

Sisters under The Skin

Chestnuts roasting on an open fire excepted, there seems nothing more Christmassy and cosy and safe than a panto. That's why well-heeled parents still blithely drag their whining infants away from the Boxing Day sex and violence of the box to the succour of the stage, for the kids' first glorious experience of live theatre.

This inevitably revolves around a tender and affecting love affair between two women (one of them in tunic, fishnet tights and stilettoes) and the ghastly physical humiliations of an old lady who, when she's not falling off her bicycle or losing her drawers, is being frightened to death by spooks in a haunted bedroom. The pantomime dame is grotesque, bawdy and vulgar; she is the very essence of pantomime itself.

Originally a word meaning 'a story told by dance alone', pantomime has gone through many changes to arrive where it is today. But even in the 1880s - when Augustus Harris first began staging what we'd nowadays recognise as the modern panto, at the Theatre Royal in London's Drury Lane - the genre was considered extremely vulgar and 'low'. For panto is a mongrel, ragbag corruption of countless theatrical forms which critics have traced from the ancient Roman feast of Saturnalia (when male and female participants ritually exchanged clothing) via the low farce of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, Shakespeare's comedies, mime, burlesque, ballet, fairy-tale romance and, perhaps most important, music hall.

It was from music hall that the original dames all came, bringing their speciality acts - their knockabout routines and singalong songsheets - with them. The dame (Oxford English Dictionary definitions include 'An aged housewife, mistress of a childrens' school. Matron. Mistress of a house') is a hardy

English perennial stereotype who can be traced back to the *Wife of Bath* and beyond. A stock character introduced as comic diversion, she is the mother-in-law joke made manifest.

It is said that the late 19th century music hall great Dan Leno - of whom, unfortunately, little visual record survives - made moving character studies of his dames, raising his *Mother Goose* and *Queen of Hearts* into great heights of artistry. But if this was so he was, and indeed still is, the exception to the rule.

For the last 100 years British comedians (all of whom appear to have a drag character in their repertoire even now) and actors have relied on bawdy knockout farce for their applause, from the Cook's famous slapstick baking scene in *Dick Whittington* to *Widow Twankey's* lengthy, gross strip-tease that culminates in the final removal of a washing-line full of voluminous bloomers. Dames wear chandeliers in their hair, get covered in bucketsfull of water and - most of all - keep getting knocked over. No wonder feminists never know whether to laugh or cry?

Over the years panto has gained a more genteel reputation, becoming finally 'respectable' when the Royal Family started sending their kiddies to it. And yet there will always thankfully be something iffy about this Xmas travesty while the men who play dames continue ever-so-carefully to distinguish themselves from female impersonators, and insist on describing themselves as character actors.

Even Danny La Rue, who was at one time Britain's highest-paid entertainer, and has made his reputation out of his 'glamour' drag, takes every available opportunity to distance himself from his 'lesser' travesty sisters. ('I find the expression "female impersonator" suspect. I am a comedian who uses female

characters, but I never let my audience forget I am a man.')

In some senses La Rue is quite literally nothing like a dame: he does panto as an Ugly Sister yet plays her glam and never lowers himself to the knockabout routine. Yet in essence there is a little difference between him and *Old Mother Riley* on the one hand, or the drag queen down the local pub who is still bringing cucumbers out of her handbag on the other. They are all sisters

under the skin, and there is little chance of the dame figure becoming an endangered species when it's arguable that men would use any old excuse to wear a frock. And until this system of male domination which we call sexism evolves into something less imbalanced, men will continue to find relief in donning skirts, and audiences will go on being entranced by their caricature of androgyny, however twisted and grotesque. ●

Kris Kirk



Photo: BBC Hulton Picture Library

Dykes and dames: up to their necks gender bending

Reclaiming Our Foremothers

Photographic images assail us endlessly as we walk past hoardings, read newspapers, turn on the telly, open the family snapshot album. Photographs are ubiquitous and the camera all-pervasive. Photography, therefore, has become an area of concern to feminists. Recent feminist critiques of photography have focused upon women as the object of photography rather than upon the work of women as image-makers. Thus Page 3 style photos which endlessly represent women as sex objects have been challenged and the stereotyping of women in advertising has regularly featured on the feminist agenda.

But what happens when women move behind the camera? Women photographers are not uncommon. Indeed, Victorian pioneers included portraitists such as Julia Margaret Cameron, and Victorian travellers such as Isabella Bird Bishop kept photographic records.

Women work in all areas of photography. Some women have produced startling work within genres that have been particularly dominated by men. For example, Gerda Tarot worked with Robert Capa in Spain during the Civil War, and was killed; Susan Meiselas' photo-reportage from Nicaragua offers an extraordinary account of a more contemporary struggle.

But many women have chosen to focus on more local subject-matter: street life, women at work, men, women and children at home; or, indeed, on landscapes or still-life.

So is there a women's perspective in photography? Are there ways in which women photographers create work which stands in opposition to dominant (male) practices? Do women photographers have the advantage, as women, of being perceived as less threatening than men and thus catch their subjects more relaxed thereby

achieving a quality of unposed true-to-life reportage?

A new exhibition, *Women Photographers 1900-1955*, offers us the opportunity to look at a range of work by women. Various types of photography are included: documentary work and photo-journalism as well as, for instance, early 20th-century pictorialist photographs and 1930s upper-class studio portraiture. The exhibition is the first one of its kind, and will tour the country next year. It was organised by Val Williams and includes the work of nearly 40 women.

A number of the photographers were featured in the recent Channel Four series, *Five Women Photographers*. Val Williams has also written a book, *Women Photographers - the other observers to the present*, which is the first major history of British women photographers.

I was thrilled at discovering in the exhibition some photographers previously unknown to me. The exhibition shows a range of work: for example, experimental photographs of the 1920s and 1930s, including Helen Muspratt's adoption of the surrealist light-exposure technique of solarisation for portrait work and Madame Yevonde's colour experimentation. These stand in sharp contrast to the London working class documentary work of Edith Tudor Hart and Margaret Monck; or to 'on the streets' photo-stories published in *Picture Post*.

The *Picture Post* work is shown as news-sheet stories and the exhibition includes a showcase of books giving some indication of where and how some of the photographic work was published (although not pursuing the question of who then read it). Situations and intentions also differed: West End portrait studios were commercial ventures with a fashionable upper-class clientele; first world war 'behind the lines'



Bell by Bell: Vanessa snaps Quentin in pensive mood, 1929

photographs were shot by nurses working in France; by contrast, Vanessa Bell's family photographs were essentially a *private* record of 'family' (Bloomsbury Group) events. These snapshot equivalents are included to make a point about the way in which photography is used to create an idealised family history through recording only 'good' or 'special' moments.

But the exhibition is in some

ways unsatisfactory. The diversity of style and subject-matter means that, as an exhibition, there is a lack of coherence. It is also frustrating in merely offering a few photographs to represent the life's work of each photographer. Indeed, the only reason for hanging this range of work together is that all the images were made by women.

It is only really through reference to the book that the