd was less a female Darwin than a female Tarzan. The comparison with Tarzan further exaggerated her masculine identity. *A Scream in the Night* was an adaptation of the well-known book and film, *Tarzan of the Apes*. Edgar Rice Burroughs published *Tarzan of the Apes* as a magazine serial in 1912 and as a book in 1914; the first of forty-five movie versions was produced in 1918, one year before Budd began working on *A Scream in the Night*. Orphaned by aristocratic parents in Africa, Tarzan is raised by an ape to become a great fighter in the jungle; he learns from books left behind by his parents, and successfully uses his father's hunting knife in his battles with stronger, bigger apes. As a young

adult, this human 'king of the apes' falls in love with a white woman, Jane Porter, who arrives in Africa after a mutiny. He follows Jane to America where Tarzan realizes his noble heritage. Like Tarzan, Darwa grows up in the jungle, becomes quite proficient in athletic skills of survival, and then embraces her position among 'socialites' in America. Tarzan's primitive upbringing and elite family background combine to make him a particularly powerful symbol of the masculine ideal in the early twentieth century. He was an example of how men could be revitalized by adopting some aspects of savagery. Tarzan's boyhood among the apes made him strong and aggressive because he escaped the feminizing influences of civilization that many observers believed sapped the virility of most men. Budd's association with Tarzan thus encouraged viewers to see her less as a virtuous woman (as the film's conclusion tries to convince spectators that she is) than as a masculine woman.

Much of the portrait of Darwa casts a negative light on Budd's appropriation of masculine roles on stage and screen; yet some positive discussion of Budd's athleticism show that the characterization of female athletes as masculine and savage did not stand alone. Darwinian concerns about the fitness of the Anglo-Saxon race were also the basis of the promotion of athletics for women, and of Ruth Budd's film role in particular. The producers of *A Scream in the Night* tapped into the support for women's sport as a way to

improve maternal health and thus stave off race suicide. A pioneer in women's physical education, Dudley Sargent, argued, for example, that 'good form in figure and good form in motion ... tend to inspire admiration in the opposite sex and therefore play an important part in what is termed "sexual selection"'.<sup>41</sup>

Advertisements for Budd's film bragged that the star was a 'perfect specimen of womanhood' and emphasized how acrobatics had helped Budd overcome ailments. In particular, publicity compared Ruth Budd favourably with vaudeville swimmer and diver Annette Kellerman, another woman who had benefited from the healing powers of sport.<sup>42</sup> Athletic regimes allegedly cured childhood illness for Ruth Budd as well as Kellerman, and remade them into perfect specimens of womanhood. Kellerman reportedly began to swim because of her weak legs, while Budd's father put her 'through a course of calisthenics later setting up rings and horizontal bars' to cure her slight physique.<sup>43</sup> 'I started acrobatic work when a very small child', explained Budd in 1919, 'by the doctor's orders'.<sup>44</sup> The phrase 'specimens of womanhood' signals that these women were hailed by scientists—and were presumably fit for motherhood. The athletic woman—perhaps the intimidating acrobat who can lift men twice her size—could be contained through maternal service and racial uplift. Women's expanding roles in education, sport and various professions may have inspired fears of racial suicide, but the

sporting woman's maternal 'fitness' was a soothing concept.

Sexually attractive and assertive, Ruth Budd was thus a symbol of the end of weak femininity; such a daring woman represented the strong woman that female reformers and physical-education professionals had hailed as model of emancipated womanhood since the late nineteenth century. The producers of *A Scream in the Night* recommended disseminating Ruth Budd's claim that 'women are not the weaker sex'. 'In this picture ... Miss Budd accomplishes feats requiring strength and agility that appear to be beyond a girl so winsomely feminine', asserted one article: 'Certainly no member of her sex and few of the opposite sex, can swing through forty or fifty feet of space.'<sup>45</sup>

Despite some positive interpretations of and justifications for Budd's gender inversions, her 'masculinity' brought her sexuality into question. While the film had raised questions about Budd's fitness as a mother and doubts about women's roles outside motherhood, her affair with a female impersonator suggested that women who crossed into 'male' social realms were also sexually abnormal. In one case, Budd was a primate; in the other case, she was a 'pervert'. But in both scenarios, Budd seemed to reject maternity and thus threaten the gender order and the health of civilization.

During a tour of Australia in 1917-18, Ruth Budd met George Peduzzi, a female

impersonator billed as the Creole Fashion Plate. They performed on the same bill at the Tivoli Theatre in Melbourne during the last week of August in 1917.<sup>46</sup> Three years later Budd again crossed paths with Peduzzi, who by this time had changed his stage name to the deliberately androgynous Karyl Norman. Following Norman and Ruth Budd's announcement in August 1921 that they planned to marry the following June, they often performed on the same vaudeville bills: Norman joined Budd from his seat in the

FIGURE 4

*George Peduzzi (whose stage name was Karyl Norman or The Creole Fashion Place). He probably sent this picture to her in the years after their first meeting (in 1917) when they were travelling in different parts of the United States and England. Courtesy of the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society.*



auditorium or appeared as a separate act on the bill. When Norman and Budd called off their marriage one month before the wedding, they ignited curiosity about the nature of their relationship and the cause of the break-up. Her affair stirred up gossip about Budd, as one acquaintance wrote to Budd that someone 'had said a number of catty things against you' after she and Norman split up.<sup>47</sup> Their performances together, the accompanying reviews as well as dialogues about their upcoming marriage and hostile break-up fused these two figures in the public spotlight.

The engagement of an 'unnatural' woman and an 'unnatural' man pointed not to a heterosexual union but to the gay subculture of the early twentieth century. Definitions of sexual perversion in the early twentieth century depended most on the reversal of gender roles. Historian George Chauncey has shown that early twentieth-century definitions of abnormal sexual identity were tied to the inversion of gender status, rather than a binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality based on the choice of sexual partners. Normal men, for example, were contrasted with 'fairies' who were identified not through their sexual activity with other men, but through their womanliness.<sup>48</sup>

Sexologists, in addition, linked women's 'unnatural' sexuality to women's 'masculine' traits as well as their feminist political aims. They often interpreted women's cross-dressing and athletics as signs of 'sexual inversion' and described

lesbians as being masculine in appearance and personality.<sup>49</sup> In the hands of sexologists, the label of sexual inversion became a tool for challenging and discrediting the New Woman, including women's romantic friendships and feminist goals. To counter women's expanding roles, some sexologists tied their definitions of unnatural, inverted sexuality to their eugenicist beliefs. Havelock Ellis, for example, was concerned that professional and political women were selfish for neglecting their primary roles as childbearers and childrearsers.<sup>50</sup>

Published accounts of this failed romance hinted at the abnormality of Ruth Budd and Karyl Norman's inversion of gender roles, and hence their 'perverted' sexuality. One author explained the reversals of Ruth Budd and Karyl Norman in terms of eagles and doves. 'Eagles and doves have tried to mate before without success', the author explained, 'But always the eagle was a man ... and the dove was a maid—some gentle, cooing creature who wanted nothing save a cozy love nest.'<sup>51</sup> This author tied Ruth Budd's gender inversion to the physical inversions in her acrobatic act, connecting his description of her as an eagle to her 'head-first' plunges on stage: 'Ruth Budd takes that breath-catching swoop at full speed, darting head first down the thread-like cable.'<sup>52</sup> Theatre critic Karl K. Kitchen, in addition, explained, '[I]f the Creole Fashion Plate was known to possess certain feminine characteristics, his prospective bride was

equally noted for certain masculine traits. For while Karyl Norman affected feminine furbelows on the stage, Miss Budd appeared in the most mannish "tailor-mades" in private life.<sup>53</sup> The suggestion of Budd's off-stage transvestism and her well-known athleticism clearly point to the category of the sexual invert, a label that many late nineteenth-century sexologists attached to women who attempted to 'pass' as men.

Budd alleged that the affair was actually a publicity stunt, claiming that Norman 'regarded his engagement to [Budd] merely as the means for keeping himself in the eyes of the public'.<sup>54</sup> She sued Norman for 'breach of promise', and reportedly won \$8,000.<sup>55</sup> Norman countered with an alternative explanation, that there was 'Too much mother-in-law'.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, both performers' mothers worked closely with their children, helping with their acts and managing their professional engagements. Karl Kitchen noted that 'when the two performers found themselves together their two mothers were not far distant'.<sup>57</sup> Norman alleged that Ruth Budd had 'insisted on having her mother travel along with them on the honeymoon and afterward when [they] were on the road'.<sup>58</sup> While designed as an attack on Budd, this explanation actually calls attention to Norman's effeminacy. His attachment to his mother marks him as weak and feminine, while Budd, as a woman, would have seemed to be more 'naturally' in need of a chaperone. Norman's reason for the failed

engagement would also have been familiar to fans of vaudeville comedy; he relied on vaudeville's popular 'mother-in-law' jokes.<sup>59</sup>

Descriptions of the break-up also undermined the New Woman. Attacking Ruth Budd's career, Norman allegedly had tried to transform Ruth Budd into an ideal wife. Budd claimed that Norman had demanded that she give up her overprotective mother, leave the stage and travel with Norman as his dresser: 'Well, I even went so far as to agree to that,' confessed Budd, 'to give up everything ... and just travel about helping him dress himself'.<sup>60</sup> Some observers speculated, however, that she was not qualified to be Norman's dresser. The *Baltimore American* reported that Norman 'questioned whether she would be altogether successful in dressing him'.<sup>61</sup> Budd did not appear to be sufficiently feminine, caring or subservient.

Like other female impersonators, Norman was linked in a variety of ways to a gay male subculture. Female impersonator Julian Eltinge was reportedly popular with gay men in particular, although he publicly disassociated himself from disreputable female impersonators, who were more openly associated with gay men.<sup>62</sup> Eltinge proclaimed his virility in the press, using publicity photographs that showed him in athletic garb and boxing gloves jabbing at another man. Such attempts to assert his 'true' manhood contrast with Bert Savoy, a female impersonator who regularly used 'she' and 'her' to refer to himself, and also

used slang from gay subculture in his routine. One line from his act, 'dishing the dirt', was identified as 'fag parlance' in a theatrical publication.<sup>63</sup> Norman, in addition, became a performer at the Pansy Club, which opened in 1930; the club offered entertainment resembling 'drag balls', the occasions which featured the effeminate homosexual or the 'fairy' on display in glamorous women's clothes.<sup>64</sup> This club and Norman's career exemplify what historian George Chauncey has called the 'pansy craze', the period from 1920–1933, in which gay men were increasingly visible in New York city's central entertainment district—Times Square. A few comments from vaudeville theatre managers reveal that they discouraged the appearances of effeminate men on their stages. In 1910 Ned Hastings, the manager of Keith's Hippodrome in Cleveland, criticized the 'Clipper Quartette' for just that reason: 'Most of the time is taken up by a Dutchman chasing a "sissy" about the stage. They were laughed at and applauded, but the act would have a more intelligent appeal if ... much of their brand of comedy [was] eliminated.'<sup>65</sup>

Though a lesbian subculture was less established than a gay male subculture, lesbians were increasingly visible in the 1920s as sexual experimentation, particularly bisexuality but also lesbianism, was in vogue. Several male impersonators who worked in variety and vaudeville in the late nineteenth century had long-term romantic relationships with

women, but their private lives were not well-known to the theatre-going public.<sup>66</sup> By the 1920s, performers' off-stage romances were more visible. The lesbian on stage was one attraction of Harlem to those seeking adventure in the 1920s. Male impersonator Gladys Bentley, for example, wore men's clothes on stage and on the street, and was married (dressed in a tuxedo) in a civil ceremony in New Jersey to a woman. The broader cultural support for revolt also helped lesbians establish a community in Greenwich Village in the 1920s. But, as Lillian Faderman has shown, bisexuality was more accepted than lesbianism; radical men in the Greenwich Village milieu often pressured women to give up relationships with other women. Despite the support for sexual freedom in the 1920s, the lesbian was a 'pariah'. In particular, the lesbian became an obstacle to the post-World War I standard of companionate marriage, a union that was supposed to feature cooperation, friendship and sexual satisfaction for husband and wife.<sup>67</sup> In this period, then, it was quite easy to explain the failure of Budd's and Norman's romance by intimating that Budd was a mannish lesbian and Norman a 'sissy'.

Ruth Budd's fame in vaudeville faded by the late 1920s and, in contrast to the risqué publicity that had once surrounded her, she settled down to a fairly conventional life. In 1927 she married Ray Hanna, a stage hand and electrician in Fort Wayne, Indiana, who had corresponded with her for sixteen years. After her marriage she

continued to perform, but her star in vaudeville had fallen. Considering the gender novelty of her routine and the gossip surrounding her affair with Karyl Norman, perhaps it is fitting that she was replaced on one vaudeville bill in 1927 by a transvestite male acrobat, Barquette. A review of Barquette's appearance at the Palace late in his career jokingly commented that theatre management had forgotten to obtain the 'endorsements of Ruth Budd and Karyl Norman' for Barquette's act.<sup>68</sup> Her scandal thus lingered on after she had embarked on her married life in the American midwest. When she injured her wrists in a fall at a Los Angeles theatre in 1929 she sued the theatre and used the settlement to finance her retirement, although she did come back to the stage (mainly in Fort Wayne) several times in the 1930s. Along with performing intermittently, she opened a small grocery store and worked there as a clerk with her husband and her parents. She died on 11 December 1968.

Whether hanging from a tree using her make-shift monkey's tail or swinging across the vaudeville stage on her trapeze, Ruth Budd's inverted female form suggested a variety of social disruptions, from inverted sexuality to evolutionary collapse. An acrobat's bodily tricks and irreverent play with gender roles became a symbol of women's varied challenges to patriarchal hierarchy in the early twentieth century. And, as Ruth Budd's tainted reputation suggests, the changes in women's social status were uneven and, in

many ways, unwelcome. Circus monkeys, Tarzan, Darwa and Karyl Norman. All were links in a chain of deviance and disrepute for 'the upside down lady'. Her career certainly shows the freedoms for women in vaudeville to perform in 'men's' roles and to use a more sexually aggressive persona; and Budd was also lauded as an emblem of the end of Victorian constraints on women. But Ruth Budd also symbolized the dark side of the new freedoms for women: her resemblance to a monkey and the suggestion of her perverted sexuality pointed to the dangers of women outside of and unfit for maternity and marriage. Her gender inversion on stage proved to be a powerful and enduring foundation for doubts about her morality and normality. ~

M. ALISON KIBLER

*M. Alison Kibler is a departmental visitor in the Centre for Women's Studies at the Australian National University.*

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## NOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Historian Wilton Eckley describing acrobat and circus star Lillian Leitzel, whose career overlapped with Ruth Budd's. See Eckley, *The American Circus* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), p. 182.
- <sup>2</sup> Nancy Cott explains that 'feminism', a twentieth-century development which contrasted with the nineteenth-century 'woman movement', overlapped with the suffrage cause. Feminists were a minority presence in the 'woman suffrage' movement but influenced its ideology with their emphasis on rights as opposed to woman's moral influence. See Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 37.
- <sup>3</sup> 'She Can Carry Ballot to Box', 25 September 1916, clipping, box 1, vol. 7, Ruth Budd Collection (hereafter cited as RBC), Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society, Fort Wayne, Indiana.
- <sup>4</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working women and leisure in turn-of-the-century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), p. 7. See also, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The New Woman as Androgyne: Social disorder and gender crisis, 1870-1936', in her *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 245-96.
- <sup>5</sup> See Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- <sup>6</sup> See Kathy Peiss, 'Commercial Leisure and the "Woman Question"', in Richard Butsch (ed.), *For Fun and Profit: The transformation of leisure into consumption* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 105-17.
- <sup>7</sup> See Peiss, *Cheap Amusements* and Lauren Rabinovitz, 'Temptations of Pleasure: Nickelodeons, amusement parks, and the sights of female sexuality', *Camera Obscura* 23 (Spring 1990), 71-88.
- <sup>8</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, 'The New Woman as Androgyne', p. 291. Film historians have turned to the anonymous female acrobat in the 1901 Edison film, *Trapeze Disrobing Act*, to describe the gendered power relations in spectatorship. This acrobat has served as an emblem of women's captivity as a sexual object in popular film in the early twentieth century for she reveals the structure of the male gaze and female spectacle. The film shows two men watching a woman's trapeze act. They become increasingly exuberant as the woman takes off her skirt, blouse and stockings and then performs a flip in her undergarments. Robert Allen concludes that the acrobat in *Trapeze Disrobing Act* was 'silenced, frozen in time and captured with the film's frame.' Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 271. See also, Judith Mayne, 'Uncovering the Female Body', in John Fell (ed.), *Before Hollywood: Turn of the century American film* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1987), 63-7.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Exceeds Speed Limit: Acrobat act sixty miles an hour produced at the gaiety', April 1911, clipping, box 1, vol. 3, RBC.
- <sup>10</sup> *New York Hippodrome Winter Circus*, 11 February 1915, box 1, folder 6, RBC. First opening its doors in 1904, the Hippodrome was a huge theatre, accommodating circuses throughout the winter months.
- <sup>11</sup> Report Book 4, p. 44, Keith/Albee Collection, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, Iowa, USA (hereafter cited as KAC).
- <sup>12</sup> Report Book 1, p. 6, KAC.
- <sup>13</sup> Laurence Senelick, 'Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural origins of glamour drag and male impersonation on the nineteenth-century stage', in Lesley Ferris (ed.), *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on cross-dressing* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 83-4.



- <sup>14</sup> Ruth Budd to Ray Hanna, 13 June 1915, box 1, vol. 6, RBC.
- <sup>15</sup> A feature act was second only to the headline act out of the ten to twelve acts on a vaudeville bill.
- <sup>16</sup> Song typescript, box 1, vol. 6, RBC.
- <sup>17</sup> Ruth Budd to Ray Hanna, 24 August 1916, box 1, vol. 7, RBC.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Ruth Budd', *Variety*, 22 June 1917, clipping, box 1, vol. 7, RBC.
- <sup>19</sup> Helen Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds: Women, sport and sexuality* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 68.
- <sup>20</sup> Report Book 6, p. 234, KAC.
- <sup>21</sup> Report Book 7, p. 11, KAC.
- <sup>22</sup> 'St. Havens Tops Bill', *Morning Oregonian*, 3 June 1918, clipping, box 2, vol. 8, RBC.
- <sup>23</sup> Anonymous fan to Ruth Budd, 30 October 1917, box 2, vol. 8, RBC, emphasis in the original.
- <sup>24</sup> Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, fitness, and sport in American society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 222.
- <sup>25</sup> Margaret Sanger, 'Why Not Birth Control in America?' *Birth Control Review*, May 1919, pp. 10–11, quoted in Linda Gordon, *Birth Control in America: Woman's body, woman's right* (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 281.
- <sup>26</sup> Report Book 6, p. 228, KAC.
- <sup>27</sup> Ruth Budd to Ray Hanna, 14 March 1919, box 2, vol. 9, RBC.
- <sup>28</sup> 'A Scream in the Night', *Exhibitors' Campaign Book*, p. 8, box 2, vol. 9, RBC.
- <sup>29</sup> 'A Scream in the Night', *Exhibitors' Campaign Book*, p. 8.
- <sup>30</sup> 'A Scream in the Night', *Exhibitors' Campaign Book*, p. 8.
- <sup>31</sup> 'A Scream in the Night', *Variety*, 24 October 1919. Quoted in *Variety's Film Reviews, 1907–1920*, vol. 1 (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1983).
- <sup>32</sup> 'A Scream in the Night', *Variety*, 24 October, 1919, quoted in *Variety's Film Reviews*.
- <sup>33</sup> 'Man's Power of Reason', *Exhibitors' Campaign Book*, p. 6.
- <sup>34</sup> 'Movies Made Ruth Budd Real "Monkey"', n.d., clipping, box 2, vol. 9, RBC.
- <sup>35</sup> Actress Annie Yeamans left vaudeville allegedly 'because she said she couldn't get on with the educated horse'. 'The Matinee Girl', *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 11 June 1904, p. 2. Furthermore, the police reportedly became involved in maintaining cultural order when they forbade blackface, acrobatic and animal acts to appear at the Actors' Fund Benefit, a charity production that included many vaudeville as well as dramatic performers. See 'Big Actors' Fund Benefit Given by White Rats', *The Player*, 6 May 1910, p. 17.
- <sup>36</sup> Report Book 15, p. 114, KAC; One trainer had a monkey perform on a swinging trapeze and the rings. Report Book 5, p. 136, KAC.
- <sup>37</sup> Carl Vogt, *Lectures on Man* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1864), p. 180, quoted in Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian construction of womanhood* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 56.
- <sup>38</sup> Russett, *Sexual Science*, p. 195.
- <sup>39</sup> Russett, *Sexual Science*, p. 205.
- <sup>40</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A cultural history of gender and race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 25.
- <sup>41</sup> Dudley A. Sargent, 'How Can I Have a Graceful Figure?', *Ladies Home Journal* 29 (February 1912), p. 15, quoted in Susan Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and sexuality in twentieth century women's sport* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), pp. 19–20.
- <sup>42</sup> Cahn, *Coming On Strong*, p. 257.

- <sup>43</sup> 'Ruth Budd is Perfect Specimen of Womanhood', *Exhibitors' Campaign Book*, p. 8.
- <sup>44</sup> 'A Bit of Budd', *Variety*, 26 December 1919, p. 30.
- <sup>45</sup> 'Women are not the Weaker Sex, Says this Movie Star', *Exhibitors' Campaign Book*, p. 6.
- <sup>46</sup> Budd toured Australia and New Zealand from August 1917 to February 1918, performing on the Tivoli circuit in major cities such as Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne and Auckland. Looking back on her international career in 1945, she recalled, among other things, the boomerangs she had received as gifts in Australia. See Helyn Hitchcock, "'The Girl with the Smile' Acclaimed by Audiences Here, Abroad', *News-Sentinel* (Fort Wayne), 14 December 1945, clipping, box 3, vol. 20, RBC.
- <sup>47</sup> Letter to Ruth Budd, n.d., box 5, miscellaneous letter folder, RBC.
- <sup>48</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), pp. 55-6. See also, Ullman, "'The Twentieth Century Way": Female impersonation and sexual practice in turn-of-the-century America', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5.4 (1995), 573-600.
- <sup>49</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A history of lesbian life in twentieth century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 46; See also, Jonathan N. Katz, 'The Invention of Heterosexuality', *Socialist Review* 90.1 (1990), 7-34. Julien Chevalier, a French sexologist, connected women's participation in 'masculine' sports and politics to female sexual inversion in his 1893 *Inversion sexuelle*.
- <sup>50</sup> For more on the famous sexologists, see Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, chapter 2.
- <sup>51</sup> 'Why the Strangest of Engagements Has Been Broken Off', clipping, 1922, box 2, vol. 12, RBC.
- <sup>52</sup> 'Why the Strangest of Engagements Has Been Broken Off'.
- <sup>53</sup> Karl Kitchen, 'Cancel of a Wedding Booking', *New York World*, 13 August 1922, box 2, vol. 12, RBC.
- <sup>54</sup> 'Ex-Fiancee Describes Wreck of "Fashion Plate's" Romance', 4 July 1922, clipping, box 2, vol. 12, RBC. This may have been a plausible explanation to the public, for by 1931 there were other cases in which male entertainers associated with femininity, female impersonation and gay subculture, also set up faux marriages. George Chauncey recounts the marriage of Gene Malin, a performer who had been a female impersonator and then became a 'pansy'. His marriage to Christine Williams and their quick divorce led reporters to contemplate whether or not he was homosexual. The *Daily News* asked, 'Is he—?' See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, pp. 314-318.
- <sup>55</sup> '\$8,000 Mends Broken Heart', *Zit's Theatrical Newspaper*, 23 May 1925, clipping, box 2, vol. 14, RBC.
- <sup>56</sup> '\$8,000 Mends Broken Heart'.
- <sup>57</sup> Kitchen, 'Cancel of a Wedding Booking'.
- <sup>58</sup> 'He'll Wed, Sure But Get Heart Balm, Try and Get It', *Daily News*, 1 July 1922, clipping, box 2, vol. 12, RBC.
- <sup>59</sup> At their most graphic, mother-in-law jokes drew the censure of managers. In 1903 Carl Lothrop, manager of Keith's Theatre in Boston, instructed Mr and Mrs Robyns to 'cut that portion of [your] opening song in which the coffin full of cheese is mistaken for the remains of a mother-in-law'. Report Book (1902-1903), p. 282, KAC.
- <sup>60</sup> 'Ex-Fiancee Describes Wreck of "Fashion Plate's" Romance'.

- <sup>61</sup> 'Ex-Fiancee Describes Wreck of "Fashion Plate's" Romance'.
- <sup>62</sup> Ullman, "'The Twentieth Century Way'", pp. 590-91.
- <sup>63</sup> Laurence Senelick, 'Lady and the Tramp: Drag differentials in the progressive era', in his *Gender in Performance: The presentation of difference in the performing arts*, (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992), pp. 37-8.
- <sup>64</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, p. 4.
- <sup>65</sup> Report Book 11, p. 22, KAC.
- <sup>66</sup> Senelick, 'Boys and Girls', pp. 90-93.
- <sup>67</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, chapter 3.
- <sup>68</sup> 'Barbette in Amazing Feats at the Palace', clipping, n.d., Barbette Clipping File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library-Lincoln Center, New York, New York. For more on Barbette, see Francis Steegmuller, 'Onward and Upward with the Arts: An angel, a flower, a bird'. Someone wrote about Barbette's replacement of Budd in the margin of *Zits Theatrical Magazine*, 15 October, 1927, clipping, box 3, vol. 18, RBC.

