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## Chapter 14. “Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On”: Female Impersonators

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## Chapter 14: “Somebody Had to Put a Skirt On”

### Female Impersonators

Though all the musical and theatrical producers and performers gained special recognition and status as “precious personalities”<sup>1</sup> in the hospital and relocation camps in Thailand, none were more precious to the POWs than the female impersonators.

In Tamarkan, there was Ted Weller, Jack Farmer, “Poodles” Norley, Sid “Happy” Marshall, Jack Turner, Vilhelm Vanderdeken, and “Sambal Sue”; in Nong Pladuk, Basil Ferron, Ronnie Parr, Michael Curtis, and “Skippy.” Chungkai had Douglas Morris, John “Nellie” Wallace, “Jackie” Steenhuizen, Puck Jonkmans, Dick Lucas, Custance Baker, Pat Donovan, Freddie Thompson, and Bobby Spong; Nakhon Pathom claimed Ken Adams, Jack Chalker, Ken Cornish, and, later, Vilhelm Vanderdeken. In Kanburi, “Popsey” Saunders, “Blondie” Weightman, Syd “Sylvia” Ray, Len Cheetham and “Pamela” Webber graced the stage. Following the changeover to the officers’ camp in 1945, John Durnford and Freddie Thompson joined their ranks. These officers and other ranks were the major Australian, British, and Dutch/Indonesian female impersonators in Thailand during 1944–45. Others played this role occasionally, but these men were the “stars.”

Military concert parties “for the troops by the troops” featuring female impersonators was a British military tradition that went as far back as the eighteenth century, if not earlier.<sup>i</sup> Having females represented in concert parties ensured a range of content not feasible without them. They had been a huge success in shows behind the lines during the First World War, which J. G. Fuller in his study of troop morale attributed to the belief that “their trappings of elegance and luxury were the negation of war and squalor and, as such, a potent fetish of peace.”<sup>2</sup>

This tradition continued into the Second World War and thus into the POW camps in Southeast Asia. When Jimmy Walker organized “The Harbour Lights” concert party in his work camp in Keppel Harbour, Singapore, in 1942, he insisted that “somebody had to put a skirt on.”<sup>3</sup> Although Walker may have met some resistance, he did not lack for a volunteer; nor did the concert parties in the main camp at Changi.

Their value to the morale of the POWs was inestimable. Laurie Allison believed the impersonators “were a tonic to all” and noted that they “received loud applause even before they commenced their act.”<sup>4</sup> Writing about the female impersonators in Changi POW Camp, Singapore, Tom Wade explained why this was so: “In POW Camp we had no heroes: no war heroes, political heroes, sport heroes. The only people about whom there was any glamour were the actors and most idolized of these were the female impersonators.”<sup>5</sup>

### Traditional Categories

Of the three traditional categories for female impersonators in military entertainment units—comic drag acts and chorus lines, skilled dancers or singers, or glamorous “illusionists”—it was the first of these that quickly disappeared from the entertainment produced in the camps in Thailand. The only occurrence of a farcical “Beauty Ballet” was in the Wampo Concert Party during the railway construction—and that quickly developed into a chorus line of “serious” dancers. In the hospital and relocation camps,

<sup>i</sup> See Frey, Sylvia R. *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981; and Leslie O’Dell, “Amateurs of the Regiment, 1815–1870” in *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800–1914*. Ed. Ann Saddlemeier. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, 52–89.

with their innumerable variety shows, revues, musical comedies, and plays, the POWs needed female impersonators to appear as “real women,” playing their roles “straight,” not “for laughs.”

For these types of shows, the impersonators’ dancing, singing, and acting abilities took precedence, and those with the most versatility became highly prized. For the revues, musical comedies, and plays, the female impersonators were further typecast into four sub-categories: the “glamorous woman,” who could enchant men with her sexual allure; “the young woman” (wife, sweetheart, or prostitute); “the *ingénue*” (an innocent and pert young girl or a sassy soubrette); or the “older woman” (mothers, aunts, grandmothers), usually played by other POWs brought in for a one-off performance, although Freddie Thompson specialized in these roles.

The images of women the POWs saw represented on stage are difficult to gauge because of the paucity of information about the shows’ content, but it appears that the variety shows featured imitations of popular film, radio, or stage celebrities, while the revues, musicals, and plays displayed middle- and upper-class women of the 1920s and 1930s—and sometimes, “ladies of the night.” These women, in the main, confirmed the POWs’ cultural stereotypes.

The official view propagated by the POW camp administrators was that the women back home were dear mothers and faithful, loving wives and sweethearts waiting patiently, like Penelope, for their loved one’s return. These myths were perpetuated in order to reduce the troops’ anxiety and to keep morale high, even though everyone secretly feared the situation on the home front might be otherwise. And heaven help the theatre producer who suggested it might be otherwise. When Dudley Gotla’s *Thai Diddle Diddle* presented a comic sketch in which a returning POW discovered he had fathered a baby boy *in absentia*, Gotla was reprimanded and sent back up the line on a dreaded maintenance party for punishment (see Chapter 6: “Chungkai Showcase,” Part Two).

### Performers’ Bios

Though detailed descriptions of the female impersonators and their performances are limited in the POW literature, by combining what is found there with information gleaned from interviews and correspondence, enough has been gathered on several of the most important officer and other ranks impersonators to tell us something about them as personalities, what their performances were like, and how audiences responded to them. One general comment about the impersonators’ physical attributes was made by Charles Fisher: “It was astonishing to see how so many of the least impressive-looking prisoners managed to transform themselves into remarkably glamorous creatures with the aid of locally improvised theatrical make-up and elegant dresses.”<sup>6</sup>

**Ted Weller.** The Australian Ted Weller had been a singer in the variety shows in Aungmyathay, Burma, but not as a female impersonator. Because he was a “silver tenor with a strong falsetto range,” Norman Carter cast him as the “leading lady” in a series of musical comedies and revues at Tamarkan: “Dorothy” in *The Wizard of Oz*, “Lily Langtry” in *Memories of the Gay 90s*, and “Lady Rowena” in *When Knights Were Bold*.<sup>7</sup> From these roles, it is evident that Weller played the *ingénue* and young women types.



FIGURE 14.1. PHOTOGRAPH OF LIEUTENANT TED WELLER.  
COURTESY OF TED AND BET WELLER.

A photographic portrait of Ted Weller taken in 1939, when he received his commission as a second lieutenant, shows a handsome, fresh-faced young officer with gentle features who, with a wig and some makeup, could easily be transformed into a beautiful young woman.

Weller underestimated his abilities as a female impersonator: “I don’t believe I created the female roles I played but went along with the script and music to the best interpretation I could to enhance the presentation of the play. Most of it was laid out in the script.”<sup>8</sup> He was obviously quite skilled: on two separate occasions, seasoned A.I.F. concert party producer Major Jim Jacobs called Weller, “a fair dinkum<sup>ii</sup> Aussie impersonator” and “a female impersonator second to none.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> Australian slang for “the genuine article.”



FIGURE 14.2. “TED WELER GOES EDWARDIAN AS BAND VOCALIST” RAE NIXON’S SKETCHBOOK. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

Weller also performed as a female vocalist in Tony Gerrish’s dance band shows. Tom Morris remembered Weller as “a slim, slight-built, little fellow [who] had a boyish voice at his command . . . a most glorious boy soprano voice.”<sup>10</sup>

“**Sambal Sue.**” Also in Tamarkan convalescent camp was the Dutch/Indonesian performer known as “Sambal Sue.” American POW Kyle Thompson, a stagehand in the Tamarkan theatre, included a lengthy description of “her” in his memoir:

a Dutch army Eurasian, who had delicate features and developed into a sensational female impersonator. This fellow had dark brown eyes with long, curling eyelashes, and a smooth olive complexion. He was five feet, five inches tall and weighed about 150 pounds—the perfect size for a female impersonator—and when he was made up with a wig and what served as cosmetics, he was a dead ringer for the real thing.<sup>11</sup>

His specialty was the Hawaiian hula. And it was his sensational performance of this dance on the stage at Tamarkan that earned him the nickname “Sambal Sue” after the spicy Indonesian finger food made by POWs in the Netherlands East Indies Army and available in the canteen.



FIGURE 14.3. "TED WELLER GOES EDWARDIAN AS BAND VOCALIST." SKETCHBOOK DETAIL. RAE NIXON. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL. COURTESY OF MRS. RAE NIXON.

On his thumbnail sketch of "Sambal Sue," Rae Nixon appended the note, "Dutchman knocks audience for loop with Hawaiian Dance. (Looked like the real thing.)."<sup>12</sup>

"**Skippy.**" In Nong Pladuk relocation camp was another Dutch female impersonator—also a dancer—known as "Skippy," who Fergus Anckorn claimed looked "EXACTLY like Marlene Dietrich!—and dare I say it—to us at the time, she looked gorgeous. She (he) had the most wonderful gowns,—God know where the material came from. We scarcely had material enough for a handkerchief."<sup>13</sup> "Skippy's" dance partner, Frans, Anckorn recalled, was "a black, Javanese fellow. And they used to dance ravishing tangos and dances. I mean, you'd swear he was a girl. And people would cheer like mad when she came on. I say 'she' because that's all you could think of: blond hair, blue-eyed, and with a face like a doll."<sup>iii4</sup>

**Basil Ferron.** The main British female impersonator in Nong Pladuk was Basil Ferron, whom Norman Pritchard described as an "Anglo-Indian . . . and very small chap . . . slight . . . and could pass for a girl easily."<sup>15</sup> In Anckorn's view, Ferron was "a gorgeous-looking Indian girl, flashing eyes and all the rest of it."<sup>16</sup>

**Ken Adams and Jack Chalker.** In the British variety shows and plays at Nakhon Pathom hospital camp, Ken Adams was cast in the glamour roles and Jack Chalker played the ingénue/soubrette roles. Like Weller, he also sang as a female vocalist in band shows. Describing Adams, Chalker wrote, "In looks he was taller and more heavily built than Bobby Spong and with less immediate female face, but made up well and assumed female movement and voice pitch well."<sup>17</sup> When Adams appeared onstage in P. G. Wodehouse's comedy *Good Morning Bill* dressed in the silk cami-knickers that had been donated for the show from an anonymous source, he received what Chalker termed, "a stunning reception from the audience."<sup>ivi8</sup>

iii In describing the most effective impersonators, pronoun confusion and quotation mark usage is common [Rachamimov, "Comforts," 379].  
iv To elicit this response, somebody in the company must have know about the practice of "tucking" done by professional female impersonators to hide the male genitals.



FIGURE 14.4. JACK CHALKER IN BANGKOK FOLLOWING LIBERATION.  
PHOTOGRAPH. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

In contrast, Chalker was of medium height and had a slight build—ideal for the young female roles he played. Fred Ransome Smith remembered Chalker as “a handsome chap with an aquiline nose & slim with quite a head of hair!” Trying to recall Chalker’s appearance on stage, he wrote, “I can only say the audiences responded rapturously.”<sup>19</sup>

The POW producer/performer Captain “Fizzer” Pearson first spotted Chalker as a possible female impersonator back in Chungkai in December 1943:

My first “female” role as a dim witted vicar’s daughter occurred up country at Christmas in a very short comic stint with Fizzer. There was no one else available at the time who had taken part in performance—such as I had had at school. (But all male parts.) I did it for a lark and off the cuff, and I think this must have set the scene for later roles—which was far from intentional. There was no coercion to do this—only the fun of being a member of the team, and when there was no one else to take the part. All rather by accident.<sup>20</sup>

**Bobby Spong, Douglas Morris, and John “Nellie” Wallace.** Of the three major British female impersonators at Chungkai, only Spong—arguably the most famous POW female impersonator in Thailand—was written about extensively in the POW literature. He will become the focus of an in-depth inquiry later in this chapter.

Douglas Morris was one of Chungkai’s best impersonators—and, perhaps, its finest “actress.” His performance in the title role in Leo Britt’s production of G. B. Shaw’s *Major Barbara* was widely praised. His attractiveness as a female impersonator is readily apparent from the *Wonder Bar* photographs.



FIGURE 14.5. DOUGLAS MORRIS. DETAIL FROM *WONDER BAR* PHOTOGRAPHS. COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.



FIGURE 14.6. JOHN "NELLIE" WALLACE. DETAILS FROM *WONDER BAR* PHOTOGRAPHS. COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Custance Baker described John "Nellie" Wallace as "long, thin and extraordinarily supple [who] could turn out some sort of a dance at a moment's notice."<sup>21</sup> Trained as a ballet dancer before enlisting in the army, Wallace was invaluable as a dancer and choreographer. Unlike Bobby Spong, whose acting style was considered "natural," Wallace's was "camp."

Besides these three, there were several other important "female" stars in the Chungkai theatre:

**Dick Lucas and Custance Baker.** Patrick Stephenson thought these two were the "prettiest girls" in the Chungkai shows.<sup>22</sup>



FIGURE 14.7. BARRY CUSTANCE BAKER. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HILARY CUSTANCE GREEN.

Baker described himself as "a small slim handsome young man and a good dancer."<sup>23</sup> He first got involved with the theatre as a "stage carpenter and odd job man" gaining the "proud nickname of

'Makeshift,' 'Custance Makeshift Baker.'<sup>24</sup> "My true potential as a chorus girl and romantic actress," he wrote, tongue in cheek, "was not recognized until later."<sup>25</sup>

Baker claimed that Dick Lucas "took over as leading lady [in the Chungkai shows] in late 1944."<sup>26</sup> Of his appearance as Cinders in the panto, *Cinderella*, Basil Peacock wrote, "I shall never forget the sight of Cinderella (one of our younger and prettier subalterns) going to the ball in a golden coach and waving to us like royalty."<sup>27</sup>

**Freddie Thompson.** As he was older and had been wounded in the battle for Singapore, Freddie Thompson specialized in playing the "older woman" types, such as Mrs. Bramston in the mystery-thriller *Night Must Fall*. G. E. Chippington, one of his fans, included a brief bio in his entry on Thompson's appearance as the Fairy Queen in the pantomime *Babes in Thailand* at Takanun in late 1943:

Freddie, who back in Changi, half his jaw removed by a mortar bomb, had shuffled like a little old man, bent and emaciated towards me, his hand outstretched in greeting. I recalled his long nights when he rested his torn face on a hot brick to try and ease the pain or walked up and down outside his hut in the darkness and waited for the dawn.

. . . here he was, up here on the railway in the heart of the jungle tripping the light fantastic, hopping about the stage in a highly credible imitation of a Fairy Queen . . . as though that mortar bomb had never happened. His determination and will power have won him the victory. . . . His wounds may have radically altered and twisted the shape and outline of his face but they cannot stop the old spirit shining through.<sup>28</sup>

**Hugh "Ginger" de Wardener.** Hugh "Ginger" de Wardener was an anomaly. Except for his one-off stint as the Fairy Queen in *Babes in Thailand* at Takanun,<sup>v</sup> he did not play female roles. Hut-mate Captain Patrick McArthur wrote, "Ginger is a splendid pale golden haired Adonis with a delightfully free and easy unaffected manner and plenty of fun and good humour, born in Paris in the last war and parents (mother at least) American."<sup>29</sup> But when the producer Leo Britt convinced the handsome young medical officer that no one else could play the important ingénue role of Olivia Grayne in *Night Must Fall* as well as he could, de Wardener instantly became one of the camp's most versatile and highly prized actors.

Under Britt's careful guidance, the men playing female roles in his productions learned how to transform into "women." "He was strict with us girls," Custance Baker wrote. "Report to the theatre after first rice<sup>vi</sup> and from then on wear skirts and high heels to become used to moving like a woman."<sup>vii30</sup> By surrendering himself totally to the character's physical movements and gestures as well as to the possibilities of his costumes, de Wardener learned how to create the young woman called for in the text.

*It was a difficult thing for me to do, because I had to learn all these feminine*

<sup>v</sup> De Wardener appeared as the Fairy Godmother on opening night; Freddie Thompson for the second performance.

<sup>vi</sup> "After first rice" was the after the first serving of food. If there was any food left over after all men were served, the POWs could get back in line for "second rice."

<sup>vii</sup> "Some of us became anxious that we might possibly be becoming too too girlish, and to prevent this we kept a stock of barbells and weight bar (bamboo and logs) behind the stage, which we could lift from time to time as an assurance that our manly muscles were still all there." [Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir, 13]

*movements. For instance, it wasn't until the dress rehearsal that I realized that the skirt made a difference of how you moved. . . . And I remember as I went around the table, the skirt went upwards. I went, "Ah, that's useful . . . . Yes, that makes the movement more natural." So I then did it with my hips.*

*The main thing was where to put your hands. This was a hysterical girl. And I had to know exactly where my hands were—both of them—throughout the whole play. I must never have a moment where I didn't know where my hands were supposed to be.*

*And I worked it out. There were about eighteen positions, I think. And at any one moment, they were in a particular one of those. So then I felt quite at ease with my hands.<sup>31</sup>*

Audio



14.1

Olivia Grayne was the only major female role Hugh de Wardener ever played.

These, then, are the most significant female impersonators mentioned in the POW literature on the Thailand-Burma Railway. In Fergus Anckorn's estimation, "all of the impersonators were brilliant. . . . They were all extremely good and they could carry it off."<sup>32</sup>

### **"First Feeling of Lust for Two Years!"**

In their memoirs, the POWs never missed an opportunity to point out that the Japanese and Korean guards appeared to be sexually attracted to the female impersonators. Of "Sambal Sue," Tom Morris said that "all the Japs in the camp had the hots for him [Laughs]."<sup>33</sup> Chalker recalled that in both Chungkai and Nakhon Pathom, "some of the Korean and Jap guards frequently came sniffing round the dressing rooms back-stage where female-cast members were dressing and making-up, and had to be diplomatically steered away."<sup>34</sup> But it wasn't only the Japanese who were sexually attracted to the female impersonators. Without any qualifications as to who was doing the desiring, Wilbur Smith claimed, "They were propositioned all the time in the camp."<sup>35</sup>

By the spring of 1944, with a better diet that included eggs and meat and minimal work requirements, a number of POWs in the hospital and relocation camps experienced sexual urges for the first time since the beginning of their captivity. (They had worried that the starvation diet endured during the railway construction would make them impotent.) And in a world without women, the only focuses for their fantasies were the female impersonators. "Clearly some of our leading ladies seemed to be as intensely sought after by their respective fans as were the real-life counterparts in London's theatre-land," Charles Fisher observed, "and more than a few wells of loneliness apparently changed overnight into fountains of desire."<sup>36</sup>

Examples of this type of projection are found in James Richardson's report of a fellow POW's remark on seeing the Dutch/Indonesian female impersonators in one of Joop Postma's early cabarets at Chungkai: "First feeling of lust for two years!"<sup>37</sup> (In the annotated version of his diary, Richardson elaborated on this statement: "So considering the debilitating [*sic*] and virtually desexing effects of a prolonged rice diet, this was an eloquent acknowledgement of excellence of the 'girls' performance."<sup>38</sup>) Geoffrey Gee had

a similar response to one of those same impersonators: “gorgeous Jackie Stoenhosen [Steenhuizen] as Carmen Miranda. Oo, la, la!”<sup>39</sup> In another instance, Custance Baker overheard this comment about his and Dick Lucas’ performances as prostitutes in *Café Colette* as he was leaving the theatre: “Those fucking tarts were more like fucking tarts than real fucking tarts.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, there is Roy Whitecross’s admission that “the sight of the leading ‘ladies’ awoke memories that had better been left asleep.”<sup>41</sup>

From his exhaustive research of POW life in the Pacific during World War II, Richard Daws concluded, “In prison camps, to be able to feast the eyes on something that looked like a woman was a powerful thing. And Complicated.”<sup>42</sup> “Complicated” because in the all-male environment of the POW camps, the “women” the prisoners were responding to were men dressed as women. And the POWs knew that—intellectually. But over and over in their memoirs, interviews, and correspondence, those who worked on the Thailand-Burma railway insist that the ‘illusionists’—the female impersonators who worked hard to convince their male audiences they were women—were *experienced* as “women,” not as men in drag. As Custance Baker explained, that was their goal:

We girls in Leo [Britt’s] company, maintained the illusion that we were really actresses, not men dressed up. Many female impersonators nowadays tend to end their act by shedding their wigs and bras to gasps of astonishment from the audience. We never did. We were girls right to the final curtain.<sup>43</sup>

Fergus Anckorn testified to their effectiveness: “And when you saw a play with men and women in it, you would never think for a moment that they were all men. In the beginning there was a lot of whistling and hooting going on . . . [but as time went by it was] accepted completely. But it was appreciated, I know, because these fellows could forget that there were no women anywhere and they really believed what they were seeing, so it must have been very good for morale.”<sup>44</sup> As a consequence, Daws explained, “there were wistful longings heterosexual, homosexual, or just confused by captivity. Everyone liked looking at the stage ladies.”<sup>45</sup>

This phenomenon was not new: the same thing had happened in response to female impersonators in military concert parties during the First World War. Fuller’s research into the subject led him to the conclusion that the “considerable sexual excitement” generated in the soldiers by the female impersonators “shows the intensity of the desire to believe.” Analyzing that conclusion a bit further, he added, “it seems likely that the appeal of the concert party ‘girls’ owed as much to their emphasis upon glamour as to the sheer fewness of the females.”<sup>46</sup> Allan Bérubé drew much the same conclusion from his study of female impersonators in American “soldier shows” during the Second World War:

On the surface, men in drag played only with the rigidity of gender roles. Spectators willingly pretended that these soldiers in drag were “women,” laughing at the clowns who made fun of the situation and standing in awe at the magic performed by the illusionists who appeared to be real women. Male reviewers and GIs in the audience comfortably talked about the sex appeal of the beautiful “women” on stage because they also like looking at women in real life.<sup>47</sup>

But as Daws intimates, the spectator's gaze is more complicated than this "safety valve" explanation would have us believe. From his investigation into the phenomenon in First World War military concert parties, David Boxwell drew a more nuanced conclusion:

While the spectacle of a soldier in drag functioned according to the "safety valve" model of cathartic ritual, the form and content of the drag performer's "act," strongly dependent as it was on multiple *entendre*, close physical contact with other men (both in and out of drag), and the illusion of eroticized, idealized, and objectified femininity, disrupted the boundaries that contained the act as a necessary release in an all-male environment. A spectator's desiring and approving gaze on a soldier in drag was not simply a matter of pleasure in a "surrogate" woman; rather, his gaze was directed at an effeminate-acting man in drag, a fellow soldier in his own military organization.<sup>48</sup>

Custance Baker remembered, it wasn't only in the spectator's gaze where "desiring" occurred. In *Outward Bound*, Leo Britt cast Custance Baker and Dick Lucas as "a young couple very much in love."

They have little part in the play except to sit in corners kissing and embracing and murmuring love to one another: "Darling, sweetheart, I love you so much." After a few dull rehearsals we decided to learn both parts and to play boy and girl on alternating nights . . . After many sessions of kissing and cuddling a pretty young man dressed as a girl, or when I was a girl being treated similarly by this same girl now dressed as a man I began to feel some considerable attachment to Dickie. Nothing physical you understand! Pat Stephenson agreed with me that it was really a lesbian tendency, so perhaps I am really a lesbian after all. My four children and eleven grandchildren seem to make this unlikely.<sup>49</sup>

Joking aside, Baker's emotional attachment might be better described as "de-sexualized homosexuality," a phenomenon discussed by Iris Rachamimov in her investigation into shifting gender boundaries in First World War Internment camps.<sup>50</sup>

### Sexual Outlets

If sexual urges were reawakened by female impersonators, what exactly was the nature of those urges and how did the POWs deal with them? Laurie Allison believed that "throughout our incarceration women had taken a holiday and were elevated to being a fondly remembered other world." For him, the POWs' response to the female impersonators was generally benign. "After the show," he wrote, "the men would return to their huts and, lying on the bamboo slats, there, undoubtedly, would be introspective mulling in their minds of what these women impersonators brought back to them."<sup>51</sup>

But John Sharp's diary entries regarding the availability of "Dutch 'navy-cake'"<sup>viii</sup> and medical

<sup>viii</sup> *Navy-cake* is homosexual code for anal intercourse.

officer “Schoolie” Faulder’s aside that “we have done almost every type of operation except childbirth—and after what is going on in the camp now we’re expecting to do that soon” indicates that some of the men had sought a more active outlet for their sexual fantasies.<sup>52</sup> Stephen Alexander’s report of a confession by fellow officer Terence Charley offers additional evidence:

Many of us have been regressing to our schooldays ever since we hit the egg belt, and, of course I’ve been at it longer than some of you. The better rations at Chungkai soon had me on the hop, and the stage shows didn’t help my dreams a bit. But the female impersonators among the officers usually had their “protectors,” and when I felt the sparks flying with anyone in the ranks, I had to remember that even if I couldn’t think like a gentlemen, I had to act like an officer.<sup>53</sup>

### Sexual Orientation

The female impersonators’ sexual orientation was always grist for the camp rumor mills. Fergus Anckorn thought that “a lot of them were effeminate. So they could do it [perform as a female impersonator] and they loved it.”<sup>54</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the military, being labeled *effeminate* was equated with being called *queer*. The dancer “Skippy” at Nong Pladuk was, in Anckorn’s eyes, as “queer as a clockwork orange.”<sup>55</sup> He also suspected that Basil Ferron may have been gay: “it was quite [obvious] that he was queer all right . . . well, I’ll say that he was effeminate, put it that way.”<sup>56</sup> But Norman Pritchard strongly disagreed with that supposition: “I think Basil was probably just a bit of a showman anyway. And was pleased to be asked to take the spotlight.”<sup>57</sup>

David Wince was convinced that the female impersonators he saw at Chungkai were homosexuals. “As I can remember,” he wrote, “most, or even all of the female impersonators lived together at the end of one of the huts. I can still remember seeing their ‘smalls’<sup>ix</sup> hanging up to dry after being washed. But I never witnessed any homosexual acts. I can only go by their personal idiosyncrasies, and by the way they spoke and moved. I don’t think I was mistaken!”<sup>58</sup>

Being thought queer by the other troops was one of the fears that men had to deal with when asked to become a female impersonator. When Geoffrey Gee was approached, he hesitated, wondering what the role might do to his status. “In many ways I should enjoy it,” Gee mused, “but feel I haven’t the necessary confidence to carry it off, nor have I the talent such as singing, impersonations, etc. etc. which to me seems so all-essential. The two main things to make me hesitate are 1. Will it bring about my discharge from hospital? Undesirable. And 2. Will it cause my friends etc. to take the piss out of me and thus lose caste?”<sup>59</sup>

Norman Carter encountered similar difficulties finding a POW to play Dorothy for his production of *The Wizard of Oz* in Tamarkan before finally convincing Lieutenant Ted Weller to take the part.

The trouble was finding a leading lady. Nobody was interested. Finally, I asked Arthur Shakes, who suggested having a word with Teddy Weller, a handsome young officer. I approached Teddy and got a firm “No!” What would his mates say? What would his Kumi<sup>x</sup> say? If he dressed up like a woman and sang like

<sup>ix</sup> *Panties.*

<sup>x</sup> *Japanese term for his own hut of junior officers.*

one, he'd never live it down. Besides he was far too busy with his softball team. It was not until I told him bluntly that if he did not play Judy<sup>xi</sup> I'd have to cancel the show that he reluctantly consented.<sup>60</sup>

Weller's own memory of how he was convinced to become a female impersonator differs from Carter's: "This caused me some embarrassment and on discussion with my commanding officer regarding losing respect from the men, was told they wouldn't be able to do many of the plays without my voice. It turned out the men gave me more respect than ever."<sup>61</sup>

Jack Chalker had also put up some resistance at first: "I took one or two female parts there, just short little ones. I don't why the hell I got into that [Laughs], which, of course, was a laugh, but it was in [Chungkai<sup>xii</sup>] camp that I first did that. I got ragged like cattle. I said, 'I can't do this.' They said, 'Come on,' you know."<sup>62</sup> But once he relented, he recalled,

I personally never received any flak after playing female roles, and we all regarded it as a huge joke. . . . The most enjoyable parts for me were in comedy—such as Wodehouse, or in silly short reviews [revues]—and the business of playing a female character, as well as male, was simply great fun and an immense pleasure to be involved in something not only important to our corporate lives but a constructive escape from our own carnage.

Apart from never experiencing "flak" for taking female roles, I had no homosexual advances made to me because of it and such matters never entered my mind.<sup>63</sup>

Chalker, though, did not play the "glamour" roles, although he did play a sexy gold digger in *Good Morning Bill*. But he had to admit that Ken Andrews, who did, may well have received some undue attention because of his portrayals.<sup>64</sup>

Though many female impersonators, like Weller, tried to minimize speculation about their sexual orientation—"I always changed out of costume immediately [after a show]. There was no doubt I was there as a soldier and a lieutenant"<sup>65</sup>—their efforts did not necessarily prevent those projections from taking place. "Sambal Sue," who gained fame in Tamarkan with his sexy hulas and other performances, discovered he was the recipient of unwanted male fantasies. During an interview, Stan Gailbraith had a sudden, startling recollection of "Sambal Sue," exclaiming, "Lots of girls would be very envious of his legs!"<sup>66</sup>

Kyle Thompson tells what happened when the playful banter about "Sambal Sue's" sexuality—which all the female impersonators faced—turned into innuendo and behavior that became just too obvious to ignore:

[Pat] Fox and ["Sambal Sue"<sup>xiii</sup>] became good friends and often played

<sup>xi</sup> Judy Garland played the role of Dorothy in the popular film.

<sup>xii</sup> Chalker mistakenly writes Kanyu here.

<sup>xiii</sup> There is a problem for me with Thompson's identification here. From my research I have found no indication that Pat Fox ever played opposite "Sambal Sue." The only way this passage makes sense to me is if the female impersonator really being discussed is Ted Weller.

opposite each other in male-female roles. Inevitably, rumors began circulating that they might be more than just fellow actors. The female impersonator quickly became a celebrity, but not of the sort he sought. Some of the guys around camp began issuing flirtatious whistles and catcalls as he walked about. Shortly, this all became too humiliating and he quit the stage. . . . He told us one night after an unusually good performance that it was his last, as he could not continue being confined in close quarters with thousands of POWs who had not been in the company of actual females for nearly three years.<sup>67</sup>

Thompson himself was convinced that “Sambal Sue” had no “homosexual tendencies” whatsoever.<sup>68</sup>

But “Sambal Sue” wasn’t the only female impersonator in Tamarkan who was the recipient of such innuendo. According to Tom Morris, Ted Weller also became a victim of speculation: “Rohan Rivett made some disparaging remarks about Teddy Weller and his female impersonating, whereupon Teddy thumped him and he [Weller] refused from that day on to participate.”<sup>69</sup>

Even G. E. Chippington, after writing glowingly about Freddie Thompson’s several performances as a female impersonator, felt it necessary to defend him against any reader’s suspicions that he might be a homosexual. “It should not be inferred from Freddie’s playing ‘female’ roles that there is anything ‘odd’ about him,” he insisted. “In fact, I have noticed no such ‘oddness’ at any time here. Should anyone make such a suggestion in Freddie’s hearing I fear he would experience a very ‘masculine’ fist planted firmly on the end of his nose.”<sup>70</sup>

The majority of the female impersonators, it appears, had no other motive than the fulfillment of duty, which was—in this abnormal world become the new normal—to keep up the morale of the troops. Speaking from his own observation, Terry Morris (brother of the popular female impersonator Douglas Morris) reiterated Jimmy Walker’s statement about the necessity of finding men to play the female roles if the concert parties were to develop more substantial entertainment: “Somebody had to wear the skirt’ really . . . sums up the situation.”<sup>71</sup>

### **“Challenging the Heterosexual Norm”**

From Custance Baker’s account of his and Dick Lucas’ experience as female impersonators, the “truth” about their representation and its reception appears to be even more “complicated.” According to Terence Charley, the production of plays like *The Circle* always “aroused curiosity as to how they would tackle the love scenes.”

Two males indulging in a passionate embrace in public, even if dramatically desirable is not, among the English at any rate, a thing to be lightly undertaken, even if one of them is masquerading as a woman, indeed that probably makes it much worse. Even if the man is as “queer” as a coot he will often prefer not to have his little bit of fun in public & if he isn’t, well you never know, people may think he is. The rumor, therefore, was sedulously put about that our leading lady, Bobby Spong, suffered from halitosis so that even the chaste embraces that our actors permitted themselves would be generally recognized to be distasteful to them.<sup>72</sup>

Though actors may have been required by the script to engage in quick kisses (see the stage directions and dialogue for *Good Morning Bill* in Nakhon Pathom) at other times they might have used the old technique of turning their heads upstage as they embraced. Supposedly, the illusion of passionate embraces could only be carried so far before disrupting established heterosexual boundaries. Or so it was thought.

Custance Baker's recall of his "kiss and cuddle" scenes in *Outward Bound* (see above) and *Hay Fever* appear to totally undercut this theory. "In my best [*Hay Fever*] scene twisting around on a very hard bamboo sofa with the host I was often worried that our kisses might cause giggles or rude comment from our brutal and licentious audience, but we got away with it and the host, Leo [Britt] himself, once whispered to me, 'They're taking it OK, do it just once more.' So we did, and the Japs who came every night and sat in the front row just loved it."<sup>73</sup> And what about the POWs?

However Baker understood what "illusion" he and his kissing partners were creating, they were certainly "challenging the heterosexual norm." As Alan Bérubé explained in his study of female impersonators in American "soldier shows,"

The most daring and skillful GI drag performers were like magicians. They played tricks with gender, becoming master of the art of illusion with a sense of humor. They created beautiful attractive women out of men, affirming the heterosexuality of their audiences, then played with the implications, covertly challenging the heterosexual norm by becoming men dressed as women hugging, kissing, and singing love songs to other men.<sup>74</sup>

What the evidence suggests is that during the long incarceration of the POW on the Thailand-Burma railway, the boundaries of "the heterosexual norm" became less fixed and more permeable than might be suspected.

### The Others

There were others—the transvestites, the cross-dressers—who specialized in the "glamour" roles and liked to wear female attire and didn't mind if their actions provoked sexual innuendo or advances. These were the impersonators who "took their 'art' too seriously, having shaved their eyebrows off and allowed their hair to pass even the worst soldier's standard" and might be seen walking around the camp with their hair up in curlers.<sup>75</sup>

Such a person was "Skippy" at Nong Pladuk, who in Fergus Anckorn's estimation "very much considered herself female day and night. Everything she did was in the female [way]—all that. She didn't wear these dresses and things [offstage]; she was [an] ordinary soldier."<sup>76</sup>

Or Vilhelm Vanderdeken in the hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom, who "always played the part of an exotic woman—and a good looking one," Benjamin Dunn observed. "A lot of guys whistled at him and he seemed not to mind. He even had a big Dutch boyfriend who was with him constantly."<sup>77</sup> Earlier, he had appeared in shows at Tamarkan where G. F. Kershaw had been particularly taken with his attractiveness as one of the court maidens in the pantomime *Aladdin*: "He looked the part of a young and attractive female, both in dress and deportment, and when he brought cigarettes to the hospital after the show it was a study in psychology to see the number of men who pressed him to sit beside them, and all those who made any

excuse to touch him, although all knew him to be a man.”<sup>78</sup>

These female impersonators teased the imaginations of the men with their ability to create the illusion of the glamorous female while, at the same time, they flirted with the revelation of their own sexual orientation by incorporating homosexual code words or employing multiple *entendre* in skits and songs.

*I'm Lady Medusa, a Social Who's-Whoser,  
I married the Governor last week.  
I traveled out steerage, me mind on a peerage,  
And now I'm half-way — so to speak —  
At Government House parties they say I'm a pest,  
But Coward preferred me above all the rest*<sup>79</sup>

This excerpt from “Biggles” Bywaters’ witty lyrics for a show in Kanburi Officers’ Camp offers a good example of the use of multiple *entendre* with homosexual subtext. The initial implication of these lyrics about an extramarital affair between the female singer and Noel Coward, who toured the Far East before the war, was “doubled” into a second and more audacious implication when a male actor in drag sang about an affair with Coward, who was known to be gay.

### A Dangerous Game

A certain level of joking and teasing about homosexuality could be tolerated in the POW camps, just as it probably had been earlier in the soldiers’ lives. During his investigation of how American army inductees in basic training dealt with their first encounter of an all-male society, Bérubé concluded that the homosexual banter and horseplay he noted in the barracks “defused secret fears through laughter, and it reassured the men that their uncomfortable feelings were common rather than queer.”<sup>80</sup>

But teasing was one thing; actual participation in homosexual activity was another. In the military, punishment for this behavior meant jail time and a dishonorable discharge. Still, such serious consequences didn’t necessarily prove a deterrent. “The latter factor [sexual activity], however, is fortunately little apparent here, with the lowering diet and lack of propinquity and stimulation,” wrote John Milford in Chungkai, “though I have heard it said that opportunity is not altogether lacking for those who are bold—and not fastidious.”<sup>81</sup>

A prevalent lack of “fastidiousness” was confirmed by Fergus Anckorn:

*An awful lot of homosexuality going in all these camps—all over the place. Oh, plenty of it went on. But, in a way, it was a lot of the married people. And it was just a matter of, well, we've got no wife, let's get someone else. And they weren't ravishing homosexuals in any way; it was that we'll have to make do with this. And there again, that was quite accepted, or not looked at. And nothing much was made of it.*<sup>82</sup>

Anckorn may be overstating the case here. Most POWs who served on the Thailand-Burma Railway would categorically deny that any such activity went on in the camps. Based on his own experience, Chalker asserted,

What is interesting in retrospect is that homosexuality never entered into our daily existence—or that most of us were quite unaware of it.<sup>xiv</sup>

What was rather magical was the constant evidence of great tenderness between appallingly sick and dying men, when trying to ease fearful pain and bringing comfort—washing a skeletal neighbour down when covered in faeces, and so on. This we do remember, but this was sheer human kindness in heart-breaking conditions.<sup>83</sup>

But Terence Charley's observations about the sexual activity in Kanburi Officers' Camp in 1945 are more in agreement with Anckorn's above: "It was in Kanburi that one noticed that sex was beginning to rear its ugly head and from this I deduced that there is probably no such thing as a completely heterosexual person. One noticed little liaisons blossoming even amongst those who, as soon as they were let out, rushed to the comfort of the married bed."<sup>84</sup>

John Sharp's diary also reveals what was taking place in Kachu Mountain Aerodrome Camp in June, 1945, among POWs who had been imprisoned together for far too long.

29.6. One of the M.O's declares that there have been four cases of 'navy-cake' [sodomy] reported to the police this month. He surprised two participants himself, behind the dysentery latrine—but, being a gentleman, he coughed and passed on. He condoned the practice.<sup>xv</sup> He spoke also of the difficulty of preventing blanket-drill [masturbation] in the hospitals—at Chungkai he checked one man on the danger-list in the morning, and caught him at it again at 1 p.m.; he was dead at 3 p.m.<sup>85</sup>

Though no official report would ever admit it, after years of isolated incarceration there seems to have been some level of turning a blind eye to what is known in penal studies as situational homosexual behavior. Some female impersonators may have been instrumental in prompting such behavior, but no camp gossip has surfaced that suggests they ever actively engaged in it. Yet comments about "protectors" or being accompanied by "big boyfriends" might suggest that some female impersonators were not simply concerned about what their actions onstage might provoke offstage.

<sup>xiv</sup> Even though there are rumors that many hearts were broken at Nakhon Pathom when the officers were sent away to the all-officers' camp at Kanburi.

<sup>xv</sup> This is exactly what Sharp wrote in the carefully handwritten redaction of his original diary.

### “The Uncomparable Bobbie”

Of all of the glamorous “illusionists” in the Thailand POW camps, it was British artilleryman Private Bobby Spong who became “a camp legend”: the best-known and best-loved female impersonator on the railway.<sup>86</sup> Since there is more mention of Spong in the diaries and memoirs of men who were there than any of the other female impersonators, it is possible to assemble a profile of Spong both as a person and as a performer.

According to Chalker, “Spong had a slender build, was more sophisticated, naturally elegant and made-up easily and exceptionally well.”<sup>87</sup> Durnford called his figure “thin but eloquent.”<sup>88</sup> And John Cosford, who had been Spong’s hut-mate in Tamarkan, remarked that Spong was “an extraordinary fellow and so completely feminine in his habits that I often found him most embarrassing. . . . He would spend a great deal of time over his teeth and hair, talked like a girl—‘Oh dear, mother’s tired,’ being his favourite phrase—and was a dab hand at mending clothes. He kept a folder of ‘cuttings’ which told of his appearance on stage and for every show made out a programme with his own name on top of the bill.”<sup>89</sup>

Unfortunately, the only visual images we have of Bobby Spong are found in the two photographs of the *Wonder Bar* show in Chungkai in May 1944 and in an illustration for a camp soccer match.



FIGURES 14.8. & 14.9. IMAGES OF BOBBY SPONG. DETAILS FROM THE *Wonder Bar* PHOTOGRAPHS. COURTESY OF MARTIN PERCIVAL.

Though indistinct, the two close-up details show a young lissome figure in a strapless evening gown. His head with its oval face sits atop a slender neck set off by abundant Brunette hair which has been pulled into an upsweep. As a major female impersonator, Spong had been allowed to let his Brunette hair grow long. To complete the illusion of his femininity, he also shaved parts of his body that would be revealed by the outfits he wore. “When [Spong] shaved his hairy chest and legs, and dressed as a woman,” Cosford declared, “it was difficult to believe he wasn’t the genuine article.”<sup>90</sup> His strapless evening gown displays his prominent clavicle bones, bare shoulders, and slender arms—and as it is gathered between his legs in **Figure 14.9**, shapely calves.

## Bobby Spong Onstage

Unlike other female impersonators like John “Nellie” Wallace who always played in a campy acting style noted by Tom Morris as “slightly outrageously overacted,”<sup>91</sup> Spong did not resort to exaggerated vocalizations, movements, or gestures onstage to convince his audiences that he was playing a woman. The qualifier used repeatedly in diaries, memoirs, and interviews to describe Spong’s physical demeanor on stage is *natural*. For example, Durnford called his “variety of feminine gestures . . . both natural and amusing yet not broadly-burlesque or exaggerated.”<sup>92</sup> It was this “naturalness” that Hugh de Wardener most admired about him:

*I remember Bobby Spong because he was so attractive. He really was. He was utterly feminine, utterly. And utterly relaxed in it. It suited him. But Bobby was a good actor, too. I mean, he was utterly at ease in the part. . . . He didn't overdo it [at] all. He did it perfectly . . . it was his relaxed, utterly natural stance which I remember so well.*<sup>93</sup>

Frank Samethini recalled that the “uncomparable Bobbie’s [*sic*]” first appearance on stage in a show always got a rise out of the audience: “The curtain goes up. Bobbie appears swaying his hips amidst catcalls.”<sup>94</sup> But in Chalker’s memory, it wasn’t catcalls but cheers that were raised every time Bobby appeared.<sup>95</sup> Wade noted that during his performances, Spong “could roll his big eyes wickedly and time his silences most skillfully.”<sup>96</sup>

Spong had first become well known as a solo performer—a singer-comedienne—in “The Mummie Bees” concert party productions back in Changi POW camp, Singapore. His repertoire included impersonations of famous female stage and film entertainers, like the British comedienne Beatrice Lillie and the German film star Marlene Dietrich, singing songs like “Love for Sale,” “Falling in Love Again,” and “See What the Boys in the Back Room Will Have.”<sup>97</sup> Another performer he loved to imitate was the renowned 1930s British female impersonator Douglas Byng, who sang songs liberally salted with multiple entendres, like “No-one Loves a Fairy When She’s Forty.”<sup>98</sup> Spong’s singing voice was, to John Durnford’s ears at least, “of Sophie Tucker proportions and huskiness.”<sup>99</sup>

It was in “The Mummie Bees” productions and the weekend *Café Colette* shows in Changi where Spong first branched out as an actor in comedy sketches and revues. When he appeared on the makeshift stage on the final night of the notorious Selarang Incident “magnificently dressed as a woman, the roar that went up from that square must have been heard all over the island.”<sup>100</sup>

As Frank Samethini reported, Spong’s versatility as a singer, dancer, and “actress” reached its apex in the POW camps in Thailand:

On stage, the men say, he is superb in depicting whatever type of woman would be required for the situation, moving about in a variety of dresses from a flimsy nightie to a plunging neckline evening gown. In most cases the script requires a young frivolous wench caught in a web of naughty innuendo or straight out dirty jokes applauded by a roaring audience. Sometimes at the finish of the show he would convincingly figure in the sacred role of the soldier’s

wife waving good-bye to her slowly backward stepping husband, departing for war, while the orchestra plays a heart-rendering, “When the Poppies Bloom Again.”<sup>101</sup>

Others, like Tom Boardman, also wrote glowingly of his acting abilities: “[Spong] always gave of his best and ‘lived’ every part he was given.”<sup>102</sup> Chalker called him “the supreme ‘actress.’”<sup>103</sup>

It had long been the tradition in military concert parties for female impersonators to take responsibility for getting their own costumes together and for transporting the articles wherever they went. When Spong unpacked his kit, Cosford saw that “[Spong] carried a full set of ladies attire with him and for his stage appearances would wear a complete woman’s rig-out, roll on corsets and all. It amazed me how he had managed to keep it all and carry it about with him, because apart from his entertainment appearances he was like the rest of us, ‘Jap Happy’<sup>xvi</sup> or tattered shorts and precious little else.”<sup>104</sup>

John Coast offers a verbal snapshot of Spong in his ladies’ underwear backstage in the dressing room prior to a performance: “Bobby, the leading lady, has a wardrobe of his own, including scanties which he has made himself. You see him now made-up and patting his hair, walking up and down in a pair of light blue silk panties, looking at himself in the mirror.”<sup>105</sup>

Competition over the quality and extent of their dress and underwear collections was supposedly the reason Bobby got into a feud with Joqui [“Jackie”] Steenhuizen,<sup>xvii</sup> the most stunning of the N.E.I. female impersonators in Chungkai. “There is too much bad blood between the ‘girls,’” Samethini revealed. “Some say because of an instant mutual dislike, others say jealousy of their personal wardrobe had been the cause for the feud.”<sup>106</sup>

But the real quarrel between Spong and “Jackie” wasn’t over who had the most extensive wardrobe; it was a contest over who was going to be recognized as the best female impersonator in Chungkai. Which one of them would receive the most wolf whistles and wild applause from audiences because “she” exuded the most sexual allure?

## Bobby Spong Offstage

Spong was one of those female impersonators who enjoyed playing his role wherever and whenever he had opportunity. He was given to understand that his offstage acting played an important part in the POWs’ psychological rehabilitation. One place he performed was in the hospital wards for those who were too sick to be brought to the theatre to see the shows. Leofric Thorpe wrote that Spong loved doing these “hut shows”: “And he used to go round singing numbers and so on, and adjust the people’s moods with his jokes.”<sup>107</sup> Cosford noticed that, during his “individual turns in the wards,” Spong would sometimes “sit on patients’ beds looking so much like a woman that they would blush and attempt to cover their nakedness.”<sup>108</sup>

Spong was apparently a good sport and game for anything. On 29 April 1944, when one of the shows was suddenly cancelled because the Japanese had taken all the theatrical paraphernalia to Kanburi to put on a show of their own in celebration of the emperor’s birthday, Spong participated in a hastily arranged burlesque soccer match to ensure that the men would still have some sort of entertainment to attend on their *yasume* day.

<sup>xvi</sup> The everyday outfit for men in the camp was the Japanese undergarment called a *fundoshi*, which the POWs called a “G-string” or a “Jap Happy.”

<sup>xvii</sup> Frank Samethini misremembered the name as “Johnny.”



FIGURE 14.10. NOTICE FOR SOCCER MATCH. IMAGE COPYRIGHT MUSEON, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS.

Notices for the soccer match posted around the camp are illustrated with an image of Bobby Spong in yellow halter top and shorts standing in a red V (for “Victory,” of course) with his foot on the ball.

But it was Spong’s two offstage appearances during the 1943 Christmas holidays where he made his biggest splash. On Christmas Day, he was among the entertainers who visited the hospital wards to hand out gifts to the patients. One of those patients, Stanley Gimson, wrote, “I saw Bobby Spong, looking ‘smashing’ in light green and orange frock and hat, causing a sensation as he distributes cigarettes, escorted by Mark Quinn in a natty grey suit.”<sup>109</sup>

His second appearance was at the race track event on New Year’s Day. These race track meets were a time for everyone in the camp to dress up and role-play. An oval racetrack was created with the camp band in the center playing appropriate music. There was a paddock where the “horses” could be evaluated and enclosures where the POWs could circulate dressed not in their everyday “Jap-Happies” but in the best clothes they had left in their kits. There were jockeys in “silks” made from sarongs and other bits of colored cloth and a tote board for placing bets. And there was Bobby. “Bob appeared dressed in a floppy Ascot bonnet, and a long, chiffon-type dress of mosquito-netting, to parade the enclosures with a parasol, leaning negligently on the arm of two other members of the ‘theatrical profession,’ splendid in tail and grey toppers,” noted Durnford.<sup>110</sup> The day ended with Spong under a large tree, accompanied by an accordion player, giving a cabaret performance of songs from Douglas Byng’s repertoire.<sup>111</sup>

Others found Spong’s antics that day unacceptable. A soldier appearing as a female onstage could be acknowledged as a necessity but functioning in that capacity offstage challenged the heterosexual norm. Captain C. D. L. Aylwin was greatly upset that fellow officers, including their camp commandant, accepted Spong’s cross-dressing and behavior: “There was a big hospital sweepstake on one of the races drawn by Colonel Owtram and ‘Miss Bobby Spong,’ the actress. The latter dressed in the latest creation of Chungkai and with [Lieutenant] Quinn, dressed in a light sandy coloured suit looking like a pimp (it made me want to vomit to see him)—as her beau, stood self consciously in the ‘paddock’ watching events.”<sup>112</sup> Lieutenant James Richardson thought Bobby’s actions really crossed a line when he ended up “kissing the winners of

races. All rather distasteful!"<sup>113</sup>

Some of the other ranks exhibited uneasiness with Spong's "feminine" presence and behavior offstage as well. In further comments on his story of how Spong affected the patients when he sat on their hospital beds, Cosford added, "I could remember their feelings for I myself, who knew him so well, often felt most awkward in his company."<sup>114</sup>

### Other Reactions to Bobby Spong

When thinking or writing about "Bobby" in their diaries or memoirs, it is obvious from the examples already given that many of the POWs experienced Spong offstage or on not as a male performer in drag but, in de Wardener's words, as "utterly feminine, utterly."<sup>115</sup> Major Leofric Thorpe, who first gave Spong the opportunity to perform in "The Mummie Bees" shows in Changi, wrote that he always thought of Bobby Spong "as a young woman."<sup>116</sup> Fergus Anckorn agreed, stating, "there's no way you could tell that he wasn't a woman."<sup>117</sup> And they weren't the only ones taken in by the illusion. W. G. Riley remembered an incident that happened during Spong's re-appearance onstage at Chungkai late in 1943 after he had returned from a work camp up the line: "His feminine mannerisms and act was so convincing, that on his first appearance in this role . . . the Japs attending the concert . . . were so convinced that he was female, that they stopped the show and made him prove his manhood!"<sup>118</sup>

As was true of other female impersonators in the camps, especially those who worked hard to create the frisson of seeing glamorous, attractive women on stage, Bobby Spong's appearances always provoked sexual responses in his audience. This reaction had been true from his earliest performances back in Changi, even from such POWs as Richardson, who would later decry Spong's behavior at Chungkai: "Bobby Spong as a girl—very good (a luscious, seductive bitch who always looks like a forthright whore!)."<sup>119</sup> Wade recalled a statement by an unidentified POW in Changi: "I had a wonderful dream about Bobby Spong last night."<sup>120</sup> And Thorpe, following up on his remark about always seeing Spong as female, admitted, "Perhaps it was just as well that after some months without the correct vitamins etc in the diet all sexual urges vanished!"<sup>121</sup> But that was Changi in 1942, not Thailand in 1944, when those urges returned.

In Chungkai, "Fizzer" Pearson, who played the male lead opposite Spong in Somerset Maugham's comedy *The Circle*, was overheard quipping, "I could have had Bobby last night, balls or no balls!"<sup>122</sup> And John Coast, who as stage manager watched Spong from the wings during a performance of one-act plays, exclaimed, "the leading lady, Bobby Spong, looked as bed-worthy as many of his opposite sex."<sup>123</sup>

As was true of the other female impersonators, Cosford believed that "more than one [Japanese] fancied [Spong] in his female attire."<sup>124</sup> Durnford recalled that the Japanese and Koreans frequently asked Spong to give private performances for them in their quarters. And he did: "Accepting gracefully inducements of fruit and cigarettes from the lascivious 'apes,' he would slip neatly out of their grasp and fly over the padang in the moonlight to the safety of his own hut."<sup>125</sup>

All of this, of course, fueled speculation about Spong's own sexual orientation. Anckorn mused, "I suspect that he was slightly gay . . . but he really was wonderful."<sup>126</sup> When asked about this possibility, Hugh de Wardener said, "Whether he was a homosexual or not, I don't know . . . he probably had inclinations that way. . . . I'm sure he had several admirers who might have tried something on him. And I don't know if anything was going on at all."<sup>127</sup>

## Spong's Final Appearances

Spong's portrayal of "the Follies Girl," Mirabelle Swam, in Leo Britt's production of the musical *Wonder Bar* in mid-May 1944 was a singular triumph. It was also his penultimate appearance in Chungkai. Following the final performance, Spong shocked everyone by volunteering for a Japan Party draft. He did so, it was understood, because "his pal Vic Marshall" had been placed on the draft, and he wanted "to stick" with him.<sup>128</sup>

His last show in Chungkai was *Café Colette*, a revival of the show he had performed back in Changi. As usual, it contained sketches loaded with salacious humor, multiple entendre, and sexual byplay. James Richardson was outraged by the antics of the two prostitutes (one of whom was Spong) depicted on stage: "culturally in the gutter, quite the worst creatures, almost I've ever seen prancing on the stage,"<sup>129</sup>

What elicited Richardson's negative response this time isn't known. Others found the show "very amusing" and "a fine musical."<sup>130</sup> For his swan song, Spong may have thrown caution to the wind and given one of those drag performances that Bérubé witnessed in some of the American "soldier shows" that "undermined the audience's heterosexual assumptions" with the result that "spectators sometimes became offended and hostile, reviewers attacked the show as obscene, authorities closed the show and arrested the actors, and, in the military, discharged the soldier-performers, as homosexuals."<sup>131</sup>

Almost casually, John Sharp mentions a poignant detail about Spong's preparation for his departure in his diary entry for 5 June: "Our leading lady has joined a Japan Party, and had her hair off."<sup>132</sup>

The Japan Party left on 8 June. Spong and Marshall, and most of the thirteen hundred other POWs crammed in the hold of the Japanese transport ship, did not survive the long and dangerous sea voyage to Japan. Their unmarked ship was spotted and sunk by an American submarine trying to disrupt the Japanese supply routes. Frank Samethini, who left Chungkai on an earlier Japan Party, heard news about Spong's fate from the few survivors after they arrived in Yakkaichi POW Camp, Japan:

It is disclosed that among the drowned comrades there is one called Bobbie [sic], "the gorgeousest phony-broad this side of Suez," [who] had gone down with twenty frocks in his rucksacks. That could only be the "uncomparable Bobbie" who so well portrayed "woman," the throb of many men's dreams in those days of the great concerts in Chungkai. Poor Bobbie.<sup>133</sup>

Though Spong had been forced to have his long brunette hair shaved off before departure, with "twenty frocks in his rucksacks," he was obviously determined to take up his responsibilities as a female impersonator once again at his new destination.

W. G. Riley believed Bobby Spong "deserved a decoration for his services as an entertainer and morale booster to so many of his fellow P.O.W.s. Alas, it is to my belief," he wrote, "that he was denied this honour by losing his life in tragic circumstances."<sup>134</sup>

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If J. G. Fuller's assessment about the worth of female impersonators in military concert parties behind the lines in the First World War—that the real significance of their popularity had been their "glamour" and "trappings of elegance and luxury," which were seen as "the negation of war and squalor and, as such, a potent fetish of peace"<sup>135</sup>—is valid, then how much more so was this the case for the POWs in their isolated camps in Burma and Thailand during the Second World War?

Yet this intellectualization dismisses the audience's complex emotional reactions to the female impersonators' audacious physical presence. "In reality," writes Boxwell, "the spectacle does not involve the simple suspension of disbelief that the 'woman' is actually a man. Rather, a simultaneous and conterminous process of avowal and disavowal never loses sight of the fact that the female impersonator is always-also a man, never not-just a woman."<sup>136</sup> The experience of the "double," which is at the heart of theatre, combined with "the intensity of their desire to believe"<sup>137</sup> may have prompted the POWs to momentarily forget that these "girls" were men. But it also prompted them to forget, if only for a few hours, that the shows were being performed in atap and bamboo theatres.

## Endnotes

- 1 Peacock, 224.
- 2 Fuller, 106.
- 3 Walker, Interview, 26.
- 4 Allison, Letter, 10 October 2000.
- 5 Wade, 46.
- 6 Fisher, 81.
- 7 Weller, "Report," 1.
- 8 Weller, Letter, 6 July 2002.
- 9 Jacobs, 139, 106.
- 10 Tom Morris, Interview, 18; 4.
- 11 Thompson, 107–108.
- 12 Nixon, Sketchbook, SK-10.
- 13 Anckorn, E-mails, 1 July 2004.
- 14 Anckorn, Interview, 58.
- 15 Pritchard, Interview, 51–52.
- 16 Anckorn, Interview, 62.
- 17 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 18 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 19 Smith, Fred Ransome, Letter, n.d. [June 2011].
- 20 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 21 Baker, "Excerpts from A Memoir," 13.
- 22 Stephenson, 47.
- 23 Baker, Extracts from A Memoir," 11.
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- 25 Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir," 5.
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- 27 Peacock, 231.
- 28 Chippington, Diary, 309–310.
- 29 Jonathan Moffatt, Excerpt from Patrick McArthur's Diary, E-mail, 18 July 2003.
- 30 Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir," 13.
- 31 De Wardener, Interview, 26–30.
- 32 Anckorn, Interview, 60.
- 33 Tom Morris, Interview, 5.
- 34 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 35 Wilbur Smith, Telephone Interview, 12 May 2004.

- 36 Fisher, 81.
- 37 Richardson, 12 February 1944.
- 38 Richardson, "Memories Bittersweet," 161.
- 39 Gee, Diary, 12 February 1944.
- 40 Allison quoting a letter from Leofric Thorpe, 7 December 2000.
- 41 Whitecross, 128.
- 42 Daws, 124.
- 43 Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir," 16.
- 44 Anckorn, Interview, 60.
- 45 Daws, 125.
- 46 Fuller, 105–106.
- 47 Bérubé, 71.
- 48 Boxwell, 12.
- 49 Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir," 18.
- 50 Rachamimov, "Camp Domesticity," 301-302.
- 51 Allison, Letter, 10 October 2000.
- 52 John Sharp, Diary, 5 March 1944, 27 April 1944.
- 53 Alexander, 202.
- 54 Anckorn, Interview, 60.
- 55 Anckorn, Interview, 58–59.
- 56 Anckorn, Interview, 62.
- 57 Pritchard, Interview, 52.
- 58 David Wince, E-mail, 2 May 2007.
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- 60 Carter, 167.
- 61 Weller, "Basic History," 19 April 2002.
- 62 Chalker, Interview, 24.
- 63 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
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- 65 Weller, "Questionnaire," 2.
- 66 Gailbraith, Interview, 28–31 passim.
- 67 Thompson, 107.
- 68 Thompson, 109.
- 69 Tom Morris, Interview, 4.
- 70 Chippington, 490.
- 71 Terry Morris, Self-interview #2, 1.
- 72 Charley, 23.
- 73 Baker, "Extracts from A Memoir," 14.
- 74 Bérubé, 85–86.
- 75 Vardy, 262.
- 76 Anckorn, Interview, 59.
- 77 Dunn, 139.
- 78 Kershaw, 130.
- 79 Durnford, 179–180.
- 80 Bérubé, 37.
- 81 Milford, Diary, 23 April 1944.
- 82 Anckorn, Interview, 59.
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- 87 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
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- 96 Wade, 46.
- 97 Norman Smith, 19.
- 98 Cosford, 104.
- 99 Durnford, 148.
- 100 Russell-Roberts, 204–205.
- 101 Frank Samethini, 74.
- 102 Tom Boardman, Questionnaire, 3–4.
- 103 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 104 Cosford, 104.
- 105 Coast, 178.
- 106 Frank Samethini, 102.
- 107 Thorpe, Interview, 13–14.
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- 109 Gimson, Diary, 25 December 1943.
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- 111 Durnford, 148–149.
- 112 Aylwin, 172.
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- 116 Thorpe, Letter to Allison, 22 February 1988.
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- 120 Wade, 46.
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- 126 Anckorn, Interview, 31.
- 127 De Wardener, Interview, 48–49.
- 128 Gee, Diary, 8 June 1944.
- 129 Richardson, Diary, 5 June 1944.
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- 132 John Sharp, Diary, 5 June 1944.
- 133 Frank Samethini, 141.
- 134 Riley, 129.
- 135 Fuller, 106.
- 136 Boxwell, 16.
- 137 Fuller, 105–106.