Rebel Without a Closet

in full drag and, in no uncertain terms, tells his father to take his expectations and go to hell. But where Michael Pierson must die after making such a speech, Bobby earns his father’s respect—on Bobby’s terms. The film ends with Bobby’s father coming out to the shack where Bobby has been living to tell his son he wants him to come home. Happy ending. No deaths. A minimum of selling out.

There are two basic reasons why Bobby can use the paradigm in ways that the other films couldn’t. First, Bobby offers a sense of a gay community, a support network including gays and straights that gives Bobby helpful advice and no-strings-attached affection. This network also presents a new character: the Good Father. Bobby gets help and support both from a straight psychiatrist (who is also, oddly enough, a Catholic priest, a literal Father) and from a gay high school teacher. There is an older gay man, Bobby’s first lover, who is shown in a less than flattering light, and God knows Bobby’s father is no saint. But at least the gay character is not faced with only Bad Fathers and Good Policemen.

Second, Bobby finally comes out on the side of education and change. Death is the only resolution in a plot that doesn’t allow for dialogue, except as a mode of co-optation. But in Welcome Home, Bobby, the first gay-theme film in 1986, Bobby’s father finally learns the lesson one of his other sons tried to teach him earlier in the film: “Prejudice, Pop—it’s terrible.”

Columbia University

Works Cited


FILM IN DRAG

TRANSVESTITISM ON THE SCREEN

EDWARD CONNOR

Men have been playing women on the screen since the movies began. In one of the less obvious ways a stunt man in dress and wig would double for the heroine in dangerous situations, especially in serials (as late as 1942 stunt man David Sharpe could be spotted doubling star Kay Aldridge in the Republic serial, Perils of Nyoka. A close look at the crowds in the climactic scenes of such disaster films as the '36 San Francisco and '38 In Old Chicago would also show most of the "women" to be thinly disguised stunt men.

Of course it was hoped by the movie-makers that such doubling would pass unnoticed by the average movie-goer but in other films, especially comedies, a man posing as a woman was the very kernel of the plot. Charlie Chaplin appeared as such in the 1915 Keystone comedy A Woman, as did famous female impersonator Julian Eltinge (real name: William Dalton) in many silent features, notably the '17 Clever Mrs. Carfax and Countess Charming, the '18 Widow's Might and Over the Rhine, and the '20 The Adventuress. The plot of The Adventuress is typical: "Jack Perry" (Julian Eltinge) disguises himself as "Mam' selle Fedora" to obtain information from "monarchists" to aid "republicans" in the mythical kingdom of "Alpania." His friend "Lyn Brook" (Fred Covert) also poses as a woman ("Thelma") for the same reason.

The most famous transvestite comedy of the English and American stage, Charley's Aunt, which premiered in London in 1892, concerns an Oxford student, "Lord Fancourt Babberly" ("Babs") whose friends "Charley" and "Jack" have a date with two girls, to be chaperoned by the former's aunt, "Donna Lucia D'Alvadoroz." When Charley's aunt fails to appear, "Babs" is persuaded to impersonate her. The play has been filmed at least ten times. In English language versions the lead has been played by Syd Chaplin ('25), Charlie Ruggles ('30), Arthur Askey ('40), Jack Benny ('41) and Ray Bolger ('52), and in foreign versions by Fritz Olmar ('34, German), Pedro Quartiucci ('46, Argentine), Alfredo Barbieri ('53, Argentine), Claus Riederstaeelt ('56, German), and Fernand Raynaud ('59, French). However, the impersonation of female relatives was not limited to comedies set at Oxford. In the '32 Sherlock Holmes Clive Brook took time out as the famous detective to play a prissy maiden aunt in one scene.

William Powell shaved off his moustache, put on heavy make-up and feminine clothing (with balls of yarn as breasts), and posed as a woman in the '41 Love Crazy. It took only a wig and dress to change Cary Grant from the screen's handsomest male to its ugliest female in the '49 I Was a Male War Bride.

Buster Keaton appeared briefly, disguised as a woman, in the '24 Sherlock Jr. while young Spec O'Donnell made a particularly unappetizing girl in the '27 two-reeler, Don't Tell Everything.

Other great comics, singers and
character actors who had at least a brief
fling at female impersonation in films
would include Jack Mulhall in the '18
Madam Spy, George K. Arthur in the
'28 Detectives, Joe E. Brown in the '35
Midsummer Night's Dream and '42 Shut
My Big Mouth, Sid Silvers in Broadway
Melody of 1936, Eddie Cantor in the '37 Ali
Baba Goes to Town, Billy House in
Merry-Go-Round of 1938, W.C. Fields in
the '39 You Can't Cheat an Honest Man,
Mickey Rooney in the '41 Babes on Broad-
way (a devastating imitation of Carmen
Miranda), Arthur Lake in the same year's
Blondie Goes Latin, Bob Hope in the '44
Princess and the Pirate, Bob Livingston in
Goodnight Sweetheart (also '44), Lou
Costello in the '45 Here Come the Co-eds
and '48 Mexican Hayride, Red Skelton in
the '48 Southern Yankee. Bing Crosby in
the '60 High Tide, Danny Kaye in the '61
On the Double, right through to Burt
Reynolds and Jack Weston (as nuns) in
the '72 Fuzz, George Segal in the '72 Hot
Rock, Beau Bridges in the '74 Thunderbolt
and Lightfoot, and Morgan Paull in the '74
Dirty O’Neill.

But top honors must go to Stan Laurel
who impersonated women in no less than
five shorts, the '26 Duck Soup, the '27 Why
Girls Love Sailors and Sugar Daddies, the
'29 That’s My Wife and '30 Another Fine
Mess plus features: the '34 Babes in
Toyland, the '40 Chump at Oxford, the '43
Jitterbugs and Dancing Masters. However
it was Del Henderson who played the
“female” in the '30 Laurel and Hardy
Murder Case.

Syd Chaplin as CHARLEY'S AUNT
In many prison or prisoner-of-war films, the inmates put on a variety show in which the "female" chorus line is made up of ugly, awkward, and hairy males. The all-G.I. '43 This Is the Army had a much more presentable chorus line plus expert imitations of Jane Cowl by Sgt. Alan Manson, and Lynn Fontaine by Cpl. Tilestone Perry. Sgt. Richard Irving appeared as "Mandy" in the production number based on that song while "Eileen" in I Left My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen was played by Sgt. Philip Truex.

On the more serious side versatile Lon Chaney Sr. played a criminal posing as an old woman in the '25 and '30 versions of The Unholy Three, a feat repeated by Lionel Barrymore in the '36 Devil Doll.

Hepburn in SYLVIA SCARLETT

Frank Puglia in BULLDOG DRUMMOND'S REVENGE

Ralph Morgan in the '35 Star of Midnight, apparently without Freudian motive, went around killing, dressed as a woman and wearing a rubber mask. Likewise, Frank Puglia in the '37 Bulldog Drummond's Revenge used a female disguise in his attempts to get at a new, secret and powerful explosive. A year later gang leader J. Carroll Naish in King of Alcatraz dressed as a grandmother to get past police guards onto an ocean liner. In the climax of the '46 comedy Genius at Work villain Lionel Atwill shaves off his moustache and puts on female garb to pose as the wife of Bela Lugosi! In the '56 The Killer Is Loose Wendell Corey as an escaped psychopath wears women's clothes to get past a police cordon.

Most films dealing with ship disasters, e.g. the '29 Atlantic, '53 Titanic, and '59 A Night to Remember, show men disguising themselves as women to escape in the life boats. Walter Connolly does so in the '34 Whom the Gods Destroy, and the cowar-
dices thus displayed forms the nucleus of the plot.

More nobly-minded is Hugh Williams as a downed British flier in the '42 One of Our Aircraft is Missing, who dresses as a woman to get through Nazi-occupied Holland.

Just plain scared were Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in the '59 Some Like It Hot. After witnessing the St. Valentine Day's massacre, they flee the perpetrators by disguising themselves as women and leave the city with an all-girl orchestra.

In the '60 Hitchcock thriller, Psycho, Tony Perkins plays a split personality — himself and his mother — even carrying on an off-screen conversation between the two. Then at key moments, dressed as the mother, he goes out to kill for the son.

As one of the "miracles" in the '67 Bedazzled Dudley Moore, though remaining a male, is transformed into a nun. In The Tiger Makes Out (also '67) Eli Wallach

becomes enamoured of a night club entertainer named "Toni Songbird" without realizing it's a female impersonator (Kim August). He follows "her" backstage and is completely bewildered to see "her" enter the men's room. Rod Steiger adopts many disguises for a series of murders in the '68 No Way to Treat A Lady and in one scene appears in drag at a bar. George Sanders is also seen in drag at the beginning of the '70 Kremlin Letter. Male transvestites have also appeared in many other films in recent years, most notably the '68 documentary, The Queen, and the '72 Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex. The Nazi slaughter of German Army homosexuals and transvestites during the "Night of the Long Knives" is detailed in the '69 The Damned.
Buster Keaton played all performers on the stage, all members of the orchestra, and every one in the audience, including several women. Laurel and Hardy played each other's wives in the '33 Twice Two, while Victor Moore appeared in three female roles in the '44 Carolina Blues and Hugh Herbert five (Mrs. Dibble and her four daughters, Faith, Hope, Charity and Prudence) in the '40 La Conga Nights. Brainerd Duffield played one of the witches in the '48 Welles' Macbeth. Alec Guinness appeared briefly as Lady Agatha, a suffragette, in his tour de force, playing all eight members of the d'Ascosyne family in the '50 Kind Hearts and Coronets, while Alistair Sim had a larger role appearing as his own sister in the '54 Belles of St. Trinian's. Peter Sellers played three roles in the '59 Mouse That Roared, one of them the Grand Duchess Gloriana. Tony Randall played Medusa in the '64 Seven Faces of Dr. Lao, while female impersonator Kim August was a hooker murdered by Rod Steiger in No Way to Treat a Lady.

British actor Arthur Lucan played Old Mother Riley, a shrill, shrewish Irish washer woman, in a series of fourteen Grade Z films made in England from '37 through '52. Mercifully, only one was released in this country.

In the '73 Up the Sandbox Barbra Streisand is summoned to the room of a Castro-like dictator (Jacobo Morales) who disrobes to disclose the fact that he is actually a woman.

The prologue and epilogue of the '46 Henry V makes clear that in the Elizabethan theatre all female roles were played by boys.

Outright deception was practised in the '31 Mascot serial, King of the Wild. In the cast "Martha Lalande" was listed as playing "Mrs. Colby," but in the last chapter she was exposed as a man, the role having actually been played by Otto Hoffman!

Men have sometimes appeared in
women's roles simply because the sex of the main character was changed in a rewrite from the original source. Jerry Lewis is a good example. In three films he appeared in roles originally written for women: the '60 *Cinderfella* (with Ed Wynn as the "Fairy Godfather"), the '54 *Living It Up* (remake of the '37 Carole Lombard *Nothing Sacred*), and the '55 *You're Never Too Young* (remake of the '42 Ginger Rogers *Major and the Minor*).

Women have also frequently played male roles in films because of a sex change in the main character from a book, play, or earlier screenplay. Thus Asta Nielsen played the '20 German *Hamlet* as a girl forced to pose as a young man to succeed to the Danish throne. Kipling's *Wee Willie Winkie* was a young boy learning about life and honor in India but became a girl (Shirley Temple) in the '37 film. In the original *Front Page*, Hildy Johnson was a male reporter played by Pat O'Brien in the '31 film version. But in the '40 remake, *His Girl Friday*, Hildy became a female with Rosalind Russell doing the honors. When Hitchcock's '61 *Strangers on a Train* was remade as *Once You Kiss a Stranger* in '69, the psychotic murderer (Robert Walker) became an even more psychotic murderess (Carol Lynley).

To give a new wrinkle to an old tale the producers of the '72 version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* had the estimable doctor (Ralph Bates) change into an evil "Sister Hyde" (Martine Beswick).

Perhaps the best known examples of women impersonating men on the screen are Greta Garbo in the '33 *Queen Christina*, Katherine Hepburn in the '35 *Sylvia Scarlett* and Annabella in the '37 *Wings of the Morning*. Lesser known impersonations of men and boys were done by Anna Q. Nilsson in the '23 *Ponyola*, Marion Davies in the '23 *Little Old New York* and '26 *Beverly of Graustarkia*, Bessie Love in the '26 *Going Crooked*, Louise Brooks in the '28 *Beggars of Life*,

Miriam Hopkins in the '34 *She Loves Me Not*, Jessie Matthews in the '35 *First a Girl*, Yvonne de Carlo in the '47 *Song of Scheherazade*, and, incredibly, Jane Russell in the '52 *Mountain Belle*.

In the '28 Pathe serial, *The Terrible People*, the mysterious "Professor" turned out to be Mrs. Revelstoke (Mary Foy) completely decked out in male clothes. Likewise, the '45 *House on 92nd St.* had the mystery man, "Mr. Christopher," unmasked as Signe Hasso in male hair-do and clothes.

The '72 *Pope Joan* presents the long-disproved ninth century legend of a girl who impersonated a man so successfully
and ascended through the Catholic hierarchy so rapidly, she ultimately became Supreme Pontiff. In the title role, Liv Ullmann at no time suggests a convincing male.

In silent films it was almost standard procedure to cast actresses as boys in classics: Marguerite Clark played both title roles in the 1915 *Prince and the Pauper*, while Marie Dorr starred in the ‘16 *Oliver Twist*. Jim Hawkins was played by Frances Cap Carpenter in the ‘17 film version of *Treasure Island*, and by Shirley Mason in the ‘22. Mary Pickford played the title role in the ‘21 *Little Lord Fauntleroy* while Betty Bronson made the ideal *Peter Pan* in ‘24.

Women were not, however, limited to playing children. Frequently they played adult males, occasionally abetted in pretense by the credits. When Mathilde Comont appeared as a grown man, the Persian Prince, in the ‘24 *Thief of Bagdad*, she was listed in the cast as “M. Comont.” Greater deception was practised in the ‘32 *Old Dark House* in which the part of the hundred year old patriarch confined to his bed was played by Elspeth Dudgeon whose name was given in the cast as “John Dudgeon.”

Infants, children, and animals have also crossed gender on the screen. In the original “Our Gang” comedies of the twenties the girl “Farina” was always played by a young man named Allen Hoskins. Baby Leroy, who appeared in so many films of the early thirties with Maurice Chevalier and W.C. Fields, was actually “Sandra” in real life. Likewise, “Lassie” in the MGM series was really a “Laddie.”

Things get more complicated with the ‘61 *Homicidal* in which starlet Jean Arless plays a husband and wife who turn out to be one person, a male who became a female in Denmark, then has to pose as a

(l. to r.) William Powell, and Myrna Loy, and Florence Bates in LOVE CRAZY
man again to protect “his” inheritance. Equally complex is the ’67 Gunn in which Marion Marshall plays a man, “George Gethers,” who periodically poses as a woman, “Daisy Jane.”

In the ’64 Fox Goodbye Charlie, Hollywood satyr “Charlie Sorel” (Harry Madden), killed by a cuckolded producer, returns reincarnated as Debbie Reynolds, a sexy female but with masculine mind still intact. The resulting complications moved one critic to state, “It’s enough to set straight sex back twenty years.”

Doubles anyone?

Although one doesn’t look for Freudian overtones in silent serials, chapter 9 of the ’26 Officer 444 presents a wild dance between a fellow and girl at the conclusion of which they pull off cap and wig to show the fellow is actually a girl and vice versa!

Then there is Thorne Smith’s Turnabout which came to the screen, considerably scrubbed, in 1940. In it a husband and wife, through the machinations of an Indian idol, exchange psyches for a time. John Hubbard and Carole Landis played the couple, the former with hand on hip and the latter sporting a bass voice while climbing all over the furniture to make house repairs. When the psyches are righted at the film’s end, the exchange is less than complete and the husband is found to be pregnant!

Myra Breckenridge, Gore Vidal’s novel on the surgical transformation of a male into a female, was brought to the screen in 1970. Raquel Welch played “Myra” after the operation, Rex Reed “before,” sometimes “after” (i.e. side by side with Raquel), and again at the end when Myra lapses back into almost complete masculinity.

1970 also marked the filming of The Christine Jorgensen Story, the true account of the first American trans-sexual, George Jorgenson, who became Christine after a series of treatments and operations in Denmark. John Hansen played George and Christine. Unfortunately, the critics commented that in the first half of the film he looks like an effeminate fellow and is the second, a masculine woman.

A later, independently-made short, My Name Is Debbie, treats of real life Austin Vincent Martin, husband and father from Yonkers, N.Y. who underwent surgery in Morocco to become “Debbie.” She later obtained a civil divorce from her wife, in the course of which the judge noted that the couple’s son now has two mothers and no father.

The ’32 Freaks had a half-man, half-woman, “Joseph-Josephine,” while the ’64 British comedy, Carry On Spying, went a step further. Unique, it had a character (played by Judith Furse) who represented the first completely successful union of male and female in the same body!