WHAT A MAN’S GOTTA DO?
Masculinities in Performance

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Acknowledgements

This book was in part enabled by a research project, "Marking Masculinities", supported under the Australian Research Council’s Discovery funding scheme (project number DP0210310) and Dr Bollen is the recipient of an Australian Research Council Post Doctoral Fellowship within that project. It is also indebted to the research project “Stage on Screen”, supported under the Australian Research Council’s Linkages funding scheme (project number LP0218607). We are grateful to the director and staff of Shafston College, the UNE Brisbane Campus, for their generosity in making available their facilities for the two-day conference in April 2004 where many of the essays in this book were first presented. We would also like to acknowledge the one-day conference on masculinities organised by CALLTS at the University of New England in December 2005 where the material was extended and developed. On behalf of CALLTS we would like to express our gratitude for the financial support of the University of New England, through the School of English, Communication and Theatre, the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research), Professor Peter Flood, all of whom have made the publication possible. Major thanks are due to those who worked as research assistants on the project, including Heather Attrill, Linda Brainwood, Di Chambers, Jeremy Gadd, Graham Seaman, Nicola Speden, Leigh Summers and Mary Walsh. Thanks are also due to the administrative and technical staff in the School of English, Communication and Theatre at UNE, Gill Willis, Helena Davies and Peter O’Donohue, for their help, to our workmates at the University of New England (both those in the School of English, Communication and Theatre, and in the multidisciplinary sexualities research group UNESEX), and those at the University of Queensland and Flinders University. The same is true of our friends and colleagues in the discipline of Theatre Studies throughout Australia and beyond, and especially the members of ADSA, the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies, who have given us invaluable support and feedback on papers at numerous conferences. On a personal level we would like to express our thanks to Joseph Ting and Kent Laverack.
Performing shamelessness: Leigh Bowery, Copi and queer body physicality

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In his musical, Taboo, about the London nightclub of the same name, the pop singer Boy George has created a theatrical character of his friend, Australian Leigh Bowery. The Bowery character says: “I feel no shame”. This chapter discusses the idea that the performance of defiant shamelessness remakes identity in new ways for queerness. It argues that shamelessness is physically presented and can be distinguished from verbalised identity.

Shameless bodies

Leigh Bowery acted Madame Garbo in a 1993 British production of Copi’s The Homosexual or the Difficulty of Sexpressing Oneself (Tilley 1997: 207-8). The dramatic character of Madame Garbo is probably derivative of

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1 I saw Taboo in London, 26 June 2002, with Mark Little playing Leigh Bowery.
2 An early version of this chapter was given at the Exploding Dandy conference, Artspace, Sydney, 23 February 2002.
3 For a description of the 1976 Australian production, see Tait 1997.
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burlesque male-to-female drag interpretations imitative of Greta Garbo’s on-screen presence in a range of characters. An explanation of the other identity transitions in Copi’s play is even more complicated.

Body performance artist Bowery’s embrace of drag artist Copi’s transgender dramatic character Garbo suggests more than a striking enactment of layered performative identities (Butler 1993). Bowery grew up in Melbourne and studied fashion at RMIT before moving to London in the late 1970s. Once there, Bowery began sewing and constructing what can only be described as body art. He shifted from designing unique clothing for himself to radically changing his body—that is, he costumed his body and face to a theatrical extreme and, for example, in one photographed period he also covered his exposed skin with blue paint. At the time of the Garbo role, Bowery was known for imaginatively and uniquely rearranging and distorting the external contours of his body with corsets, padded protuberances and masks. In redesigning the actual shape of his body, Bowery visually contested assumptions about identity and exposed how a body’s surface manifests the prescriptive norms of social identity in its surface features. His art belongs in a category of artistic practice that progresses from initially appropriating alternative fantastic identities through dress, to actively subverting the gender divide as a social idea, to reinventing the body’s physique and, by implication, its physiology. Perhaps such an artistic progression is inevitable with artistic practice that questions how the seen body dominates beliefs about gender identity and sexuality. The transitions in Bowery’s “looks” can be viewed in the photographs produced and exhibited by Fergus Greer (2002). Greer’s photographs of these “looks” are divided by years. From 1988 Bowery’s face is mostly hidden in the costume, often covered by an extension of the dress fabric, and there are only four out of approximately forty-three “looks” that show his theatrically made-up facial features (Greer 2002: 21, 85, 89, 153). On the other hand his genital area is displayed in seven “looks”, but again made-up as part of the costume rather than exposed as ‘naked’.

Copi’s 1969 play is set in Siberia in a narrative about Garbo trying to elope to China with the character Irina. The Argentinean playwright Copi performed as a drag artist in Europe and was familiar with its milieu where drag queens replicate the appearance and gestures if not the speech of popular culture’s fantasies of femaleness. In Copi’s play, however, the process of interpreting identity goes much further than cross-dressing male to female; as the narrative unfolds, the main characters have all had the ‘operation’ in Casablanca. The play presents spoken text in which the
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characters gradually reveal how they have bodily assumed other gender identities. Garbo has had a female-to-male—or should that be hermaphrodite—change through a penis transplant, and she is in love with Irina who has had a male-to-female sex change and is pregnant, until she miscarries. A metatheatrical reference here might be the ingénue character of Irina in Chekhov’s (1991) *Three Sisters* who aspires to leave her provincial home and find great romantic passion. By way of satirical contrast, Irina’s sexual promiscuity is central to the narrative in Copi’s play. The father of Irina’s child is unknown; it could be Garbo, her husband General Garbenko, one of the Cossacks from the railway station or General Pushkin or even Irina’s guardian, Mrs Simpson. The dialogue in Copi’s drama describes a transgender world of perverse sexual attachments. Irina’s textual body is a fantasy of unrestricted youthful transgender crossings and physiology.

Bowery acting Garbo would have said to Mrs Simpson (Madre):

GARBO: I had the operation in Casablanca too, Mrs Simpson. I now have a man’s penis.

MADRE: I don’t believe it.

GARBO: Feel it.

MADRE: And Captain Garbenko?

GARBO: I had the operation when I was twenty-seven, against my will.

MADRE: My daughter and I changed our sex of our own free will, Madame. Now good evening to you.

GARBO: Mrs Simpson.

MADRE: Yes, Mrs Garbo?

GARBO: Your daughter is expecting my child.

MADRE: I’ll go and fetch her.

The MADRE exits. CAPTAIN GARBENKO enters.

GARBENKO: Hell’s Bells! I’ve killed at least three wolves in less than two miles. It’s becoming impossible to leave your own house! Just look at that! One of them ripped off half my sleeve! Listen Nikita, you don’t need seventeen dogs to pull one sled. You could at least leave me three or four. How do you think I can get along with just your chihuaha [sic] to pull me? Anyway he’s pissed all over the place, your dirty little chihuaha! The next time I’ll throw him to the wolves. (Copi 1976: 44)
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The geographical setting of the play parallels the social positioning of the character's sexual identities; the raucous conversation establishes a parallel between geography and sexuality. The play presents a reality, albeit as black comedy, in which the norm for all the characters is sex reversal, in a narrative where being a social outcast is reclaimed as an adventurous life. The wolves might be a covert metaphor for a vigilant hostile environment but they are also slang for sexual predators. This play validates how an ostracised queer community on the margins of so-called civilised society might be self-contained.

Why was I not surprised to discover that Bowery was attracted to acting the character of Garbo? In performance he embodied her to cultish acclaim, cross-dressed with Russian fur trim (Tilley 1997: 207–8). *The Homosexual or the Difficulty of Sexpressing Oneself* normalises a world of fluid gender identities and sex reversals. The characters are not who they seem to be. Here, the characters can talk freely about shifting geographies of sexual body-identity, without shame. In this theatre, multiple spoken identities expand out from a visible physical entity.

The history of queer identity is one of seen bodies as much as silenced subjectivities (Vicinus 1993). A queer history reclaimed from secrets and clandestine communication is one in which speaking out directly was always dangerous. But queerness could be communicated body-to-body without speech, and this covertness was fundamental to queer histories. Speech acts and visual exchanges need to be distinguished from each other. Yet at the same time, a specific body was invariably seen in order to be accused of queerness in social practice. This connection between seeing and naming means that physicality remains central to acts of spoken identity. Identity and its differences are inhabited bodily. The participants in queer histories, willingly or otherwise, chart the physicality and bodily expression of identity.

When queer identity acquired brave public voices to protest its oppression, it was spoken presence that subsequently articulated the politics of pride after the 1960s. The refusal to be shamed was also the refusal to be silenced.

Shame is used in this context in relation to its function in reinforcing the norms of social identity. Shame, according to Silvan Tomkins, while inseparable from an internalised sense of humiliation, is also facial and physical exchange (1995: 136). He expands the concept of shame as expressed and imposed through speech to include an exchange of looks. In
Tomkins' interpersonal schema, this is "an act which reduces facial communication" (134) to shame-humiliation in front of an other or others and their stares (155). In his research he finds participants "are caught between the shame of looking and the shame of being ashamed to do so" (146). This is a face-to-face social encounter. Shame is invariably an exchange between bodies, and judgments on behaviour and socially appropriate appearances precipitate verbal accusation and condemnation. Shame manifests in bodily interaction; it is fleshed and moved. Therefore the refusal to be shamed and humiliated implicates body-to-body and face-to-face encounters.

In the European-dominated cultural tradition, the greatest source of social shame was transgression of the boundaries of the gendered body in the failure of mastery which Gail Paster aligns with Foucault's disciplinary regimes of civilising (1993: 7). The fear of shame often seems a stronger motivation for conformity than punishment, given the varying degrees of severity. A body is physically most shameless, most shocking, when it confounds social beliefs about the naturalness of the sexed male or female body. For females, and therefore cross-dressed males, public shaming for gender role transgressions always implicated sexual behaviour and the subversion of moral codes. Accompanying a process of shaming is the implicit expectation that the body which defies the gender division will also be sexually active. Since a cross-gendered body could not be separated from ideas of shameful sexual behaviour, shameless sexualised talk about embodiment, and physicalising shamelessness through sexualised actions, becomes part of a queer defiance of shame.

The political implications of emotional expression more broadly can be illustrated with shame. Stephanie Shields explains in detail how "doing emotion" is also "doing gender" (2002: 54-9), and Elspeth Probyn discusses how "doing shame" has wide political implications in relation to race in Australia, and to gender identity demarcations across cultures (2005: 1). In creating his "looks" Bowery was doing acts of shamelessness, acts which may therefore exist somehow outside gendered identity. Not only has gender seemingly vanished in his costumes, but by covering his face in some "looks", Bowery literally takes away the possibility of shaming through face-to-face encounters.

Perhaps inadvertently the physical phenomena of bodily identity have been taken for granted. More recently, queer identity began to be communicated in public ways that had not previously been heard outside its subcultures. To the mainstream society, a body speaking about queerness, even when tamed
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for broad consumption on television, still seems outrageous and possibly shocking. In artistic practice, however, physical performances of shameless sexualities continue primarily to 'body-talk' with their own kind. Copi's dramatic world drew on a pre-existing subculture but his drama is still largely unknown within the broader theatre milieu. Similarly the clubs like Taboo that made Bowery well known in London had restricted entry.

Nonetheless, Copi's play pioneered drama that transgresses social and theatrical conventions because the characters speak about 'unnatural' physical bodies and their bodily functions in defiance of social shaming. Bowery had a well-established reputation for imaginative body works and performance art by the time he acted Madame Garbo. The fetishised dressing of the body to accentuate nonconformist cultural and sexual identities was openly celebrated and demanded for the sought-after entry to Bowery's club Taboo (Tilley 1997). Bowery's theatrical depiction of Garbo in 1993 reveals an artistic convergence of talking about the body shamelessly and bodily performing a shameless physicality.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, performances with explicit queerness may appear to be without shame as popular entertainment. The slightly fictionalised central character in Boy George's West End musical is bisexual Billy, and like the other male, female and transgender characters, he frequents Bowery's club Taboo. Set in the late 1970s and 1980s, the musical depicts a time when spaces for cross-dressing were fashionable and attracting influential young people, and when their clientele, like Boy George, could become pop stars. In the musical, Billy's spurned girlfriend and mother set up a fashion design business. By 2001 Taboo's clientele had assumed the status of musical legends for their dressed-up unconventional-ity. Is this transition from underground clubs to West End musical venue indicative of greater social acceptance of sexual differences? Only to a point. It is more indicative of a minimal separation between fictionalised or theatrical identity and personal identity that might be socially performed. When Boy George acts the character Leigh Bowery in Taboo, which also features George as a character, it might be considered a respectful tribute to Bowery's continual striving to reinvent himself through imaginative visual displays. Bowery's physicalised personae were staged by him as social acts that are subsequently restaged theatrically. It suggests how one individual's experience of embodiment in relation to feeling differs from the social norm and might become a projected external entity. These become artistic expressions of social identity as embodied physical phenomena, and of body phenomenology. Such physicalised self-identity is knowingly produced as a
visual spectacle, as if it belongs within a continuum of performance that reaches back to theatre.

Social acts of shamelessness

Can Bowery's art of dressing the body be located within a theatrical tradition? European theatre has a two-thousand-year-old tradition of cross-dressing. From this perspective, costuming the male body to cross the gender divide has often been very socially legitimate, as it was in medieval Europe and Elizabethan England. The orthodox argument that it was expedient for men to play female characters on a stage that excluded women, without necessarily proffering sexual innuendo, now seems extremely questionable. The potential of cross-dressing for audience titillation became obvious when female performers on the English stage after 1660 undertook breeches roles (Senelick 2000: 206-27).

Robert Schanke and Kim Marra write that

the major source of theater's allure for those marginalized on the basis of sexual deviance [...] has been public performance, with its distinctive potentialities for both self-concealment and self-revelation. One has a special license ostensibly to become something other, which affords the protections of a mask. (2000: 9)

Wearing an extra surface on the body may be both a mask and a revelation in theatre. This might also be said about Bowery's artful inventions including his unique way of masking the face.

The history of theatre provides numerous examples of highly costumed identities, which may or may not coincide with the gender of a performer. Theatre history has excelled at presenting duplicitous social bodies in its costuming. Perhaps because of theatre's capacity to sever the relationship between costumed identity and sexed body-identity, it has remained associated with aspects of public shame. Bodies in theatre are visible entities.

What of the converse to a cross-dressed body, of the body stripped of its costume, and the potential of bare all-over physicality to be shamed, for transgressions of gender identity? In Eurocentric cultural values, certainly the act of undressing in public by a female and, to a lesser extent, a male, exemplified another important aspect of shame until well into the twentieth century. To take off clothing publicly, both on and off the stage, was to defy
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the condemnatory force of public shame around nakedness. Acts of undressing denote the primacy of seen physicality in social shaming. Two questions for recent artistic practice arise here. Has the theatricalised body that might appear semi-naked retained the capacity to be queered in performance like the dressed-up body? In arguing that it has, I shall put forward examples of acrobatic and aerial performances that deliver texts of queer physicality. Therefore have shifts in social values about nakedness in late twentieth-century Western society made its staging into a less radical act? This is the case exemplified by Bowery and his fashion creations. It appears as if Bowery found nakedness in public a tame gesture of social defiance, and he sought to shift the notion of defiance into another dimension by grooming the exposed areas of his flesh so they remained part of the costume.

Can social performances of defiant shamelessness be distinguished from the tradition of gender-bending bodies in theatricalised performance? The signifying spaces produced by social and theatrical acts need to be separated to make this distinction. In theatre, how words are delivered can be as important as what is said. In describing the history of the term 'queer' Judith Butler writes that it was

the producing of a subject through the shaming interpellation. 'Queer' derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologisation, insult. (1993: 226; original emphasis)

Butler is arguing that ‘queer’ was created through performative speech acts of social shaming and that these speech acts determine queer identification and an understanding of queer identity. Butler asks if embodying queer performativity is different from the discursive practice of speaking the term (1993: 225). But she argues against a distinction between embodiment and discourse in theorising the performativity of social identity, while leaving open the possibility that such a distinction could remain in artistic practice and its choices (1993: 231). Consequently, in defiance after the 1960s, queer pride has had to shout its shamelessness. Sally Munt writes that pride is “shame’s corollary” (2000: 536) and functions to “rebut sexual repression in favour of expression” (534). To some extent historically then, theatre’s gender-bending bodies have been able to eschew social shame by avoiding explicit accusations and communicating physically and visually through movement, gesture and innuendo. Theatrical spaces presented seen bodies communicating alternative identity texts physically.
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I would make a distinction here between theatricalised bodies performing historically without the imposition of shame in acts that can be interpreted as queer, and those post-1960s artists intentionally performing shamelessness and outrageousness in social and theatrical spaces. Public acts of shamelessness are political acts when they confront society's reductionist formula for identity. They are particularly powerful when they make physicality the cultural site of confrontation. Bowery used his tall large body to brilliant effect and attracted attention by masking it or revealing it in ways that were often painful to maintain. Copi and Bowery and other artists challenge society's gendered prescription for bodies where it matters most. This action is not deflected into words, tamed and displaced, but radical in its embodied liveness.

These rebellious actions can also be located within a history of theatre in part because of the slipperiness of physicality in relation to named identity. The muscular female and the cross-dressed graceful male belong to a longstanding tradition of acrobatic and gymnastic acts (Tait 2005). Historically, such queered physicality belonged in spectacles of body display which attracted audiences because they contravened beliefs about gendered physicality. They occurred, for example, as part of popular entertainment in fairgrounds, circus and exhibition gardens.

Where the spoken insult historically decided the queer identity of the body, the performative speech act was inseparably accompanied by social shame, at least in public. Accordingly shame or fear of shame is experienced by individual bodies singled out within the social body. Thus, imbedded in the idea of reclaiming queer identity is an associated one of performing shamelessness, which requires courageous daring. Munt writes that “[s]hame itself is often repressed because to acknowledge shame is to (unwillingly) invoke shame” (2000: 534).

Yet, as I am arguing here, acts by bodies and speech acts may not be inter-changeable and physical bodies are completely central to the rejection of shame. Individual queerness may exist visibly without social shame as an unnamed entity until the accusation of shame is spoken or “‘queered’ into public discourse”, as Butler explains (1993: 226). A similar proposition can be made for undressed queer physicality in performance.

How does this queer performative identity become more than a costume? In what ways does it become physically embodied? The history of art and cultural representation reveals numerous examples of bodies in socially
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sanctioned performances that seem in retrospect visibly queer. Clearly their impact on social values was covert. David Savran writing on the internationally successful 1990s’ play, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, makes a distinction between the development of queer subjectivities and a queer (historical) materialism (1995: 208). Certainly the public shame associated with the social accusation of queer cannot be assumed to be interchangeable with the subjective or private experience. Historically, in European culture, a queer identity meant avoiding public shame while seeking private experience (Senelick 2000: 295, 302). The recent decades of gay and lesbian struggle have been about changing both the material culture and subjective perception; that is, changing cultural representation to publicly validate private and subjective experience. Hence the importance of individual bodies like Bowery’s and many others in this radical subversion in public; for example, Annie Sprinkle and other sexualised body artists (Schneider 1997). They materialise a body surface as artistic representation that undermines the assumptions of seamless body-self identities: their bodies may or may not be an expression of their own subjectivities.

This is queerness that materialises through physical bodies that defy shame bodily. Shameless acts are not simply spoken and costumed, they are also always fleshed, and physically moved in space. By the 1980s these fleshed and moved displays of bodies had evolved into full-fledged performances of shamelessness that contributed to changing social history. The convergence of body art in clubs and theatres and the social struggle for acceptance of queer identity seem inevitable rather than accidental.

Nonetheless why does Butler argue that corporeal performative identity is not a conscious choice and is not inherently theatrical (1993: 12)? She is writing about embodied subjectivities. Where does this leave deliberately constructed body performances like Bowery’s art? A separation between the public persona and the subject self may be difficult to maintain in viewing the work of many queer artists, especially when the artist’s body is central to the performance. There is always the suspicion that the self becomes like the theatricalised body over time. Is there an explanation for the inspiration behind Bowery’s performances as a public persona other than conceding self-identification? This is where I return to the idea of the fleshed body as central to social acts. I contend that it is possible to separate this fusion of a queer subjectivity without choice and materially performing queer identity by recognising a third possibility in the performance of shamelessness. The deliberate decision here is to embody and perform shamelessness, regardless of identity labels. Bowery’s performances defy easy classification both
artistically and socially. However, a shameless display with the body, costumed or otherwise, can be recognised and yet remain without a specific sexual identity label. This is the performance of defiant shamelessness. It is an identity choice. Bowery rejected both a male or a female demarcation and, in camouflaging his face, he suggested entities beyond those of human identity. His outrageous vividly costumed body demanded attention from others while thwarting the social engagement process by which shame-humiliation could manifest. Bowery covered his face and often his whole head, and therefore removed the possibility of face-to-face contact or confrontation. An absence of facial features pointedly circumvents the possibility of face-to-face shame-humiliation with Bowery's embodied acts of shamelessness.

Muscular shamelessness

A shameless display necessitates a degree of prowess if not also physical mastery over the body in demonstratively contravening the norms of prescriptive shapes and action. A more useful historical lineage for understanding recent performances of shamelessness like Bowery's might be found in that of acrobatic and aerial bodies in performance. These often seemed naked at a distance although they were and are dressed in close-fitting body tights. The body is fully covered. The body shape, however, is changed by the muscular development required to do the work and this remains visible, covertly subverting ideas of gender. Bowery, however, took physicality beyond the gender ambiguity of circus bodies.

For some time, I have been considering performances by muscular bodies that queer identity, inspired by unique Australian new circus work. In seeking out new ways to think about the social impact or meanings of powerfully muscular female bodies and gracefully muscular male bodies, I find, perhaps unsurprisingly, that this is the legacy of a much older tradition. Identity has always been performed across race, ethnicity and gender in traditional circus. It provides performance histories of scantily clad male and female performers who bodily contravened gender identity difference in their acts but remained celebrated artists (Tait 2005).

Why could the reconfigured identities of muscular bodies 'pass' around the barrier of social shame historically? I contend that acrobatic and gymnastic performances were accepted, even though the body's action defied its gendered appearance and a performer wore skin-tight costumes, because,
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among other things, these performances were muscular displays without speech. Speech avoidance allowed for permissive spaces of alternative physicalities. Also this was more a body-to-body engagement than a face-to-face one (Tait 2005: 147-50). These were and are silent performing bodies in athletic action that produce a limbic space within the social order, which regulates the shaming of bodies.

What is less recognised is that there has been a deliberate process of queer artistry in circus to enhance the acts done by extremely athletic bodies. This understanding has been distorted by popular culture in literature and cinema, manufacturing a cultural imaginary of a grotesque circus that collapses the performer's out-of-the-ring or off-stage identity into his or her circus persona, and thus denies artistic control or creative agency. Circus consists of performances by bodies and seems particularly susceptible to this confusion between a consciously constructed performance persona and that of the performer's personal identity. Such assumptions confirm the longstanding voyeuristic fascination with circus life on the social margins.

I contend that while nonverbal circus performances could avoid shame's disciplinary forces, because circus presents a visible readable text of physical action, of fleshed moving bodies that do not speak, it is paradoxically widely assumed that the surface of these performing bodies is somehow subjectively and socially authentic, even more so than in other theatrical performances. Quite the contrary, until recently, it was difficult to find a match between a performer's self-identity and the circus persona; an authentic body-self was a circus illusion.

The actions of physical bodies without speech should be included within the representational framework of gender identity ambiguities. The photographic record of Bowery's art makes it important to acknowledge how its embodied action contributed to making the costumes legendary (Violette 1998). His performance of defiant shamelessness was fleshed with a moving body and hence the connection to the live tradition of theatre and circus. But it is preserved in photographic images that reinstate the power of wordless physicality to move identity out of its known conventions and, in this instance, out of even a convention of gender ambiguity associated with queerness.

As Madame Garbo replies when General Pushkin asks her if she needs an escort to China:
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GARBO: [...] I can look after myself.
PUSHKIN: Still as mad as ever, Nikita. When next you pause for a moment’s reflection at that spot on the bank of the river which flows past your house, just four paces north of the weeping willow tree, think of me. [...] 

GARBO: You move me, General.
PUSHKIN: Being moved is your gift to me. Goodbye. (Copi 1976: 4)

References

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