

Jacob Bloomfield * *The University of Manchester*

.....

Splinters: Cross-Dressing Ex-Servicemen on the Interwar Stage

Abstract

This article will examine how a series of theatrical shows which starred casts of cross-dressing ex-servicemen achieved critical and commercial popularity in interwar Britain despite increased cultural anxieties about the links between gender variance and transgressive acts, behaviours, and categories of identity. Prior to this study, historians have researched wartime concert parties where servicemen cross-dressed for each other's entertainment, but scant attention has been given to the popular phenomenon of ex-servicemen who performed cross-dressing revues for the general public. Staging revues on the home front exposed cross-dressing ex-servicemen to new forms of spectatorship: the theatregoing public, arts criticism in the press, and state censorship. This article will analyse these dynamics for the first time through an investigation of the First World War troupe *Les Rouges et Noirs*, who popularized the subgenre of veterans' cross-dressing revues with their debut production *Splinters* (1918). Critics commended the company's contribution to the war effort while also lauding the troupe for their entertainment value and 'bewitching' feminine mimicry. Some observers, like the Lord Chamberlain, found *Les Rouges'* cross-dressing troubling, but these views were in the minority and did not seriously hinder the performers' success. When carried out temporarily in a performative setting by artists who presented a skilful and beguiling representation of femininity, and whose status as ex-servicemen helped to dispel suspicions of immorality, cross-dressing could be a source of great pleasure, even as it constituted a source of cultural anxiety in other contexts.

* jacob.r.bloomfield@gmail.com. I am grateful to Laura Doan, Frank Mort, Bertrand Taithe, Paul Deslandes, Charlotte Wildman, Charles Upchurch, Chris Waters, Jack McGinn, Edward Owens, David Bloomfield, Vicky Vossen, Caleb Bloomfield, and Camilla Wasén for their support and guidance. Thanks also to the editors of *Twentieth Century British History* and the anonymous referees for their insightful feedback. The University of Manchester's Jones Travelling Grant provided valuable assistance as I carried out my research. Versions of this article have been given as papers at the Social History Society Conference (2015), the South East Hub for History Conference (2015), the Historicising Trans* Conference (2015), DUCKIE: Lady Malcolm's Servants' Ball (2016), the New Scholars' Forum at the International Federation for Theatre Research Conference (2016), and The Manchester Drag Symposium (2017).

Introduction

One of the most conspicuous renderings of male gender variance in early twentieth-century Britain was a series of interwar theatrical productions which starred casts of ex-servicemen in women's dress. These veterans' cross-dressing shows all fell under the genre of the revue, a popular form of theatrical light entertainment introduced to Britain in the early 1910s, which featured a diverse set of scenes unified by a loose plot or theme.¹ Prior to this study, historians such as Lisa Z. Sigel and David A. Boxwell have researched male cross-dressing shows performed by and for British servicemen in concert parties on the front lines during the First World War.² Boxwell has argued that this wartime female impersonation could be 'conservative and misogynistic' because it 'shore[d] up normative arrangements of sex, gender, and sexuality in an acutely homophobic context', while also containing 'subversive potential', in that it 'was an expression ... of crossing the homo/hetero divide', thus, 'enabling gay subcultural forms to flourish'.³ Sigel has taken a more nuanced approach in analysing the reception to these performances. Rather than categorizing the reaction to front-line female impersonation with labels such as 'homosexual', 'heterosexual', 'conservative', and 'subversive', Sigel has instead observed that:

female impersonation during the Great War allowed for the existence of pleasures resistant to categorization ... based on ambiguity and mutability rather than referencing only gender identity or erotic object choice.⁴

¹ According to theatre historian Rebecca D'Monté, the genre's popularity lay partly in its perceived timeliness. 'The revue's episodic and fragmentary structure', D'Monté has noted, 'reflected the insecurity of the times, and the informal and intimate style enacted a break with past hierarchies'. See Rebecca D'Monté, 'First World War Theatre', in Rebecca D'Monté, ed., *British Theatre and Performance: 1900-1950* (London, 2015), 64.

² For more on cross-dressing performance among servicemen during wartime, see Lisa Z. Sigel, "'Best Love": Female Impersonation in the Great War', *Sexualities*, 19 (2016), 98–118; David A. Boxwell, 'The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914-1918', *Modernism/Modernity*, 9 (2002), 1–20; Laurel Hallady, 'A Lovely War: Male to Female Cross-Dressing and Canadian Military Entertainment in World War II', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 46 (2004), 19–34; Clare Makepeace, "'Pinky Smith Looks Gorgeous!'" Female Impersonators and Male Bonding in Prisoner of War Camps for British Servicemen in Europe', in Linsey Robb and Juliette Pattinson, eds, *Men, Masculinities and Male Culture in the Second World War* (London, 2017), 71–95; Alon Rachamimov, 'The Disruptive Comforts of Drag: (Trans)Gender Performances among Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914-1920', *American Historical Review*, 111 (2006), 362–82; Emma Vickers and Emma Jackson, 'Sanctuary or Sissy? Female Impersonation as Entertainment in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945', in Corinna Peniston-Bird and Emma Vickers, eds, *Gender and the Second World War: The Lessons of War* (London, 2017), 40–52.

³ Boxwell, 'The Follies of War', 4, 11.

⁴ Sigel, 'Best Love', 99.

This article will build upon these previous works by focusing on a topic which has been largely neglected by the historiography: interwar cross-dressing shows starring ex-servicemen staged in British theatres for the purpose of entertaining the general public.⁵ Staging such productions on the home front exposed cross-dressing ex-servicemen performers to new forms of spectatorship which they did not encounter in wartime concert parties: the theatregoing public, arts criticism in the press, and state censorship. This article will analyse the commercial, critical, and regulatory response to these performances through an investigation of the First World War troupe *Les Rouges et Noirs*, who first popularized the subgenre of veterans' cross-dressing revues with their debut production *Splinters* (1918) and continued to cultivate a successful career well into the 1930s.⁶ In analysing *Les Rouges* and the contemporary reception to them, I will expand upon Sigel's important intervention in the study of historical male cross-dressing performance by probing the different, and sometimes contradictory, ways in which the art form was interpreted by various observers in interwar Britain. The players of *Les Rouges* could, for instance, be seen at once as earnestly sensual and as trivial fun, troubling and reassuring, comic and dramatic. Furthermore, as Sigel has also acknowledged, I will demonstrate that these reactions were often culturally and historically specific, defying categorizations which mark prominent present-day cultural understandings of sexuality and gender expression, such as hetero/homosexuality and 'homophobia'.

Throughout *Les Rouges*' career, critics widely commended the company's contribution to the war effort while also lauding the troupe for their sheer entertainment value and 'bewitching' feminine mimicry.⁷ Other observers, like the Lord Chamberlain's Office (the institution charged with licensing almost every new scripted theatrical production between 1737 and 1968), found *Les Rouges*' cross-dressing troubling, but such views tended to be in the minority and did not seriously hinder the ensemble's success.⁸ *Les Rouges*' popularity is particularly notable given that, as historians such as Matt Houlbrook

⁵ For examples of sources which have touched upon interwar veterans' cross-dressing revues, see Roger Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (London, 1994), 188–9, 194; David Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy, 1929–1939* (Exeter, 2000), 114–17.

⁶ Major *Les Rouges* productions included the stage shows *Splinters* (1918), *Splinters* (1920), *Super Splinters* (1927), *Splinters 1914–1933* a.k.a. *Splinters 1914–1934* a.k.a. *Which Is Which* (1933), and *Splinters* (1937).

⁷ Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archives (V&A), Blythe House, Theatre and Performance Company Files: CORP LES ROUGES ET NOIRS, *Evening Standard*, "'Les Rouges et Noirs' Army Entertainers' Programme At the Savoy", 5 August 1919.

⁸ See British Library Manuscript Collections (BL MC), British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays Correspondence files (LCP Corr) 1933/12058, *Splinters 1914–1933* by L. Arthur Rose, Reader's Report, 19 April 1933.

have observed, male gender variance came under increased suspicion in interwar Britain.⁹ I will examine how veterans' cross-dressing revues achieved critical and commercial popularity despite pronounced cultural anxieties in this period regarding the links between gender variance and transgressive acts, behaviours, and categories of identity. When carried out temporarily in a performative setting by artists who presented a skilful and beguiling representation of femininity, and whose status as ex-servicemen imbued their performances with a pertinent national significance in the wake of the Great War, cross-dressing could be a source of great pleasure, even as it constituted a source of cultural anxiety in other contexts.

Utilizing largely overlooked archival material, this article will demonstrate that the reception to *Les Rouges* was overwhelmingly positive. A significant source of the appeal lay in the performers' status as genuine discharged ex-servicemen, a feature of the productions that was regularly emphasized in the company's promotional material, the content of their shows, and coverage in the press. Building upon the work of cultural historian Ana Carden-Coyne and others, I argue that the artists' well-publicized participation in the war effort encouraged civilian audiences to view *Les Rouges'* shows as an authentic, informative, and entertaining way to engage with troops' wartime experiences during a period marked by uncertainties regarding how popular culture should engage with the war and its legacy. The popularity of *Les Rouges* elucidates the nature of the interwar British public's somewhat paradoxical desire for war-themed popular culture that was perceived to depict life on the front authentically, yet was simultaneously reassuring, and even enjoyable.

Despite the widespread admiration for *Les Rouges'* wartime service, evidence suggests that the troupe's popularity was primarily driven by their ability to provide a high standard of entertainment. As one reviewer concluded in a typical assessment of the company:

The knowledge that the entertainment now being given at the Savoy has for years eased the monotony of life at the front for thousands of our fighting men would make us oblivious to any shortcomings . . . But there are no shortcomings. The performers are good, many of them wonderfully good.¹⁰

The ensemble's skilful feminine mimicry was particularly lauded by observers. Critics unapologetically described the ex-servicemen artists as alluring beauties and promotional materials unselfconsciously

⁹ Matt Houlbrook, "'The Man with the Powder Puff' in Interwar London', *The Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), 145–71.

¹⁰ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Pall Mall Gazette*, "'Splinters' at the Savoy: Capital Performance by 'Les Rouge Et Noir [sic]'", 5 August 1919.

boasted about 'love letters' the performers received from male admirers.¹¹ As I will argue, *Les Rouges'* explicit delineation between the carnivalesque fun of the theatrical milieu and the performers' offstage default masculine personas, combined with prominent interwar discourses on masculinity which allowed the male body to be seen as a site of eroticism and beauty, established an atmosphere whereby spectators could express unrestrained appreciation for the troupe's aesthetics.

As *Les Rouges* was staging their widely acclaimed performances, male gender variance was becoming increasingly associated with transgressive cultural meanings by the state, the press, and other commentators. Accounts of these negative contemporary readings of male gender variance in the interwar period have tended to predominate the academic literature on the subject. For example, Houlbrook has highlighted how men who wore make-up in public were held up as 'figure[s] of profound cultural disturbance' in interwar London.¹² The 'painted boy menace', as these individuals were referred to in an extended exposé by *John Bull* magazine in 1925, were frequently singled out for arrest by police for homosexual offences, and were cast by the press as a dire threat to the 'social life of the country'.¹³ A 1932 raid on a ball conducted at Holland Park Avenue, London, where many of the attendees were cross-dressed men, led to the arrests of sixty patrons. The gender nonconforming men were subsequently the primary target of vilification by the court and the press, who reacted with sensational headlines like 'MEN DRESSED AS WOMEN', implying that the mere practice of cross-dressing could be essentially associated with unstated lurid acts, behaviours, and categories of identity.¹⁴ The organizers of Lady Malcolm's Servants' Ball, a fancy dress ball held annually for domestic servants at the Royal Albert Hall, announced in 1935 that 'NO MAN IMPERSONATING A WOMAN [...] WILL BE ADMITTED' after complaints about such practices were received.¹⁵ Making the motive for such a policy explicit, former CID officers were hired to eject 'sexual perverts'—identifiable based on their

¹¹ V&A, LES ROUGES, 'Les Rouges et Noirs' Savoy Theatre Programme, August 1919.

¹² Houlbrook, 'The Man with the Powder Puff', 160.

¹³ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis: 1918-1957* (London, 2005), esp. 33-4, 139-66; Quoted in Houlbrook, 'The Man with the Powder Puff', 160.

¹⁴ Matt Houlbrook, "'Lady Austin's Camp Boys': Constituting the Queer Subject in 1930s London', *Gender and History*, 14 (2002), 31-61; *The Morning Advertiser* quoted in Houlbrook, 'Lady Austin's Camp Boys', 32.

¹⁵ Matt Cook, 'Queer Conflicts: Love, Sex and War, 1914-1967', in Matt Cook, H. G. Cocks, Robert Mills, and Randolph Trumbach, eds, *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007), 152; Houlbrook, 'Lady Austin's Camp Boys', 36.

transvestism—from the venue.¹⁶ As I will explain, some of the discourse regarding interwar veterans' cross-dressing revues reflected contemporary anxieties over male gender variance. The Lord Chamberlain, for example, voiced some wariness towards the revues due to male cross-dressing's perceived connection with sexual immorality.¹⁷ A small number of reviews of *Les Rouges* productions expressed a belief that male cross-dressing was 'distasteful' or was associated with a 'subtle unpleasantness', but such statements were often made to impress upon readers that the shows were not morally suspect, as one might have assumed.¹⁸ Overall, any negative opinions communicated about the shows were in the minority and did not appear to impede the success of the veterans' cross-dressing revues. In fact, *Les Rouges*' popularity inspired a surge in similar productions starring cross-dressed ex-servicemen immediately following the Second World War, like *Soldiers in Skirts* (1945) and *Forces in Petticoats* (1952).

This article, as well as my wider investigations of male cross-dressing in twentieth-century Britain, demonstrates that female impersonation was intrinsic to the interwar theatrical and popular milieu.¹⁹ Yet the academic literature on gender variance in this period has tended to frame the practice—whether rendered through female impersonation, unconventional gendered character traits, contemporary fashion trends which obfuscated aesthetic gender boundaries, or other ways—through the paradigm of societal 'concern'.²⁰ Such studies have been

¹⁶ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 268; Despite this, no actual arrests were made as the Hall enjoyed a unique legal status which exempted it from surveillance by the Metropolitan Police. See Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 267.

¹⁷ BL MC, LCP Corr 1933/12058, Reader's Report.

¹⁸ British Film Institute Reuben Library (BFIRL), South Bank, *The Picturegoer*, 13 February 1932; V&A, LES ROUGES, *London Mail*, 23 August 1919.

¹⁹ See Jacob Bloomfield, 'Male Cross-Dressing Performance in Britain, 1918-1970', PhD thesis, The University of Manchester, Manchester, 2018.

²⁰ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918-1931* (New York, NY, 2009), 153; for example, see Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester, 2013); Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (London, 2000), 123-4; Houlbrook, 'Lady Austin's Camp Boys', 31-61; Houlbrook, 'The Man with the Powder Puff', 145-71; John Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil* (London, 1990), 131-2, 205-9; Kent, *Aftershocks*, esp. 152-4; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), esp. 41-3; Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London, 1992); Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930* (Chicago, IL, 1997), esp. 208-31; Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2009), esp. 152-60; For examples of this historiographical trend in literature relating to other periods, see H. G. Cocks, 'Secrets, Crimes and Diseases, 1800-1914', in Matt Cook et al., eds, *A Gay History of Britain*, 121-5; Tommy Dickinson, 'Curing Queers': *Mental Nurses and Their Patients, 1935-74* (Manchester, 2015); Susan Gubar, "'This is My Rifle, This is My Gun': World War II and the Blitz on Women', in Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz, eds, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT, 1987), 253-4; Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, 1750-1900* (Chicago, IL, 2016), 191-4; Charles Upchurch, 'Forgetting the

predisposed towards focusing on how gender variance aroused controversies in the wider culture, with contemporary public discussions on the topic reportedly acting as forums for expressing 'anxiety about the blurring of gender lines [which] grew out of the experiences of the Great War' in particular.²¹ My study moves on from casting male gender variance as a social problem by highlighting a significant case in which individuals presenting themselves in terms of male effeminacy were the objects of widespread, sustained, and unambiguous acclaim throughout the interwar period.²² Far from being a source of anxiety, the cross-dressing *Les Rouges* ensemble was lauded by commentators for providing the British public with uncomplicated relief from the trauma of war. In analysing a markedly popular manifestation of male cross-dressing performance, this article both encourages historians of gender and sexuality to consider the diverse ways in which gender variance was interpreted and expressed, and aims to contribute to existing historiographical discussions regarding the interwar popular culture of convalescence.²³

Les Rouges et Noirs: Image and Performance Style

Les Rouges et Noirs first developed their act in concert party theatricals staged for their fellow servicemen during the First World War.²⁴ Military historian J. G. Fuller has noted that concert parties were 'practically universal' by the end of 1917, with at least 80 per cent of divisions staging them over the course of the war.²⁵ Owing to high

Unthinkable: Cross-Dressers and British Society in the Case of the Queen vs. Boulton and Others', *Gender and History*, 12 (2000), 127–57.

²¹ Kent, *Aftershocks*, 153.

²² Some notable studies have discussed predominantly positive responses towards certain renderings of gender variance in interwar Britain. For example, historian Alison Oram has asserted that 'Until the late 1930s, women passing as men in Britain continue to be represented in the popular press as entertaining, fascinating and even admirable'. However, in contrasting this phenomenon with the contemporary reaction to male cross-dressing performance, Oram has largely repeated the narrative that male effeminacy was seen as a social problem. 'Alongside this anxiety about male effeminacy [in the 1920s]', she has argued, 'came a retreat by the press from its previous approval of female impersonation on the stage'. My evidence contradicts this assertion. See Alison Oram, *Her Husband was a Woman!: Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2007), 82, 87.

²³ For an exploration of 'a literature of convalescence', see Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991), 65–75.

²⁴ The name '*Les Rouges et Noirs*' referred to the regimental colours of the First Army, as the troupe was affiliated with the First Army Concert Party. The individual performers were initially recruited '[f]rom many regiments and army corps', however. See V&A, LES ROUGES, Savoy Theatre Programme.

²⁵ J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914–1918* (Oxford, 1990), 96, 188; entertainment for the forces became increasingly professionalized after the war with the establishment of the Navy, Army, and Air Force

demand and the fact that entertainment for the forces was mostly organised by troops themselves, servicemen-performers were often given relatively light military duties so they could be ‘virtually full-time entertainers’.²⁶ It was not unusual for divisional ensembles to stage hundreds of shows per year, with many companies travelling widely to perform for other divisions.²⁷ Individual concert party shows tended to consist of a series of unrelated turns, with female impersonation acts being a common feature. As Sigel has explained, concert party cross-dressing was manifold. Renderings of female impersonation included performances with erotic potential, comic dame portrayals, and earnest depictions of maternity.²⁸

The diverse femininities represented in First World War concert party drag reflected, to some extent, the types of female impersonation on the early twentieth-century British stage, where audiences could see men dressed as elderly comic dames or as glamorous, attractive women. The genesis of the British pantomime dame dates back to the seventeenth century at least, with the character becoming a ubiquitous theatrical fixture by the late nineteenth century.²⁹ Victorian dames could be portrayed as male characters masquerading as older women, as in the hugely popular play *Charley's Aunt* (1892), but, increasingly, dames tended to be female characters played by men in a purposefully graceless, comedic fashion. Music hall star Dan Leno, arguably the most famous British entertainer during his heyday in the mid-1880s until his death in 1904, lent a newfound complexity to the characterization of the dame in his celebrated Drury Lane theatre pantomimes, where he imbued roles like Mother Goose with a combination of physically robust slapstick and moving pathos.³⁰ Theatregoers’ appetite for dame acts continued into the interwar period, with dame comedians like Douglas Byng and Arthur Lucan (also known as ‘Old Mother Riley’) emerging as some of the most successful entertainers of the era.³¹

Glamorous renderings of theatrical female impersonation, as depicted by *Les Rouges*, gained popularity in the mid-to-late Victorian period, when:

Institutes (NAAFI) in 1921 and the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) in 1938. See D’Monté, ‘Second World War Theatre and After’, in D’Monté, ed., *British Theatre*, 153–5.

²⁶ Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 95.

²⁷ Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 96–8.

²⁸ Sigel, ‘Best Love’, 103, 109.

²⁹ Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London, 2000), 231–6.

³⁰ See Caroline Radcliffe, ‘Dan Leno: Dame of Drury Lane’, in Jim Davis, ed., *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York, NY, 2010), 118–34.

³¹ See Patrick Newly, *Bawdy But British!: The Life of Douglas Byng* (London, 2009); Robert V. Kenny, *The Man Who Was Old Mother Riley: The Lives and Films of Arthur Lucan and Kitty McShane* (Albany, NY, 2014).

epicene young men began to appear with some frequency on the popular stage as alluring young women ... flaunting elaborate feminine wardrobes, aping the behaviour and vocalisms of female stars, and projecting a feminine sex appeal.³²

By the early twentieth century, male cross-dressing performers who portrayed this kind of femininity, such as ?Lind?, Julian Eltinge, and Bert Errol, were achieving fame on the British stage. The Swedish female impersonator ?Lind?'s 1904 performances at the London Pavilion were received positively, with one critic enthusing, 'Never was there such a waving of plump white arms, or such a lavish display of shoulder and back'.³³ Eltinge, an American, staged a command performance at Windsor Castle in 1906, where an appreciative King Edward VII gifted him with a white bulldog.³⁴ Birmingham-born Errol was famed for his high-pitched feminine vocal range, and he undertook successful British and international solo tours from 1909 through the 1920s.³⁵ *Les Rouges'* other glamorous interwar contemporaries included the Spanish female impersonator Derkas and the American cross-dressing acrobat Barrette, both of whom made acclaimed appearances in British theatres in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁶ The renown of these artists demonstrates that Britons were familiar with theatrical male cross-dressing immediately before and during *Les Rouges'* heyday. However, *Les Rouges'* pre-eminent fame was unprecedented among interwar male cross-dressing performers in Britain.

Les Rouges was the first British troupe to turn a wartime cross-dressing act into a successful touring revue on the home front.³⁷ The company originally starred Reg Stone a.k.a. 'Phil', the lead female impersonator, comedian Hal Jones as 'Splinter', who played most of the leading male roles, and an all-male 'beauty chorus'.³⁸ The ensemble

³² Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 295.

³³ Mander and Mitchenson Collection (M&M), University of Bristol, MM/REF/TH/SU/SP/2: Drag, *Photo Bits*, 'Men Who Wear Petticoats: Amusing and Curious Gossip Regarding the Questionable Lind', 7 January 1905.

³⁴ *The New York Times*, John Holusha, 'A Theater's Muses, Rescued; Mural Figures Recall Celebrity of a (Well-Painted) Face', 24 March 2000.

³⁵ Anthony Slide, *Great Pretenders: A History of Female and Male Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (Lombard, 1986), 38.

³⁶ For example, see British Library Newsroom (BL NR), *The Sketch*, 'The Famous Spanish "Female Impersonator": Derkas—In One of His Amazing Costumes', 18 January 1928; BL NR, *The Sketch*, 'A Charming "Deceiver": Barrette, The Mystery of the Olympia Circus', 22 December 1926; Barrette was also said to affect an 'astounding' Marlene Dietrich impression. See M&M, Drag, Unknown newspaper, 'Lots of Good Things in "The Jack Pot"', May 1932.

³⁷ *Les Rouges* had a Canadian counterpart, The Dumbells, who embarked upon a London tour in 1918. See Jason Wilson, *Soldiers of Song: The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War* (Ontario, 2012), 65–7.

³⁸ *Les Rouges'* Savoy Theatre programme insisted that each member of the company 'were all artistes, NOT AMATEURS, before the war'. See V&A, LES ROUGES, Savoy

caught their big break in December 1918 when, at the War Office's behest, they performed a three-night public engagement of their show *Splinters* at the YMCA's Beaver Hut Theatre in The Strand.³⁹ These shows were an instant success, leading to a performance at Windsor Castle for King George V and Queen Mary and a UK-wide tour for general audiences from 1919 through 1924.⁴⁰ *Les Rouges* regularly toured British theatres into the late 1930s and spawned three films under the *Splinters* moniker: *Splinters* (1930), *Splinters in the Navy* (1932), and *Splinters in the Air* (1937).⁴¹

A programme from their August 1919 engagement at London's Savoy Theatre lends insight into how the troupe was promoted. Emphasizing *Les Rouges'* valour on the front, one notable anecdote in the programme detailed how the company bravely returned to an evacuated camp under the cover of night to retrieve the frocks they left behind, with 'shells screaming overhead and dropping sometimes sickeningly near'.⁴² This dramatic portrayal of the artists' dedication to their craft was tempered by the programme's insistence that '[*Les Rouges*] regard their work in feminine garb as a huge joke, [but] there is no doubt they brought real and necessary entertainment and distraction to their soldier audiences in France'.⁴³ While the programme stressed

Theatre Programme; for some information on Jones' and Stone's theatrical backgrounds, see V&A, LES ROUGES, *Empire News*, 10 August 1919.

³⁹ *Les Rouges* appear to have garnered a good degree of institutional support by the end of the war. *The Times* reported that 'when the end came the party was demobilized as a complete unit', so they could tour together in Britain. Furthermore, General Sir Henry Horne, commander of the First Army during the end of the war, personally gave the troupe £1,000 in funds once they were discharged and he addressed the audience at *Les Rouges'* first night at the Savoy Theatre in August 1919. The ensemble's friends in high places probably aided them significantly when it came to securing their initial British theatrical engagements at the Beaver Hut Theatre and Windsor Castle. See V&A, LES ROUGES, *The Times*, "'Les Rouges Et Noirs" Army Entertainers at the Savoy', 5 August 1919; V&A, LES ROUGES, *The Era*, 24 September 1919; V&A, LES ROUGES, *The Era*, 'Les Rouges et Noirs. General's Appreciation', n.d.

⁴⁰ V&A, LES ROUGES, Engagement book, January 1919 to November 1924.

⁴¹ The first *Splinters* film functions largely as a fictionalized account of the company's founding and features several scenes from their stage shows. *Splinters in the Navy* depicts *Les Rouges* backstage and showcases a few concert party performances aboard a navy vessel, but troupe members are relegated to minor parts supporting star comedian Sydney Howard. *Splinters in the Air*, the final *Splinters* film, also stars Howard and barely involves *Les Rouges* at all aside from a scene set in a concert party. See British Film Institute National Archive (BFI NA), *Splinters* (dir. Jack Raymond, British and Dominions Films Corporation, 1930); BFI NA, *Splinters in the Navy* (dir. Walter Forde, Twickenham Film Studios Productions, 1932); BFI NA, *Splinters in the Air* (dir. Alfred Goulding, Herbert Wilcox Productions, 1937).

⁴² V&A, LES ROUGES, Savoy Theatre Programme; *Les Rouges* was not alone in their eagerness to emphasize the fact that their cast was made up of genuine ex-servicemen. According to D'Monté, during the Great War, actors were 'fearful of being handed a "white feather," a sign of cowardice, by a member of the audience', and it was not uncommon for theatre programmes to clarify that all male cast members had served or had legitimate reasons for not serving. D'Monté, 'First World War Theatre', 71.

⁴³ V&A, LES ROUGES, Savoy Theatre Programme.

Les Rouges' wartime hardiness and clarified that female impersonation held no profound meaning for the artists themselves, the troupe does not appear to have been overly self-conscious about maintaining this image. 'And, of course, they get love letters, treasured as souvenirs of a unique engagement', the programme added.⁴⁴ This alleged impassioned response to the shows was argued to be a result of performers' ability to expertly imitate women, particularly British women. 'What did the average Tommy long for ... Just – GIRLS! But the genuine English-speaking variety was non est', insisted the programme, 'therefore a good colourable imitation was the next best thing'.⁴⁵ Presumably this implied that servicemen preferred a congenial British femininity—even if it was performed by other men—over engaging with continental European women. Through promotional materials like the Savoy programme, *Les Rouges* succinctly highlighted the main elements of their appeal: their commendable wartime service, their evocation of patriotic motifs, and their skilful female impersonation.

The troupe's theatricals mostly involved typical revue fare such as song and dance numbers, and sketches featuring comedic patter. Some of the turns referred to life on the front, but this theme was not strictly adhered to. One particularly lauded scene from the debut *Splinters* production, 'Tommy Buys a Souvenir', sees Hal Jones as a 'Tommy' and Reg Stone as a lusty French souvenir shop assistant. Jones 'dallies over long in her witching society', and much of the humour is derived from Jones' futile attempts at flirting with Stone's aloof shop assistant who has a limited English vocabulary.⁴⁶ Another comic sketch called 'The Tale of the Grandfather Clock' contrasts 'bye-gone and present-day methods of lovemaking'.⁴⁷ The scene features Stone and Jones as an unsentimental 'slangy Twentieth Century couple', who exchange crass contemporary insults, juxtaposed with a decorous Victorian couple.⁴⁸ Aside from comedic cross-dressing performances, *Splinters* also includes more solemn turns. One critic wrote that a male baritone (accompanied by a cross-dressed pianist), 'brought a blur into my eyes'.⁴⁹ A dance number performed by female impersonator Jack Hives reportedly made it seem 'as though Maud Allan and her Salome dream were floating across the stage horizon again'.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ V&A, LES ROUGES, Savoy Theatre Programme.

⁴⁵ V&A, LES ROUGES, Savoy Theatre Programme.

⁴⁶ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Brighton Standard*, 15 May 1919.

⁴⁷ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Sussex Daily News*, 9 September 1919.

⁴⁸ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Sussex Daily News*, 9 September 1919; BL MC, Lord Chamberlain's Plays (LCP) 1920/17, *Splinters* by Eric Barber, Script, Licensed 26 June 1920.

⁴⁹ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Sporting Times*, 1919.

⁵⁰ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Brighton Standard*, 11 September 1919; Allan, a Canadian dancer, gained fame in North America and Europe for her 'Dance of the Seven Veils' routine. She is also widely remembered for her failed 1918 libel case against British MP Noel

Much of the original *Les Rouges* troupe disbanded in 1924, but subsequent iterations of the company continued to perform under the *Splinters* moniker into the late 1930s. The format of the later productions did not differ greatly from that of the first *Splinters* show, for the most part. One exception to this was the revue *Splinters 1914-1933* (1933), which boasted the radical novelty of, 'Real ladies introduced for the first time—in addition to the female impersonators'.⁵¹ Confusion as to the 'true' sex of the performers, as implied by the alternative title of the show, *Which Is Which*, is the source of much comic business throughout. For instance, one scene revolves around 'Hal greet[ing] the W.A.A.C. sergeant in familiar manner when he mistakes her for his pal in new guise'.⁵² By the end of their career in the 1930s, *Les Rouges* was clearly a well-established brand, with three *Splinters* films released—the first of which being one of the very first British motion picture 'talkies'—and critics regularly attesting to the troupe's ubiquitously cherished status in popular culture, as I will discuss further in the next section.

Critical Responses and Connecting with the First World War

The critical reception to *Les Rouges'* initial public performances in Britain was almost universally positive. Reflecting the content of the ensemble's promotional material, critics tended to highlight the performers' wartime service while also marvelling at the talent exhibited onstage. As *The Daily Telegraph* remarked of the troupe's Savoy debut:

it is quite easy to believe that those who made and performed that revue helped to win the war. How many tens of thousands of Tommies might have lost something of their indomitable British spirit and grit but for the stimulus at times of such jolly, honest fun as they got out of 'Splinters'!⁵³

'[*Splinters*] gave the last night's audience three hours of unmixed pleasure', raved the *Sussex Daily News*, 'what it must have meant to

Pemberton Billing, who accused her of leading a Sapphic cult. The *Standard* critic's wistfulness was likely a response to the ending of Allan's stage career, precipitated by the recent trial. It is therefore significant that Hives, as a female impersonator, was deemed to be a worthy successor to Allan given this context. See Judith Walkowitz, 'The "Vision of Salome": Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Dancing in Central London, 1908-1918', *American Historical Review*, 108 (2003), 337-76.

⁵¹ V&A, THM/LON/CHP: Chelsea Palace Theatre (London) Production Files, 1903-1957, Chelsea Palace Theatre programme, September 1933; there were some all-servicewomen revues, such as *Girls Out of Uniform* (1945). See Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama, 1900-1968: Volume Two* (Exeter, 2005), 321.

⁵² *Daily Mail*, 'Palace—"Which Is Which?"', 6 June 1933.

⁵³ V&A, LES ROUGES, *The Daily Telegraph*, 'Savoy Theatre "Les Rouges et Noirs"', 5 August 1919.

troops undergoing all the horrors of the trenches one can only dimly speculate'.⁵⁴ *The Times*, also emphasizing the ensemble's ability to authentically connect audiences with servicemen's experiences, concluded that 'We are inclined to think, [this was] the first time that the entertainment has been given in its entirety and as nearly as possible under the same conditions as prevailed during the war in France'.⁵⁵ *Les Rouges* maintained their overwhelmingly favourable critical reputation into the 1930s, by which point they were widely viewed with nostalgic reverence. A 1934 article declared that "'Splinters" is now quite a household word. Mention of it conjures up something more than entertainment ... romance'.⁵⁶ A review of *Splinters 1914-1933* (re-named *Splinters 1914-1934* to take the New Year into account) indicated that the performers' efforts on the front lines still held cachet nearly 16 years after the end of the Great War:

'Splinters', the famous show which lightened the hearts of many in France during the war years ... still retaining many long-remembered associations in the post-war period makes a welcome return ... The show is rare fun from start to finish.⁵⁷

As these reviews demonstrate, a significant part of *Les Rouges'* appeal lay in their ability to help audiences feel connected to servicemen's wartime experiences, specifically the phenomenon of the front-line concert party. Carden-Coyne has stressed the important role of the arts and visual culture in shaping how the British public understood the First World War. 'While reality was continually merging with representation, repeated visual languages were becoming the vernacular of the war', Carden-Coyne has argued, 'visual and performative media constituted both the search for meaning and the pleasure culture of the war'.⁵⁸ Such media included newsreel footage, visual art, literature, and plays which dealt with the experiences of servicemen. Public consumption of war-related media was largely driven by a yearning for information about loved ones' experiences and those of British forces generally.⁵⁹ According to Carden-Coyne, 'the continued desire to inform and be informed about modern war was one of its most charged legacies, invoking remembrance, yet also generating

⁵⁴ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Sussex Daily News*, 9 September 1919.

⁵⁵ V&A, LES ROUGES, *The Times*, "'Les Rouges Et Noirs" Army Entertainers at the Savoy', 5 August 1919.

⁵⁶ *Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, "'Splinters" in New Guise', 17 March 1934. Punctuation is that of the original author.

⁵⁷ *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 'Return Visit of "Splinters" Melody and Mirth at the Grand', 23 January 1934.

⁵⁸ Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism, and the First World War* (Oxford, 2009), 83-4.

⁵⁹ Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body*, 83.

cultural attractions both disturbing and entertaining'.⁶⁰ In this vein, artistic representations of the war were perceived to be more authentic and educational if Tommies themselves devised and took part in them. The ex-servicemen in the cast of the war play *Journey's End* (1929), for example, were praised for lending a sense of realism to the production, giving observers the impression that the actors were 're-enacting their past' onstage, thus enhancing the play's ability to inform and educate.⁶¹

Seeing the recently discharged ex-servicemen artists of *Les Rouges* perform was both an entertaining and edifying exercise for the troupe's civilian audience members. Given the ubiquity of concert parties among British and Dominion forces, civilians would have likely heard about such entertainments from media reports or through contact with servicemen.⁶² Evidence suggests that the common feature of cross-dressing in wartime concert parties was a source of particular fascination for the public on the home front. *Punch* magazine, for instance, reported on the phenomenon with playful bemusement several times over the course of the war.⁶³ Furthermore, some members of the public would have heard specifically of the cross-dressing at *Les Rouges'* concert parties by reputation, thus sparking an initial curiosity about the ensemble. As one newspaper recalled:

During the war, occasionally by the London papers, and frequently through remarks made by men home on leave, people in England heard in a vague way of a concert party calling themselves 'Les Rouges et Noirs', who at rest camp and base laboured to amuse our men in their brief respites from the horrors of the field.⁶⁴

Les Rouges revues informed civilians about an aspect of the war which most of them would have been aware of, yet few had seen first-hand. The fact that the shows were presented by a genuine concert party ensemble—with their martial credentials detailed in promotional material like the August 1919 programme—imbued the productions with authenticity and strengthened their perceived educational potential in the eyes of the public who hungered for information about troops' experiences.

Les Rouges not only catered to the public's desire for authentic representations of life on the front but also appealed to a demand for light entertainment among war-weary theatregoers. Despite civilians' craving for information about the war, some methods of relaying news from the front were deemed too frank and depressing. Roll of Honour

⁶⁰ Carden-Coyne, 94.

⁶¹ Carden-Coyne, 83.

⁶² For example, see Sigel, 'Best Love', 108–13.

⁶³ Boxwell, 'The Follies of War', 6–8.

⁶⁴ V&A, LES ROUGES, Unknown newspaper, 'Les Rouges Et Noirs', n.d.

films, for example, were dropped from cinemas by 1917 as patrons increasingly found them distressing.⁶⁵ Instead, many Britons gravitated towards more reassuring ways of engaging with the war, like viewing the latest sleek, modernized hospital trains which were exhibited for viewing at railway stations, yet were rarely used at the front.⁶⁶ Historians such as Carden-Coyne and D'Monté have observed that the early interwar period was marked by public discussions regarding the extent to which society should dwell upon the subject of war. For ex-servicemen who had experienced mental and physical trauma, "'overcoming" was the dominant social and medical response to [their] disability', and wounded troops were often encouraged to display inspiring signs of recovery for the media and visitors to military hospitals.⁶⁷ With respect to the arts, some commentators such as dramatist St John Ervine, argued that the nation was too 'exhausted' by war to 'create great drama or great anything else until we have recovered our health'.⁶⁸ However, despite sentiments like these, the war was regularly represented in the performing arts throughout the interwar period.⁶⁹ The British public's somewhat paradoxical desire to learn more about the war combined with an urge to quickly 'overcome' was demonstrated by the success of war-themed light entertainment like the Charlie Chaplin comedy film *Shoulder Arms* (1918). Initially released days after the Armistice and re-released several times during the interwar period owing to its popularity, *Shoulder Arms* was promoted as a film which both directly addressed the war and could help cinemagoers move on emotionally. An advertisement for the film directed at cinema exhibitors proclaimed that '[It] has come at the right time. People can laugh at it without feeling guilty now', while *The Bioscope* magazine reported, 'It is so light-hearted that every Tommy and Jack will roar themselves hoarse now that it is past history'.⁷⁰ Yet the film's broad humour apparently did not obscure its perceived realism in the eyes of audiences. As film historian Michael Hammond has concluded, *Shoulder Arms* 'depicts the stresses and discomforts of military life at the front, which resonated with soldiers and those at home imagining the conditions there'.⁷¹

Like *Shoulder Arms*, *Les Rouges* shows occupied a pleasurable middle ground between evoking servicemen's wartime experiences while providing light entertainment. Even the company's recreation of a battle

⁶⁵ Carden-Coyne, 86.

⁶⁶ Carden-Coyne, 87.

⁶⁷ Carden-Coyne, 86–7.

⁶⁸ Quoted in D'Monté, 'Interwar Theatre', in D'Monté, ed., *British Theatre*, 118.

⁶⁹ D'Monté, 'Interwar Theatre', 118.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Michael Hammond, "'So Essentially Human": The Appeal of Charles Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* in Britain, 1918', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 8 (2010), 307, 310.

⁷¹ Hammond, 'So Essentially Human', 309.

and its aftermath in the first *Splinters* film, arguably the most dramatic performance of *Les Rouges'* career, was praised for its restraint. 'The final sequence, which shows Hal Jones re-marshalling his complete company after the bombing attack that shattered their hard-won theatre is rich with a comedy and pathos which cannot soon be forgotten', declared a glowing review in *The Sketch* magazine:

In the handling of this episode Mr. Raymond [the director] shows the greatest artistic perception in avoiding the obvious temptation to condemn one or several of his valiant little band of actors to heroic deaths . . . the whole thing is merely a slice of make-believe set in the midst of a stern and terrible reality.⁷²

The battle scene depicts the artists quickly throwing khaki uniforms over their frocks after their concert party is disrupted by a bombing. The beauty chorus is then shown running outside to return fire, with frilly frocks still clearly peeking out underneath their uniforms. After shots are exchanged with the enemy, *Les Rouges* and their First Army comrades easily emerge victorious, with no casualties taken, before the end credits roll.⁷³ Ultimately, in addition to reinforcing the entertainers' ever-present masculinity (even while cross-dressed), this scene served to carefully connect audiences with the 'stern and terrible reality' the Tommies faced without shattering the relatively light 'slice of make-believe', which constitutes the film's true focal point. This low-stakes, pleasurable drama demonstrated by *Splinters'* battle scene echoes 'a form of popular modernism' evident in interwar popular culture which historian Alison Light has identified as 'a literature of convalescence'.⁷⁴ Light has observed that stories by Agatha Christie and other writers of immediate post-war 'whodunits' reflected a modernist break with the crime fiction of the past in that these new works 'sought to make crime entertaining "after the trauma."⁷⁵ The most novel aspect of these new whodunits was the 'removal of the threat of violence'.⁷⁶ Christie and others aimed for their novels to be 'preoccupying . . . work[ing] more to relieve generalized anxiety than to generate strong emotion'.⁷⁷ Although both the new interwar whodunits and the *Splinters* film take place against the backdrop of perceivably lurid circumstances—

⁷² BL NR, *The Sketch*, Michael Orme, 'At the Sign of the Cinema', 8 January 1930.

⁷³ BFI NA, *Splinters*. Another purpose for the scene, no doubt, was to show off *Splinters'* technical prowess, as it was one of the first British films to feature sound in every scene. According to *The Bioscope*, '[*Splinters*] surpasses in technical achievement anything of its kind ever made in Britain'. See BFI RL, *The Bioscope*, 'Sound and Dialogue Subjects "*Splinters*"', 1 January 1930.

⁷⁴ Light, *Forever England*, 66, 69.

⁷⁵ Light, 66.

⁷⁶ Light, 69.

⁷⁷ Light, 71.

crime and war, respectably—both encompass the popular modernist milieu by approaching their subjects in an ‘airy’ manner which served to preoccupy rather than provoke pathos, even in the most serious scenes.⁷⁸ Through content like this in their stage and screen appearances, in addition to their promotional material, *Les Rouges* cannily tapped into an interwar popular culture defined by audiences’ desire for perceivably authentic, yet ultimately reassuring, war-themed media.

Les Rouges’ status as ex-servicemen played upon pertinent contemporary patriotic motifs regarding the soldier’s elevated place in interwar British culture. Historian Paul R. Deslandes has observed that soldiers’ bodies were often ‘invoked to foster national unity at a particular moment of crisis’ and ‘functioned as specific objects of admiration and desire’.⁷⁹ Houlbrook has asserted that the masculine integrity of men who conformed to this patriotic ‘soldier-hero’ model was often considered unassailable, even when there was evidence that servicemen had participated in sexual encounters with other men. By the early 1930s, the Brigade of Guards had experienced a number of recent scandals involving cases of guardsmen engaging in same-sex liaisons with older, wealthier men in London.⁸⁰ These were not isolated incidents, but glimpses of a wider ‘institutionalized erotic trade, an arresting feature of London’s sexual landscape’ in which members of the Guards exchanged sex for ‘money and consumerist pleasures’.⁸¹ However, when the guardsman’s established association with sexual availability was brought to light, the state defended the soldiers’ conduct, thus jealously maintaining the guardsman’s role at the nexus of ‘the symbolic heart of nation and empire’ and ‘the unproblematic quintessence of what was manly and good’.⁸² The War Office, setting the tone for the guardsmen’s defence, blamed corrupting influences rather than moral failings on the part of soldiers. ‘The contamination of members of the armed forces stationed in London is a greater risk than that incurred in the provinces’, argued the War Office, noting factors which might lead young guardsmen to be seduced into vice, including ‘an environment containing all shades of entertainment’, and ‘[being] perpetually short of money’.⁸³ The vulnerable guardsman was contrasted with the ‘evil’ predatory ‘queer’ who cravenly preyed upon young soldiers and represented an insidious threat to the health

⁷⁸ Light, 69.

⁷⁹ Paul R. Deslandes, ‘The Male Body, Beauty and Aesthetics in Modern British Culture’, *History Compass*, 8 (2010), 1192.

⁸⁰ Matt Houlbrook, ‘Soldier Heroes and Rent Boys: Homosex, Masculinities, and Britishness in the Brigade of Guards, circa 1900-1960’, *Journal of British Studies*, 42 (2003), 351–88.

⁸¹ Houlbrook, ‘Soldier Heroes and Rent Boys’, 353.

⁸² Houlbrook, 356, 357.

⁸³ Houlbrook, 374.

of the nation.⁸⁴ The presupposed masculine integrity of the guardsman and his indelible association with nationhood made it less likely for him to be labelled as a pervert or, indeed, to be marked with any label at all, even if he engaged in sexual acts with other men.

As a paragon of masculinity and symbol of the nation, the serviceman represented the ideals which men who understood themselves in terms of gender variance and sexual difference perceivably stood opposed to. Institutions and individuals were complicit in maintaining the national ideal of the soldier-hero which gave the interwar serviceman some licence to subvert his masculinity, so long as he could ultimately fulfil his symbolic role as the 'centre of Britishness ... a cultural focus around which the national community could cohere'.⁸⁵ Unlike in Houlbrook's study of the guardsmen, there was no conspiracy at the institutional level which sought to protect the masculine integrity of *Les Rouges* as the ex-servicemen performers temporarily subverted their masculinity night after night. Instead, the company benefited from a more passive collective reverence for the soldier-hero. This reverence helped audiences to overlook any initial discomfort with male cross-dressing they may have held, though evidence suggests that few who saw *Les Rouges'* shows expressed any such reservations. Admiration for the company's service in the Great War only partially explains *Les Rouges'* popularity, however. The remainder of this article will be devoted to exploring the other key factors behind the artists' success: the high quality of their productions, auspicious reassurances that their offstage behaviour was conventionally masculine, and the diverse range of contemporary cultural interpretations relating to male cross-dressing which meant that the practice 'did not register any one stable spectatorial effect'.⁸⁶

Les Rouges et Noirs and Male Beauty

Les Rouges' wartime service earned them admiration and attracted audiences who sought a connection to life on the front. However, the sheer artistic quality of their performances was the main focus of the critical praise received by the company. In particular, contemporary reviews unselfconsciously raved about the female impersonators'—especially Reg Stone's—ability to represent a beguiling idealized femininity (Fig. 1). 'Compare any of the languid beauties of revue and musical comedy with the energetic charms of Mr Reginald Stone as

⁸⁴ Houlbrook, 375, 381.

⁸⁵ Graham Dawson quoted in Houlbrook, 'Soldier Heroes and Rent Boys', 352.

⁸⁶ Here I borrow a phrase from historian Laura Doan. Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York, NY, 2001), 96.



Figure 1
 Contrasting images of Reg Stone cross-dressed 'as the beauty' and in military uniform 'as himself'. © British Library Board, British Library Newsroom, The Sketch, 'This is Not a Page Dealing With a Society Engagement!', 20 August 1919.

leading lady', the *Evening Standard* proclaimed, 'and it is obvious that the advantage belongs not to the former'.⁸⁷ Another *Standard* review struck a similar tone:

There are many chorus beauties upon our London stage who might do worse than take a few hints from Reg. Stone . . . Stone makes up into the most attractive girl with short dress, bewitching smile, and banded hair complete.⁸⁸

The *Daily Express* observed that the show 'played to peals of laughter', and singled out Stone's 'coquetry and demureness without a trace of exaggeration [which] nearly sent the ladies in the audience into hysterics. Mr Stone could probably write a textbook on "Hints to Actresses."⁸⁹ 'Stone in particular . . . achieves a wonderful sexual transition, complete in all its details', gushed the *Brighton Standard*, 'down to the white-powdered arms and polished manicured fingernails, the dainty gestures and positively pretty little affectations of femininity'.⁹⁰ The *London Opinion* also highlighted the ensemble's ability to mimic abstract 'affectations of femininity', observing that 'Little captivating tricks that come unconsciously to the girl who has been one are copied with excruciating fidelity by the temporary ladies of the company'.⁹¹ Deslandes has probed the extent to which 'the history of masculine aesthetics' should 'privilege the body over the face'.⁹² In judging the beauty of these ex-servicemen performing femininity, critics not only considered both face and body but also more nebulous traits of aesthetic attractiveness associated with comportment, identified with labels like 'charms' and 'affectations'. While these markers of superficial beauty could not be located on a specific part of the body, they were nonetheless deemed equally important as 'bewitching smile[s]' and 'white powdered arms' when the female impersonators' outward beauty was appraised.

Needless to say, it was within the remit of a theatre critic to praise a performer's technical skill, but the extent to which critics, many of them male, felt free to unabashedly describe the all-male *Les Rouges* cast with descriptors such as 'attractive' and 'bewitching' is notable.⁹³ Carden-

⁸⁷ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Evening Standard*, 'Les Rouges et Noirs'; first-hand accounts of the revues from the performers themselves are scant. For a rare extended interview with Stone, see Peter Ferrer, ed., *Cross-Dressing Between the Wars: Selections From London Life 1923-1933* (Liverpool, 2000), 249–51.

⁸⁸ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Evening Standard*, 'Les Rouges et Noirs'.

⁸⁹ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Daily Express*, 'Soldiers With Flaxen Tresses. Men of the First Army as Stage Beauties. "Splinters"', 5 August 1919.

⁹⁰ V&A, LES ROUGES, *Brighton Standard*, 11 September 1919.

⁹¹ V&A, LES ROUGES, *London Opinion*, 16 August 1919.

⁹² Deslandes, 'The Male Body, Beauty and Aesthetics', 1203.

⁹³ Doan has observed a similar phenomenon regarding female observers unself-consciously 'expressing intense, sometimes romantic, feelings' towards female ambulence

Coyne has observed that, by the interwar period, it had become increasingly acceptable for the male body to be seen as a site of eroticism and beauty.⁹⁴ A consumption culture emerged around the objectification of the male physique, consisting of mass-produced photographs, magazines, and men's beauty competitions which women were sometimes invited to judge.⁹⁵ Organizations like the Men's Dress Reform Party complained that men had 'abandoned their claim to be beautiful' by wearing utilitarian, muted clothing, while contemporary womenswear allowed for greater freedom and aesthetic individualism. The reformers encouraged men to be 'as beautiful as women' by adopting a wardrobe of more loose-fitting, ornamental, colourful, and unique clothes.⁹⁶ This public discourse, combined with the carnival-esque fun of the theatre milieu, made it increasingly acceptable for men to openly prize other men for aesthetic beauty, particularly if the subject was a virile young ex-serviceman.

Deslandes has challenged historians to 'interpret the links between desire and personal appearance' and to 'reconstruct what "turned people on" in the past'.⁹⁷ The critical response to *Les Rouges* constitutes a fascinating and complex case study of this process of attraction. If a male audience member felt some form of desire, sexual or otherwise, for a *Les Rouges* cast member, it was not viewed as a crisis of sexuality but as part of the fun. *The London Opinion*, for instance, noted with amusement 'the shock that Stampa had when he went round to the Stage Door afterwards', accompanied by a humorous cartoon depicting a lustful 'Stage Door Johnnie's' amazement upon being greeted by masculine-presenting servicemen coming out of their dressing room beside the caption, 'the beauties in real life'.⁹⁸

The backstage area as a stark, reassuring dividing line where the veneer of theatrical feminine glamour was dropped to reveal the military man underneath was a reoccurring motif *Les Rouges* played on. One scene in the first *Splinters* film depicts Reg Stone in his dressing room smoking a pipe after a performance, the picture of masculine leisure aside from the fact that he is still cross-dressed. A Stage Door Johnnie, played by comedian Sydney Howard, and his lovelorn companion decide to pursue Stone to his dressing room after the artist blows Howard a flirtatious kiss onstage. However, in the offstage

drivers in the Great War. See Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago, IL, 2013), 124.

⁹⁴ Carden-Coyne, 201–3.

⁹⁵ Carden-Coyne, 202–3.

⁹⁶ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago, 1996), 138–9, 198–209; for varied reactions to the Men's Dress Reform movement, see Ferrer, ed., *Cross-Dressing Between the Wars*.

⁹⁷ Deslandes, 'The Male Body, Beauty and Aesthetics', 1203.

⁹⁸ V&A, LES ROUGES, *London Opinion*, 'Plays & Players', 6 September 1919.

setting, Stone responds gruffly to the intruders' entreaties, yelling, 'Now don't come back here again ... Now hop it!' at Howard's friend before physically assailing Howard.⁹⁹ *Splinters in the Navy* sees Howard trespassing backstage again. After he rips off a beauty chorus member's wig, the artist forcefully grabs it back and reprimands Howard, shouting, 'What do you think you're playing at?!' in a gruff cockney baritone.¹⁰⁰ The backstage restoration of gendered normalcy was also highlighted in the film's promotion. 'I understand that Reg Stone has already misled three electricians and a carpenter as to his sex', stated one reporter while affirming that Stone's feminine guise was dropped once the cameras stopped rolling.¹⁰¹ The momentary views of *Les Rouges* backstage tacitly acknowledged that some audience members may have inferred that the artists' theatrical effeminacy onstage might have indicated certain patterns of behaviour offstage. Under the premise of providing a fly-on-the-wall backstage glimpse at the performers, audiences were assured that the company's effeminacy was purely an onstage affair. Once the ensemble de-wigged, it was established that they naturally reverted to a default masculinity: smoking pipes, fighting, and fulfilling their martial duties.¹⁰²

Criticism of *Les Rouges et Noirs* and the Meanings of Gender Variance

Though *Les Rouges* received widespread critical acclaim, reviews were not always positive. It is also notable that, among the few negative assessments I have found, most cited discomfort regarding male cross-dressing as a reason for their views. 'The Splinters Concert Party', wrote one such critique, 'has once again been incorporated with the usual addition of female impersonation which always seems to me distasteful'.¹⁰³ Other reviews referenced the perverse connotations of male cross-dressing but did so to reassure readers that *Les Rouges* provided only wholesome entertainment. 'An important point is that there is nothing offensive about the "beautiful young ladies" who are really stalwart young men', declared the *London Mail*, 'How they have managed to eliminate all trace of that subtle unpleasantness so often associated with this type of thing I know not, but it has been done'.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ BFI NA, *Splinters*.

¹⁰⁰ BFI NA, *Splinters in the Navy*.

¹⁰¹ BFI RL, *The Bioscope*, 22 July 1931; one critic even mused that '[Stone] must be an extremely personable young man in private life by the way'. V&A, LES ROUGES, Unknown newspaper, 'The National News, Splinters from France', 10 August 1919.

¹⁰² See also British Pathé, Film ID 1084.09, 'The Rivals—Some Chippings from the New Splinters Dancing Troupe (1928)'; for more on de-wigging, see Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 306.

¹⁰³ BFI RL, *The Picturegoer*, 13 February 1932.

¹⁰⁴ V&A, LES ROUGES, *London Mail*, 23 August 1919.

The Bournemouth Graphic praised Reg Stone in particular for not evoking ‘the slightest suspicion of the “Nancy” type’.¹⁰⁵ One notable expression of unease came via the Lord Chamberlain’s Office which viewed the cross-dressing in the *Splinters* shows with scepticism but always inevitably licensed the revues with few edits. For instance, the Lord Chamberlain’s Office Reader’s Report on *Splinters 1914-1933* determined that, despite show’s inclusion of cross-dressing, ‘I do not see any unpleasant suggestiveness in this: it is simply a question of clever makeup’. The Lord Chamberlain cautiously agreed in a handwritten note at the bottom of the Report. ‘I detest men making up as women’, he wrote, ‘but if there is no “suggestiveness” or “Nancy” business, I suppose it is all right’.¹⁰⁶

The vagueness in describing cross-dressing as ‘distasteful’, subtly unpleasant, “‘Nancy” business’, and potentially suggestive, without going into further detail as to why the practice elicited these feelings, is telling. As historian Laura Doan has argued, when analysing the “not said” or “not seen,” in “fragmentary evidence, gossip, and suspicion,” the historian should not immediately assume ‘that we know what others didn’t or that we know what they were unable to name’.¹⁰⁷ These innuendos and inferences, a common element of discourses on sexuality in interwar Britain, were ‘useful in suggestion rather than specifying’.¹⁰⁸ Referring to female impersonation using innuendo and inference allowed these critics to suggest that seeing men dressed as women was, or had the potential to be, troubling in a cultural environment where doing something, such as carrying out a certain sexual practice or presenting oneself in terms of gender variance, was not immediately associated with being something (i.e. being placed within a category of identity).¹⁰⁹ One can only speculate as to what form of ‘knowing’ these observers possessed or exhibited in these cases. This discourse could have constituted ‘wilful unknowing’ to protect the sensitivities of readers or to shield the writers from suspicions which

¹⁰⁵ V&A, LES ROUGES, *The Bournemouth Graphic*, ‘Clever Company of Army Artistes’, n.d.

¹⁰⁶ BL MC, LCP Corr 1933/12058, Reader’s Report; when the play *The Gay Young Bride* (1923) was refused a licence over of the Lord Chamberlain’s objection to the cross-dressing scenes, the show’s producer wrote to the Lord Chamberlain asking why his play was unlicensed when the 1920 *Splinters* production was allowed. Interestingly, the Lord Chamberlain’s Office pleaded ignorance by stating that they did not know that *Splinters* contained cross-dressing. The Office’s response in this instance is odd but somewhat plausible. The 1920 *Splinters* script does not explicitly indicate that the women’s parts are played by men and, as *Les Rouges* had only recently been formed, the Lord Chamberlain could have been ignorant as to the nature of the revue. See BL MC, LCP Corr 1923/11295, *The Gay Young Bride* by Tom Martell, Letter from the Lord Chamberlain’s Office to Herbert Clifton, 23 November 1923; BL MC, LCP 1920/17, Reader’s Report, 26 June 1920.

¹⁰⁷ Martha Vicinus quoted in Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 160.

¹⁰⁸ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 189; see also Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 156–7, 180–9.

¹⁰⁹ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, esp. 100, 130, 136, 140–1, 155.

came from having perceivably too much sexual knowledge.¹¹⁰ These writers may have also made vague connections between male gender variance and certain sexual proclivities or a category of identity but lacked the inclination to taxonomize, or had a limited grasp of sexual taxonomies.¹¹¹ As Doan has observed, not knowing or ignorance is, in itself, a regime of knowledge that existed alongside means of understanding gender variance which utilized scientific systems of categorization to label certain individuals.¹¹² It is apparent that, by the height of *Les Rouges'* fame in the interwar period, seeing men dressing as women could initiate a process of inference on the part of the observer which associated male cross-dressing with transgressive acts, behaviours, or categories of identity. What these acts, behaviours, or categories entailed was open to interpretation, but this view was apparently pervasive enough to move some observers, such as the Lord Chamberlain, to acknowledge the unsavoury associations one might have regarding male cross-dressing.

With respect to the Lord Chamberlain specifically, the Office had an official ban on the representation of same-sex desire, and anything perceived to be indicative of it, on the stage until 1958.¹¹³ However, these rules were fairly nebulous and were applied inconsistently. Theatre critic Nicholas De Jongh has argued that, 'Effeminate and camp males generally appear to have been regarded as a virtual third gender that posed no threat to men'.¹¹⁴ De Jongh has cited the licensing of a Noël Coward script featuring quite obviously homosexual characters, *Bitter Sweet* (1929), as evidence that the censor was willing to turn a blind eye to displays of gender variance and even same-sex desire onstage as long as it was framed by middle-to-upper class mise-en-scène and represented a de-sexed, eccentric effeminacy. Perceived associations between male cross-dressing and sexual immorality were expressed by the Lord Chamberlain, but such links were not deemed explicit enough to warrant banning the practice from the stage.¹¹⁵ *Les*

¹¹⁰ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 184–8. As Doan has suggested, 'In the court of law, the inability to understand the meanings of words ... was an asset, since speaking freely about sexual matters was judged transgressive (as Maud Allan had discovered)'. See Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 184.

¹¹¹ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 130–3.

¹¹² Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 161.

¹¹³ John Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil* (London, 1990), 171–2; For information on the lifting of the ban, see Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama 1900–1968, Volume Three: The Fifties* (Exeter, 2011), 110–39.

¹¹⁴ Nicholas De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901–1968* (London, 2001), 99.

¹¹⁵ For example, the censor explicitly clarified in one case that '[The Lord Chamberlain] has no apparent grounds for refusing to licence a play merely because it is to be performed by female impersonators, female impersonation in this country being as old as the stage'. See BL MC, LCP Corr 1958/667, *We're No Ladies* by Phil Starr, Letter from the Lord Chamberlain's Office to the Clerk of the London County Council, 10 February 1958.

Rouges befitted from a censorship body that was tolerant of gender variance, so long as it was mostly comic and was largely free of explicit references to sexuality.

Extricating male cross-dressing from sexuality became increasingly difficult in the 1930s, however, as the perception that gender variance was linked with sexual immorality became more culturally pervasive. As mentioned in the introduction, in December 1932, shortly before *Splinters 1914-1933* opened to fanfare, police arrested sixty people, many of them cross-dressed men, in a raid on an underground ball at Holland Park Avenue in London.¹¹⁶ The ball's crossed-dressed male attendees were particularly fixated on by the police, the prosecution, and the media as symbols of immorality in London and the nation as a whole. 'MEN DRESSED AS WOMEN' read one typically sensationalistic newspaper headline on the widely covered case.¹¹⁷ This vague, yet impactful headline suggested that the newspaper assumed readers would make some sort of epistemological leap, linking cross-dressed men to certain sexual proclivities, vice, and/or a named type of person. During the trial, the Recorder of London, Sir Ernest Wild, acknowledged the public's growing acknowledgement of sexual perversion—increasingly associated with gender variance—as a societal danger.¹¹⁸ Contrasting the 1930s with Victorian times, he noted, 'When gross indecency between males was made an offence nearly fifty years ago, many juries acquitted, because being decent-minded men they could not think such beastliness could exist'.¹¹⁹ Wild's comments specifically tied homosexual offences to the accused men's effeminate gendered character and the women's clothing they wore, while comparing older regimes of sexual knowledge with newer ones. The British public of the 1930s, Wild argued, had a greater degree of sexual knowledge than those in the past. They were now aware of the existence of men who engaged in acts of sexual immorality with one another and understood that male gender variance signified the type of man who might commit these acts. Even mainstream popular venues were not above suspicion regarding perceivably immoral presences. In 1933, a complaint was sent to Scotland Yard regarding 'Degenerate boys and men in female attire parading about', in that year's Lady Malcolm's Servants' Ball, an annual fancy dress ball for domestic servants in the Royal Albert Hall overseen by aristocrat Lady Malcolm.¹²⁰ A ban on male cross-dressing

¹¹⁶ Houlbrook, 'Lady Austin's Camp Boys', 31–61.

¹¹⁷ *The Morning Advertiser* quoted in Houlbrook, 'Lady Austin's Camp Boys', 32.

¹¹⁸ For more on Wild, see Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 176–86.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Houlbrook, 'Lady Austin's Camp Boys', 32; for information relating to views of gender variance in the nineteenth century, see H.G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19th Century* (London, 2009), 50–76; Upchurch, 'Forgetting the Unthinkable', 127–57.

¹²⁰ Houlbrook, 'Lady Austin's Camp Boys', 36.

at the ball was imposed 2 years later, and former CID officers were hired to eject cross-dressed 'sexual perverts' from the venue, thus clearly establishing the impetus behind the policy.¹²¹

Interwar Britain saw the increasing prevalence of cultural frameworks for understanding male gender variance which associated the practice with a number of transgressive acts, patterns of behaviour, and/or categories of identity. Given this, it is understandable that so much of the historiography on gender and sexuality in this period has been devoted to analysing gender variance as a social problem. However, as I have demonstrated, interwar Britain was also the environment in which a male cross-dressing ensemble became a popular culture phenomenon. As opposed to the predominant literature on interwar male gender variance, which has explored how controversies surrounding the practice revealed or aggravated socio-cultural anxieties, this study has shown how cross-dressing performance could soothe anxieties by fluently tapping into precisely the kind of entertainment milieu the war-weary theatregoing public was yearning for in the aftermath of Great War. The widespread popularity of veterans' cross-dressing revues was sustained by *Les Rouges* from 1918 through the late 1930s and then surged again after the Second World War with new long-running touring productions such as *Soldiers in Skirts*, *Forces Showboat* (1947), and *Forces in Petticoats*.¹²² These post-Second World War shows, like those of *Les Rouges*, were widely popular, but were subjected to different cultural interpretations regarding the links between gender variance and transgressive acts, behaviours, and categories of identity in the post-war period. For instance, homosexual campaigners such as journalist Peter Wildeblood attempted to distance homosexuals such as himself, who, in his words, 'were extremely cautious and discrete', from men who predicated their identities on gender variance.¹²³ Another factor which impacted the post-Second World War revues was that ex-servicemen arguably had less immunity from accusations of sexual immorality than they did in the interwar period. This is evidenced by the vilification of Royal Air Force servicemen Edward McNally and John Reynolds during the Montagu trial of 1953–4 compared to the gentler treatment of the guardsmen in the 1930s.¹²⁴ As drag entertainer and performer in the

¹²¹ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 268.

¹²² Although these newer shows featured some former *Les Rouges* performers, they were distinct from the *Les Rouges/Splinters* canon.

¹²³ Quoted in Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (London, 2010), 180–1.

¹²⁴ Reynolds and McNally were granted immunity in return for turning Queen's Evidence but were still harshly criticized by the prosecution. See Chris Waters, 'Disorders of the Mind, Disorders of the Body Social: Peter Wildeblood and the Making of the Modern Homosexual', in Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters, eds, *Moments of*

post-Second World War revues Danny La Rue recalled, the veterans' cross-dressing revue subgenre eventually 'petered out' by the mid-1950s, but this likely had more to do with the overall decline of the variety theatre than specific criticism directed at the shows.¹²⁵

Conclusion

How did veterans' cross-dressing revues manage to thrive as a theatrical subgenre during the interwar period despite contemporary cultural anxieties regarding associations between male gender variance and transgressive acts, behaviours, and categories of identity? *Les Rouges'* status as ex-servicemen meant that observers were much more likely to perceive the troupe's shows as an informative and entertaining way to connect with life at the front than as a disconcerting display. However, as important as the troupe's wartime service was to their appeal, the primary determinant behind *Les Rouges'* success was the high quality of the performances, particularly the artists' ability to project attractive renderings of femininity. Some dissenters, such as the Lord Chamberlain and a few members of the press, expressed vague discomfort with female impersonation, but this controversy did not seriously impede the ensemble's career.

Literary critic Marjorie Garber has warned against viewing historical renderings of cross-dressing exclusively through the framework of 'an emerging gay identity' at the risk of concealing the other significant meanings attached to the practice.¹²⁶ In the same vein, I have aspired for this article to demonstrate that a tendency towards studying gender variance, and especially male cross-dressing, through the prism of controversies, concerns, or other negative sociocultural reactions, can obscure the varied, complex, and contradictory ways in which gender variance and sexual difference were understood in interwar Britain. For example, female impersonators could consciously project attractive representations of femininity, and spectators could openly express attraction to the artists' feminine guises, with neither that dynamic nor the parties involved being subjected to a naming process. Different variables and contexts influenced observers' understanding of what gender variance meant, if it was perceived to hold any distinct meaning at all. In the case of *Les Rouges'* shows specifically, female impersonation

Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964 (London, 1999), 145; see also Houlbrook, 'Soldier Heroes and Rent Boys', 386-8.

¹²⁵ Danny La Rue, *From Drags to Riches: My Autobiography* (London, 1987), 75; for information on the decline of the variety theatre, see Oliver Double, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (New York, NY, 2012), 82-7; Mort, *Capital Affairs*, 266.

¹²⁶ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, NY, 1992), 4-5.

was not only deemed unproblematic for the most part, but the art form actively helped to soothe post-war anxieties. Analysing these meanings and lack of meanings allows the historian to uncover both the pleasures and the perils relating to the expression of gender variance throughout history; who was given licence to express gender variance, what were the boundaries of gendered respectability, and what, if anything, constituted gendered normality.