

*Do you laugh when you see men in women's clothes?
This critic says it isn't funny*

THE NEW TASTE IN HUMOR

ALFRED TOWNE

WHEN MILLIONS of people laugh at the same thing the national funny-bone has obviously been tickled. For comedy to be popular in a mass culture, such as America's, it must stay away from the regional, the special, the local. Therefore only those experiences with which everyone is familiar find repeated expression in our humor. Witness the traveling salesman joke with its thousands of variations, the irrepressibly ingenious boy from Tom Sawyer to Henry Aldrich, and that stock butt of gags, the mother-in-law. The mass culture media of today have contributed an addition to this gallery of humorous types: the Male American in Skirts.

In Shakespeare's day, the popular stage exhibited a bevy of young men dressed up as women, and no one laughed. The absence of female actors, and the necessity for men to play their parts, was not the only reason why the audience went along with the illusion. Homosexuality, and its concomitant transvestism, were too little known in those days to provide the foundation of the

ludicrous needed for laughter. Somehow the audience managed to forget that the demure, giggling Juliet was really a beardless boy.

The advent of women (playing women) on the stage, did not bring the masquerade to an end. It merely brought into existence that highly specialized character actor, the female impersonator. For a long time, it was thought to be at least one height of dramatic art for a man to successfully convince the audience that he was a woman. But his blonde wig, his falsies and his carefully pitched voice were all meant to foster an illusion. If people laughed, it was at the jokes in the monologue, not at the spectacle he created.

Today, however, the female impersonator is unable to compete with a new army of men dressed up like women which is invading the movie and television screens. His meticulously detailed illusion amuses nobody. The new imitators seem crude, even vulgar; but they are getting the laughs, raking in the dough, and being rewarded with long-term contracts. Apparently audiences do not

want to be fooled into thinking that they are seeing a woman behind all the flounces (which was the secret of the female impersonator). They want to *know* it is really a man; and therein lies the only source of their laughter. That comedians recognize this, and are capitalizing on it, is made overwhelmingly evident by their eagerness to climb into dresses at the slightest opportunity. So much so, in fact, that the "drag act" can be said to constitute a "new taste" in American humor.

HOLLYWOOD, always eager to find a laugh where there had been none before, borrowed the gingham dress from *Charlie's Aunt*, mass-produced replicas, and issued one to almost every big-name movie comedian: Bob Hope, Danny Kaye, Cary Grant, Martin and Lewis, Jack Carson, William Powell, Lou Costello, and even old Jack Benny (who pioneered the modern trend in his version of "Charlie's Aunt"). To name just a few.

Bob Hope has hardly made a movie in which he does not "slip into something more comfortable" at one point or another: *They Got Me Covered* (he models beachwear); *Road To Singapore* (they pour him into a sarong); *Road To Zanzibar* (which led him into the veils and spangles of a harem girl); *Road To Rio* (with a fruit chapeau from Carmen Miranda, who should have sued). In his most recent film, *The*

Lemon Drop Kid, he completes the cycle by playing a kind old lady).

Danny Kaye's rise to fame began with his "fairy" Anatole of Páree. In *Up In Arms* he plays a love scene with a sleepy bunk-mate who mistakes him for Veronica Lake. In the film version of *On the Town*, the comic-climax comes when Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, and Jules Munshin escape a tough shore patrol by "changing" into three alluring belly dancers, complete with transparent gowns, come-hither veils, and wriggling hips. The caption on the publicity still picturing this scene read: "SOME GIRLS! . . . Hiding behind those veils are Frank Sinatra, Jules Munshin and Gene Kelly. . . ."

War, judging from the movies, breeds transvestism like trenchmouth. The only escape from khaki, it would seem, is organdy. An example is *At War with the Army*, which starred Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. Lewis, unable to get out of camp one night, dresses as a bobby soxer in off-the-shoulders blouse and blonde wig, and later croons a ballad to a drunken sergeant. A saturation point was reached in Cary Grant's *I Was a Male War Bride*, in which, a good part of the time, he dresses as a Wac. Even the soldiers whistled! Recent press releases from his studio, hoping to clear up any possible misunderstanding, assure Cary's fans that a future film will be called *I Married a Woman*. The studio will,

however, undoubtedly awaken to the implications of this title, and it will be changed before the picture reaches the public.

THE GIRLS ALSO get a chance. The standard Hollywood camouflage in which women are allowed to appear in men's clothing is the musical production number. The favorite uniform is white-tie and tails. Examples are Ethel Merman in *Alexander's Ragtime Band* and Doris Day in the opening sequence of *Lullaby of Broadway*. The drama of intrigue provides another excuse, and almost any Marlene Dietrich film features at least one scene in which pants (of the long variety) are felt to be appropriate to the mood.

The phenomenon which actually lies behind female transvestism, namely Lesbianism, gets its first crack at the audience in the most widely talked about film of last year, Academy Award Winner *All about Eve*, written by Joseph Mankiewicz. In the opening scene of this film, Anne Baxter, playing a thinly-disguised lesbian actress, is shown in male trench coat and pork pie hat. She has seen every performance that her "idol," Bette Davis, has played; and before the picture is fifteen minutes older, she is living with her. Miss Davis, however, does not learn until late in the film that she has let a serpent into her garden; perhaps because the serpent's name is Eve, who was, according to Genesis, the

first woman, but who seemingly becomes, according to Mankiewicz, the first real lesbian in the history of the movies.

These pictures are not tailored for the fringe audiences which patronize the "art theaters," or even, more baldly, for the "queer" set which laps up each new Jean Cocteau tribute to blond boys in tight pants, drooling at themselves in the mirror. These are the pictures which top *Variety's* box-office list week after week; they are the foremost grossers year after year; these are the films that make stars. These films are, in short, what a nation laughs at.

TELEVISION, quick to learn from its biggest competitor, has also discovered that the spectacle of a man either dressed up as, or acting like, a woman is not merely ludicrous, but side-splitting as well. Judging from even a cursory look at the big laugh shows on TV it becomes evident that if there is one situation which is repeated with standardized regularity in this infant medium it is the "drag act." So widespread has it become that newspaper columnists, not notoriously alert when it comes to homosexuality, have seen fit to condemn it. Led off by Walter Winchell, complaints against the "soprano hips" approach to comedy appeared recently in columns by Jimmy Cannon, Nick Kenny, Jack O'Brian, and finally in *Variety* itself, perennial watchdog of

show business trends.

The Texaco Star Theater, granddaddy of TV variety shows, made popular, along with Milton Berle, the "new taste" in costume which soon swept the field. TV addicts sometimes no longer seem to care about Berle's jokes; they just want to see what dress he will open his program with this week, as compared to the gown he sported last.

It was evident that Bob Hope's years of film experience struggling in and out of an assortment of women's clothes would make him a natural for TV, and before long he had his debut. A customer in one of the last "frontier" bars on Third Avenue, where fruits are still only the ingredients of an old fashioned, could find no other standard by which to measure Hope's comedy than to say: "He doesn't come close to Uncle Miltie in 'dressing up'!"

Eddie Cantor on one of his early TV shows ran wildly through the audience kissing the men. No one objected; in fact, the audience rolled in the aisles. Later, with Charlie Cantor (no relation), he inaugurated what was to become a standard "bit" on his show: two Brooklyn biddies in a series of fetching gowns. One week Charlie threw himself too completely into the act, and succeeded in looking so much like a woman that the laughs were few. But Eddie's pop eyes betrayed his identity despite the mascara, and he found that the "drag act" will pay off even for

the father of five girls!

For good, clean American fun (Bucks County Division), it would be hard to beat Fred Waring's four husky football players, complete with frills, doing the can-can on one of his shows. Other top name comedians who have realized the laugh-provoking potential in wigs, falsies and falsettos are Ed Wynn (as female traveling companion), Danny Thomas (as the bearded lady), Jack Carson (as Sapphira, the slave-boy), and the contestants on *Truth or Consequences* (who are forced weekly into girdles and bras). To name just a few.

Crude pandering to the popular conception of homosexuals (men in women's clothes) is mostly avoided by Martin and Lewis. Their satire of homosexual mannerisms is more subtle, and far more complete.

On one program Lewis complained that Martin had four lovely girls to accompany him while he sang. Not to be outdone, Lewis brought on four hefty chorus boys, swished through his number, and leaped into their outstretched arms instead of taking his usual prat-fall. Before signing the show off, he threw the audience a limp-wrist farewell, leaving them in hysterics.

On a subsequent show, the team did a parody of the standard traveling salesman routine, beloved by burlesque comedians. With one important change. Instead of the traditional cow-eyed farmer's daughter,

Lewis appeared as the farmer's son forced to bunk, for lack of space, with salesman Martin. TV audiences were spared the bedroom finale, but were treated to a lengthy bathroom scene to make up for it. Here, the two principals, stripped to the waist, went through five minutes of horseplay, which culminated when Lewis, sitting in the bathtub, pulled Martin by the ears headfirst down into it. A few people in the audience looked away and shuddered.

But the nadir was yet to be reached. Fulfilling their promise that their last show of the season would be "the craziest," Martin and Lewis offered a skit built entirely around an ice-cream cone. Tough gangleader Martin grabs Little Lord Fauntleroy Lewis's ice-cream cone and refuses to give it back. He sits down nonchalantly and proceeds to eat it. Lewis, playing the folklore Sissy down to the last gurgle, runs around him declaring "You can hold it, you can even keep it for a while, but d-o-n-'t l-i-c-k i-t!" He continues this caterwauling until his mother sticks her head out of the window and remonstrates Martin in the same vein: "You can play with my little boy, you can borrow his ice-cream cone, you can even keep it for a while, but d-o-n-'t l-i-c-k i-t!" Only the naive were confused as to what was meant by this refrain. The only licking that was done, however, was by Lewis, who, in a moment of unparalleled tastelessness, rushed to

Martin and hungrily started licking his face, crying: "I l-i-k-e i-t! I l-i-k-e i-t!"

Many people in the audience didn't.

WHEN ASKED BY this writer to furnish an explanation for this flood of "swish-comedy" on TV, Abel Green, realistic editor of *Variety*, spoke at some length about "the visual gag," which could, he thought, be most easily effected by humorous costume changes.

This "costume-joke" explanation, however, proves inadequate when the steady television-watcher notes twenty bustles for every tyrolean hat, and fifty wigs for each handlebar moustache. But such costumes *do* get laughs. Which brings up a far more serious question: why does a nation which is predominantly non-homosexual derive so much pleasure from the fantasy-sight provided by "costume jokes?" Before attempting an answer, let us extend our investigation to radio.

Radio, expiring slowly, pumped new blood into its veins with *The Big Show*, which made more than a passing bow to the "new taste." When the laughs got sparse on this hour and a half extravaganza, the male-imperfections of the "unpredictable" Talullah Bankhead were paraded before the audience to get a few yuks. Her masculine voice (doing an off-key George M. Cohan on "Give My Regards to Broadway"), her the-

atrically ambiguous gender ("Well, Miss Bankhead, sir!" was a steady chant throughout the program), and her disinclination for marriage were repeated with "n-a-u-s-e-a-t-i-n-g" regularity week after week. A high spot was reached when that other well-known male-impersonator, Marlene Dietrich, appeared as a guest, and the two of them fought over which had the most masculine voice! When Milton Berle (oft-time female impersonator and wit) appeared as Talullah's guest, he accused her, in his role of a little boy touring the radio stations, of being "Uncle Mil-tie." Though she denied this, when he asked his mother where to go to tinkle, Talu, taken off guard, shouted directions to the men's room. To finally confuse things for all time (and perhaps deal radio a blow from which it will never recover), Talullah, later in the same program, went through an imitation of Berle imitating a fairy imitating a woman: "Ah'll kill you! Cause I feel so *gay* tonight!"

One supposes that the explanation offered for these goings on would be some mutterings about "the audio gag." It would be fruitless to point out to apologists for this kind of thing in radio, or in television and movies, that true comedy consists of what people do in the clothes they wear, and what people say in the voices they possess; not in the clothes and voices themselves. What lies beneath the "visual and audio"

apology is a pathetic admission that much modern comedy is almost entirely devoid of real humorous content.

Just what *is* funny about a man in woman's clothes, or vice versa? Perhaps it is simply this: due to the efforts of Kinsey and others the phenomenon of homosexuality, once the skeleton in the closet of American morality, is now widely accepted as an actuality. It is as well known as B.O. and dandruff. Knowledge of the phenomenon has made its way into the psychological public domain, and any veiled reference to it will bring laughter, sometimes of the nervous kind.

PEOPLE LAUGH AT the risqué because it brings out in the open, conventionally disguised, something that is forbidden (and about which they are, therefore, uneasily curious). But it is ironic that our hard-working censors, busy covering up women's breasts, laundering the most innocent love scenes, and generally watching out for the kids, should see nothing wrong in the most blatant references (naïve as the intent behind them may be) to homosexual love.

If anyone asks you what has happened to that American brand of humor that was fathered by Mark Twain, Will Rogers and Ring Lardner, you can say, at the risk of making a poor joke, that it got lost in a swish of taffeta.

THE CRUSADING SENATOR O'CONOR

Lee Mortimer

IN a grim and peculiar period in American history, when people seem to be competing with each other in nuttiness, it takes genuine talent for any group of individuals to make a real dent on the minds of calloused newspaper readers, hardened by a daily diet of murder, sex crimes, graft and double-dealing. The Senate Crime Investigation Committee is one of the few outfits that have captured and held the fascinated interest of the public from the very beginning. Maybe most of the Senators involved were merely born troupers who simply got to the limelight the long way. Maybe it was just the extras they hired; it's hard to miss with a cast that includes Costello, Virginia Hill, Anastasia and such bit-players as gorilla-face Weber, the philosophic policy boss of Brooklyn. We think their success is also partly due to the colossal nerve of the committee, the breezy manner in which they perform their feats of magic without caring a rap for what the public thinks or how easy it is to catch on to their tricks.

Consider their latest antics. Kefauver, whose sense of timing we

rate second only to Bob Hope's, stepped down from the chairmanship directly after his sock video appearance. It was obvious to any trained vaudeville actor that anything afterwards would only be an anticlimax and might spoil the fine glow his first sensational appearance left in the hearts of the voters. The fact that the job our shining knight set out to do is far from complete doesn't seem to disturb his slumbers. The dragons he was supposed to slay are still very much alive and snorting. But instead of continuing Estes has wisely elected to check out, before people start asking embarrassing questions.

Neat is the word for the Kefauver performance. We don't quite know what word to use for the appointment of Herbert O'Connor, Senator from the Free State of Maryland to succeed him as leading man of the road company. It's a beauty. We think it deserves some kind of award for public effrontery.

O'Connor hails directly from Baltimore, the proud metropolis of the Free State, famous for its two story houses with their white steps, the verbal fireworks of H. L. Mencken