The moral sense of the majorities: indecency and vigilance in Late-Victorian music halls

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Although known as the ‘Naughty Nineties’, the last years of the nineteenth century are characterised by a succession of anti-liberal backlashes most notoriously including the Vizetelly prosecution of 1889 (principally involving Emile Zola’s novels), Oscar Wilde’s trials of 1895 (indirectly about homosexuality) and the pillorying of feminist reformers. Instead of becoming more sexually permissive, the English fin de siècle was in many respects deeply conservative, not only in bureaucratic responses to these sexual controversies but also in the creation of political organisations to represent and lobby for conventional moral values. Social purity campaigners’ efforts to eradicate indecency in music-hall performance fits into this pattern, and provides insight into the continuity between the class politics of leisure reforms, control of artistic production and hegemonic sexual mores.

Most of the correspondence in the voluminous files of the licensors of public entertainment in Victorian London is concerned with fire prevention, routine vetting of playscripts and safety inspections. A few letters specifically complain of music halls’ tolerance of ‘vile songs and dialogues, vomited by the lowest grade of public singers’; this becomes a hazard when aimed at audiences ‘too susceptible of evil example and demoralising influences’.1 The lyrics of songs like ‘She’d a Black and Rolling Eye’, singled out in the Sunday Times in 1867, give plenty of scope for objection in accordance with the prevailing prejudices of the day by treating unwed motherhood, child abandonment and inter-racial courting without condemning commentary.2 Occasionally, however, complaints are augmented by a more sophisticated charge implicating the flouting of women’s bodies in combination with licentious words, gestures and costumes. Such charges reflect comprehensively on all aspects of music-hall programming – songs, ballets, sketches, tableaux vivants and novelties – linking what occurred on stage to the ‘demoralisation’ (sexual excitement) of the audience. In moral conservatives’ attempts to combat this pernicious cause and effect equation, three elements prevalently recur and coincide: bureaucratic conservatism, class conflicts and concerns of evangelical Protestantism.

Indignant letters in the mid-Victorian files of the Lord Chamberlain, for example, specify what was and was not visible on ballet girls. In most cases, the letters are followed by memoranda recording whatever official excuses for not taking censorious action that the Lord Chamberlain invoked on each occasion. When the
innovative cancan dance reached its height of popularity in 1869, however, the
pressure to impose sanctions finally became too intense for the Lord Chamberlain
to ignore, and his office issued the following warning to theatre managers:

[The Lord Chamberlain] has learned with regret . . . that there is much reason to complain of
the impropriety of costume of the Ladies in Pantomimes, Burlesques, &c., which are now
being performed in some of the Metropolitan Theatres. He has noticed for some time past
that this evil has gradually been on the increase, but he has been most unwilling to interfere
in a matter which he considers ought more properly to be left to the discretion and good
taste of the Managers themselves.3

Response to this warning was split between managers of West End theatres, who
took the high moral stand and claimed to support the suppression of scanty
costume, and managers of working-class theatres in South and East London, who
asserted that their audiences never had and never would tolerate the slightest
indiscretion. As with most other matters addressed by the Lord Chamberlain (who
licensed theatres) and the local magistrates (responsible for music and dancing
halls), nothing of any consequence resulted from this initiative, but its substance
and response signal aspects of anti-music-hall lobbying that became increasingly
important in the late nineteenth century.

Over the next decade, the people who were predisposed to complain about
performance organised into societies dedicated to reclaiming souls and cleaning up
working-class neighbourhoods. Under the auspices of Methodist, Wesleyan and
Baptist congregations, the YMCA, total abstinence federations, vigilance and
watch committees and Women’s Rescue Missions, lobbying groups brought
increasing attention to theatres’ public disregard for propriety. A common moral
sense drew them together into an ideological bloc coalesced around the issue of
impure leisure. They were never able to rally the cooperation of the Lord Chamber-
lain, who was apathetic, or local magistrates, who almost always sided with
managers’ commercial interests. In frustration, they themselves became managers
of what were considered some of the most degenerate establishments in the East
End, such as Wilton’s Music Hall. An anecdotal history of the East London
Wesleyan and Methodist Mission documents the attraction of such projects:

Mrs. Reginard Radcliffe and Miss Macpherson were passing through Grace’s Alley into
Welchrose Square as the evening performances in the music-hall were proceeding. The
dreadful hubbub that came from the hall startled them. They paused to listen, and were so
impressed that they paid the admission fee and went in to see really what could be going on.
The sights on the stage and the entire condition of things became so awful to them, that they
fell down on their knees together, in the centre of the hall, and in view of the stage and
crowd of onlookers, prayed that God would break the power of the devil in the place, and
bring the premises into the use of Christian people. (Walker 1984, pp. 165–6)

The East London Mission disliked Wilton’s so much that it bought the company. Religious sectarians repeatedly targeted working-class neighbourhood institutions
in this way: before the Mission took over Wilton’s, the Salvation Army bought the
notorious Grecian Theatre in the City Road. In Waterloo, the housing reformer
Emma Cons converted the Old Vic to a temperance hall under the auspices of
Morley College.

In 1891, Robert Buchanan asked how far ‘the moral sense of majorities’ would
be allowed to dictate public access to art; in contemporary usage, the term ‘moral
majority’ retains Buchanan’s original implication of Christian pressure groups
attempting to exert leverage in secular politics. In 1889, when the power to licence
music halls was transferred from local magistrates to the new London County Council’s (LCC) subcommittee on Theatres and Music Halls, reformers jumped at the chance to influence the new body, pinning their hopes on Frederick Charrington (of the National Vigilance Committee) who was elected to represent Mile End. When Augustus Harris (manager of Drury Lane Theatre and councillor for the Strand electoral division) was disqualified from membership in the LCC’s Theatres and Music Halls Licensing Committee due to conflict of interest, the scales seemed to be weighted in favour of reform. Charrington immediately attacked world famous high-class music halls in the West End, initiating the most active and concerted of campaigns against impure leisure in the Victorian period.

The first contentious case to come before the Theatres and Music Halls Committee concerned the Trocadero music hall (Great Windmill Street). Accusations centred on some sexual byplay in an acrobatic sketch and on a seriocomic singer. Maud Hilton, who insisted and subsequently demonstrated that her legs were not bowed but merely bandied. The Committee recommended that the licence not be renewed, but the Council as a whole overturned the recommendation. The reformers were equally disappointed when the Council did not heed the Dean of Westminster’s complaint that the Royal Aquarium (Tothill Street, Whitehall) was the resort of prostitutes. They had also hoped that combined charges of immoral performance and prostitution would close the Empire Theatre (Leicester Square), but the evidence was so badly presented that nothing could be done. When asked how he recognised prostitutes, for example, Charrington’s witness (a grocer) explained ‘by their manner of going so about – the manner of passing by people and looking out with their eyes’, and when asked to justify his objection to costumes the most specific remark he could make was ‘I thought the dresses were exposing the shapes of the performers very much’. Apart from the naivete of witnesses, the major impediment to reformers’ success in the early years of the campaign was the lack of precise legal nomenclature for infractions. They seemed implicitly to follow a descriptive ratings scale ranging through inane, vulgar, dubious and indecent but their own moral proclivities prevented them from iterating exactly what was meant by each term. The root of their objection was that performance conventions and the ambience of music halls were sexually exciting to men, but this was difficult to prove empirically under the quasi-legalistic procedures of the LCC. In testimony, male and female reformers alike resorted to euphemisms, verbal accounts of fleeting gestural nuances and blatantly subjective interpretations, relying far too much on their own bourgeois bearing to make vague statements authoritative. Routed by initial attempts on West End music halls, the moral majority returned its attention to working-class neighbourhoods and there perfected the necessary rhetorical flourishes before trying again to persuade councillors of corruption in their own beloved middle-class haunts.

Like the magistrates who targeted song saloons in Islington and Clerkenwell in 1863, the LCC’s attention turned in 1881 to halls in a tightly delineated area: the East End’s Tower district. Evidence both from the LCC hearings and resultant litigation strongly suggests that the authorities took advantage of the proprietors’ low status as East End immigrants in order to financially cripple two popular centres of local entertainment, and that this was undertaken at the instigation of evangelists active in the neighbourhood. On the basis of testimony from a ship’s cook, banker’s clerk, workers with the Hope Mission for Fallen Women, and pastor of the Wesleyan East End Mission, renewals of the dancing licences for the Rose
and Crown and the Angel and Crown public houses were denied, despite the fact that neither the police nor the vestry ever lodged complaints against the premises or their proprietors. Such institutions, where most of the entertainment was audience-generated, represent the simplest model of cause and effect with respect to sexual impropriety. Reviewing the case, the LCC accepted the comments of its Inspector as equally indicative of both houses:

I am of the opinion that not only is prostitution tolerated, but that it is even fostered by the management, at all events in the person of the elderly woman behind the bar [wife of the proprietor] . . . I can find no other name for such a place than a hell."

The women, he alleged, were all common prostitutes, the men were all foreign sailors, and the combination had an inevitable result. Other local residents testified that the Rose and Crown was well conducted, there was no drunkenness, and that working-class people of both sexes were as liable to attend as sailors and prostitutes, yet neither the Rose and Crown nor the Angel and Crown were ever relicensed for music or dancing.

Through a combination of economic buy-outs, political pressure and partisan officials, the moralists were successful in suppressing and controlling much working-class entertainment. Buoyed by these victories, the middle-class reformers once again turned attention to their own institutions. The new campaign was ambitious: they deliberately targeted the halls that had particularly high local and international profiles, and particularly prestigious clienteles. The cachet of these halls came partly from the excellent, trend-setting, yet racy stage entertainments, and partly from the sophistication of the audiences, including the prostitutes who solicited in the promenades (the open spaces between the last rows of seats and the bars on each tier). The police ignored mere solicitation and concentrated on premises notorious for prostitutes and disorderliness, so the high class music halls were freely tolerated. This 1894 to 1896 campaign against the official complicity toward public manifestations of female sexuality in middle-class music halls had two main prongs: the Palace and the Empire Theatres of Varieties.

Sidewalk advertisements may have alerted the reformers. According to Edward Webb, placards outside the Palace Theatre in Cambridge Circus (a major junction of West End traffic) were 'suggestive and demoralising to the crowds of young men and boys who linger about the place'. These susceptible males were attracted by copies of nude paintings by eminent British and Continental artists. The placards advertised a staple of music hall programmes known as tableaux vivants or living pictures. The custom in mounting these still frames for the stage was to be as authentic to the composition of original works of art as possible, with the addition of loincloths for men and modified togas ('classical' drapery) for women. Theatres such as the Palace, which were built since the inauguration of the LCC, were forbidden to construct promenades, and instead were required to close off auditoria from all lobby and bar areas. This stipulation was fine for the Palace as long as it was used for opera, but this initial venture quickly failed and in order to recoup losses the building was put under new management and licensed as a music hall. The owners appealed to the LCC to permit renovations, fearing that without the amenity of promenades the Palace could not compete with its well-established neighbours, but permission was repeatedly denied. The management turned from architectural renovations to an innovation in performance for its financial salvation. Unable to tear down walls, the managers stripped away the
traditional costumes from female living picture models. Instead of adapting the original nineteenth-century art sources by adding 'classical' drapery for the females, the Palace used body-stockings (maillots) when nudity was called for. Thus, the placards outside the theatre could evocatively claim: 'the reproductions of these pictures by living persons to be seen inside are exact copies of the originals'.

 Complaints were soon forthcoming, and an LCC inspector was dispatched. He found that among approximately twenty tableaux on the programme, some of them are very clever representations of pictures, and statuary to which the most severe could not object, but several are of a classical nature, represented by, apparently semi-nude, or nearly nude women. The last one, 'Aphrodite', [based on John Gibson's Tinted Venus] was apparently quite nude, except for a scarf over the loins. I say apparently, because in every case, I observed that the body, arms, and bosom were completely clothed in very delicate close fitting fleshings, which, when a warm light was thrown on them, appeared [from the orchestra stalls] like nature. Two months later a new series was mounted, and the same inspector noted: 'in several cases the figures are entirely undraped with the exception of a slight scarf or spray of flowers across the middle of the body. The ladies are dressed in skin tights'. Not everyone agreed with him that the provision of some object (even transparent gauze) over the pelvis was adequate to forestall objections.

In August 1894, the Palace mounted its fourth series of living pictures. The National Vigilance Association (NVA) decided to act, and through its principal spokesperson, Lady Henry Somerset, mobilised forces against the realisation of F.M. Bredt's The Moorish Bath. The matter was prominent in the press, and though the Palace quietly withdrew the picture, reformers kept up their pressure and issued an objection to the renewal of the Palace's licence in September. The moral majority (including the NVA, Salvation Army, Lady Henry Somerset, the Prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral, the hymnist Samuel Smith, and a pioneer in journalism for adolescents) believed that the performance was pornographic, but could not appeal to a magistrate to invoke Lord Campbell's Act because the living pictures could not be brought into court for an anatomical demonstration of their effect on men. The case hinged on William Alexander Coote's (Secretary of the NVA) ability to describe the living pictures to the LCC and successfully account for their 'inflaming' propensity. His first example, from Johann Heinrich von Dannecker's 1814 sculpture Ariane, is a depiction of a naked woman seated on an antique lion. No photographs of this or any other Palace tableau survives, but the source is in the Frankfurt Museum. Judging from engravings and a photograph of the sculpture, it can be described as follows. The woman's shin is tucked underneath the other thigh, and she holds the folded leg in place by grasping the ankle with one hand. The elbow of her other arm rests on the lion's head. She is well muscled, with tight breasts and generous hips, appearing from the back like an Ingres nude. Her head is turned forward, in the direction in which the lion may be travelling. The overall effect is graceful, elegant, and dignified. In Coote's words:

This, so far as I can put it into language, represents a naked woman lying on the back of a lion. There were 4 or 5 wrinkles on the lower parts of the limb, distinguishing it from an ordinary picture. The left leg was placed under the lower part of the right leg, producing these wrinkles. She was lying in such a position that had it not been for the tights gross indecency would have been the result.

It is possible that the Palace modified the original upright posture to a reclining one.
and splayed the legs slightly, but it is equally possible that Coote exaggerated, erred in memory or described his highly subjective perception in order to justify offensiveness. His second example is based on Henrietta Rae’s Naiad. Because the source was an oil painting rather than a marble sculpture, the model was clad in a flesh coloured instead of a white maillot. The original and the copy both incorporated a sheath of filmy fabric across the lower pelvis. Coote admitted, ‘of course . . . I believe there were tights’, but found the gauze insufficient to ‘hide’, demurring to mention what failed to be hidden except to say that wearing somewhat less than the Venus de Milo, her ‘wisp of white gauze [was] such as would pass not only through a finger ring, but through a lace hole’. His third example, which has defied attempts at identification, was of Luis Falero’s Polar Star. This was objectionable not just because of its nudity, but because the ‘naked’ woman in it extended both arms above her head to hold a lamp. This was an extremely indecent posture, for as another famous music hall scandal demonstrates, armpits were metonymous with the female pudenda and their exposure in the Victorian period was inevitably an invocation of sex (Davis 1990).

It irked Coote that the ‘nudes’ generated applause rather than the patriotic and domestic subjects that were also included in the programmes; it disturbed him that male stage managers assisted nightly to properly pose the tableaux; but in all cases, his principal objection rested on the fabric covering the genital area.

No doubt the ladies who thus displayed their person were in fact provided with an extra cuticle of flesh colour, [be it] silk or some such fabric, but this is a matter of inference & faith, not observation and knowledge.

The authorities were placed in a difficult position, for if they imposed sanctions they risked offending the artistic establishment, including Lord Leighton, President of the Royal Academy and contributor to Palace tableaux series in 1894 and 1895. The Committee ruled that as long as the models wore maillots nothing need be done. The Palace was verbally instructed to ‘exercise greater caution in the future’ but the licence was granted without written restriction.

In April 1896, Coote’s attack was renewed with the support of the Vestry of St Anne (Soho). This time he focused on Alexis Joseph Mazerolle’s La Source.

Here is a woman, apparently naked . . . sitting on a piece of rock, and her feet are resting on a similar rock. From a little way above, from a spring there is water coming down, and the water is coming underneath the legs. Now, sir . . . though it may be that I am charged with reading into things, it did seem to me that that could only have one explanation.

At this, the assembly burst into laughter. When he looked over the transcript a week later, Coote discovered that the Committee had misconstrued his description. The ‘one explanation’ that the Committee believed Coote to be referring to was that the stream between the woman’s legs was urine, and that this (rather than her nudity, posture or the composition) was obscene. Judging from his rejoinder that ‘my view of the living picture was that the nude woman was obtrusively presented as the source of life, and that this suggestion was abominably indecent’, he may have meant that the picture’s title, ‘La Source’, referred to conception, in which case the spring represented a stream of ejaculant and the whole composition was an allegory of copulation. This demonstrates the gulf between an inanity and an indecency.

It was probably clear to the reformers at an early stage in 1894 that the Palace campaign would not yield results. Their best witness, Lady Somerset, was sud-
denly called away to America as the licensing hearings began, and without her the case failed to generate much publicity. Coote went through the motions of objecting to the Palace, but his compatriots' efforts concentrated on the other targeted music hall, the Empire Theatre of Varieties.

In separate studies of the Empire scandal, Penelope Summerfield and Joseph Donohue both note the importance of the promenades to reformers' arguments, focusing on the issue of prostitution. As Thomas Anstey (1974, p. 54) remarked, the women in the promenades 'are generally pretty obvious members of a class which, so long as it behaves itself with propriety in the building, it would, whatever fanatics say to the contrary, be neither desirable nor possible to exclude'. By all reports, the visual codes of prostitution were pretty clear: prostitutes were well dressed and invited conversation by either looking men directly in the eyes or casually bumping against their legs. As long as everyone understood the subtleties of English public behaviour and vestimentary propriety the nature of each woman's character could be easily discerned; an isolated error by the acting manager, Charles Dundas Slater, who once mistook a wealthy American woman in an opera cloak for a prostitute, demonstrates the point.10

Voluminous verbatim testimony from the LCC hearings reveals, however, that it was not prostitution per se that brought about the action against the Empire: it was the contiguity of behaviour in the promenades to the performance on stage that preoccupied the witnesses. Laura Ormiston Chant's testimony clearly shows how the complainants focused on the costumes and gestures of the ballet.

To begin with, there was one dancer in flesh coloured tights, & I used no opera glasses at first, but at last I had to use them to see whether she even had tights on or not, so nearly was the colour of the flesh imitated. She had nothing on but a very short skirt – which when she danced & pirouetted flew right up to her head, & left the rest of the body with the waist exposed except for a very slight white gauze between the limbs... Also there is one central figure... in flesh coloured tights, who wears a light gauzy lacy kind of dress, & when she comes to the stage, it is as though the body of a naked woman were simply disguised with a film of lace. There is also a dancer who dances in black silk tights with a black lace dress, and... she gathers up all her clothing in the face of the man before whom she is dancing, and stretches up her leg, & kicks him upon the crown of his head. I noticed that the audience took these peculiarly objectionable parts very quietly.19

The Reverend J. Brooks concluded, 'I think it was obnoxious & hurtful in the highest degree, not only to those who took part in the entertainment, but also to those who witnessed it'.20 As Marie Loyd once sang:

By correct manipulation, she the figure can display,
And the ankles, and the – well, it's hard to turn the eyes away
When there's half a yard of 'open work' about. (Leigh 1904)

Or, as a contemporaneous erotic verse described the chorus girl:

With gesture trim she throws her limb
Out from her hip elastic,
And, for a fact, it's not exact –
Ly what you'd call monastic (Mascot 1895, p. 13)

The moral majority found the ballets in dubious taste, but the crux of the problem was that other patrons found the dances indecent and thus provocative of sexual desire. With desire so inflamed regularly each evening at ten o'clock, the women of the promenades had a guaranteed clientele.

After years of campaigning, the moral majority finally succeeded in convinc-
ing the LCC that provocative performance and solicitation had a causal relationship in a West End music hall. In order to disassociate performance’s instigation of desire from the outlet in the promenades, the LCC ruled that the Empire must install barriers between the back of the seating at the levels of the dress circle and upper circle so that strolling men in the promenades could not watch the performance, drink and circulate among prostitutes at the same time. As the reformers discovered, neither the civic authorities nor the manager would take steps to ban prostitutes from the premises, so this represents a calculated attempt to inhibit sexual consequences of performance.

An unsigned letter in the Greater London Record Office reveals that the precincts of high society were not the only areas of the Empire Theatre famous for sexual assignations. The document describes how the theatre’s front of house manager, Robert William Ahern, was seen dragging, kicking and punching an unresisting man from the gallery. He is cited as explaining that ‘this man was a sodomite, & that more than half the audience in the shilling promenade were of that class & that he often turned out half a dozen a night & gave them a good kicking’. This is surely not what Oscar Wilde had in mind when he quipped a scant few months later in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that Jack and Algny should go round to the Empire at ten, but if the report is accurate it is highly likely that Wilde knew about the Empire gallery, for the source paraphrases Ahern saying ‘it was the only place in London where this class of people congregated . . . he could lay his hands on 200 sobs every night in the week if he liked’. This suggests that the Boulton and Park transvestite case twenty-five years earlier at the nearby Strand Theatre may not have been an isolated incident (Ackroyd 1979, pp. 83-4). In retrospect, it seems tremendously significant that the intense homophobia shown around Wilde’s trial in 1895 played no part in the Empire controversy in 1894. It suggests that apart from selecting an area of the metropolis and a class of music halls in which to concentrate licence objections, the moral majority chose particular morals of particular majorities at each phase of its campaign. Instead of trying to close the Empire because it harboured male homosexuals in the lowest priced areas, reformers cited the indecency of women’s bodies – revealingly shown in cross-dressed and feminine characters – and linked this to immorality among the highest paying customers engaging in heterosexual solicitation.

The same tactic was tried on the Oxford Music Hall in 1896. This time the reformers, led by the Social Purity Branch of the British Women’s Temperance Association, objected to the ‘excessive drinking[,] indecent conversation[,] and disorderly conduct’ in the promenades as well as ‘obscene[,] vulgar[,] and objectionable songs’ performed on stage. They called attention to a verse in one of Lady Mansell’s songs which described a girl’s maiden aunt climbing over a stile, being caught by a high wind, and falling down head first. The refrain, ‘What I saw I must not tell you now; the boss will make such a row’, highlighted the double entendre. Another verse described a girl swimming in the sea at Margate; when she returned to the shore she mistook a man’s changing cubicle for her own, ‘And what I saw I must not tell you now’. In a later verse, the song explicitly links the maiden aunt and bathing machine scenarios to a dancer’s tights bursting, when once again ‘What I saw I must not tell you now’. Music-hall humour was on a par with seaside postcards, but the live presentation of such material offended the moral majority. The exposure of the female genitals was merely alluded to, but sometimes the revelation of female underwear was accomplished. In 1900, Cissie
Fitzgerald, 'the lady with the wink', sang the refrain 'higher, higher, higher', while lifting her dress to three different levels. 'This', complained a pseudonymous One Who Prefers Decency in Popular Entertainments, 'is accompanied by the advertised wink'. In her next song and dance, 'the performer's chief aim consists of getting all the skirt of her dress (a plain evening gown) around her waist, and keeping it there to display what is underneath'. This was so commonplace that the LCC did not even dispatch an inspector to investigate the charge.

The moral majority's campaign against indecency continued at the Holborn in 1897. A complaint was received about the Animated Photographs (cinematic projections), including the 'picture of a woman who strips naked in front of the audience'. By the time an inspector was sent the item was withdrawn, however he called attention to a song entitled 'I Was On the Right Side' sung by Alice Lloyd:

Algy was a howling masher
Quite a penny steamboat swell
Drove me out once in his dogcart
Stood a champagne lunch as well.
Took a little too much of it
Going home had come to worse
In a ditch upset the dogcart
It was Luckily Algy fell out first.

Chorus
But I was on the safe side...
He was soft to fall upon
So I was on the safe, safe, side.

Girls ambition nowadays
Is on a bicycle to ride
Those with decent understandings
Put the bloomers on with pride.
I did likewise had an upset
Very soon the trick was done
Bloomers burst a crowd got round me
Some said now we'll see some fun.

Chorus
But I was on the safe side...
With rage they ground their teeth
I'd another pair underneath
So I was on the safe, safe, side.

Marie Lloyd's rendition of 'What's That For, Eh?' caused more concern, particularly the verse where Lloyd (dressed as a schoolgirl) describes her father taking her into town. She is astonished by the throngs of yellowed-haired women:

And one of them - oh! what a shame! -
She called Pa 'Bertie' - it's not his name, -
Then went like this (kissing sound) and winked her eye -
And so I said to Pa, 'Oh, my!' -

Chorus
What's that for, eh, please tell me Pa
If you don't tell me I'll ask Ma... (Lytton, 1895)

Allusions to sex, extramarital affairs, and prostitution did not stop there.

The songs performed by R.G. Knowles have typically inane lyrics, but Knowles had a knack for indicating anything through gesture and improvised
Permission to publish this photograph has been granted by the Harvard Theatre Collection.
patter. The routine that was accompanied by successive illustrations of feet was particularly objectionable:

There was one diagram – the legs rather above the knees of a ballet girl and the legs of a policeman. She was lifting up her dress in front, & the remarks which Mr. Knowles made at the time were to the effect 'We all know what that means. Some of us have been there.' The legs were bared up to the knees & she was lifting her dress up above . . . And there was another diagram . . . of this woman with a sheet or a nightdress across her feet & the legs of the man. He [Knowles] sat in the same attitude, which is evidently the attitude of a drunken man, & said: 'We have all been there, & some of you are in training for that tonight'.

This is Knowles's standard fare. He delighted in pushing rules to the brink, as in the song 'Tableaux Vivants (There's a Picture For You)' which describes various situations worthy of living pictures. In one, a drunken man goes into the wrong hotel room; at 4.00 am he awakes to find a woman with him (Osborne, 1894). Knowles got away with this for years: as an inspector later noted, 'some of his recitations were dubious but on the whole there was nothing actually indecent in his inuendos [sic]'. The lyrics of one of Nellie Wallace's songs, however, prompted an inspector to remark:

I think that passages such as 'I go for my honeymoon! Three Times a Day!' and about the singer's husband wishing for children a girl and a boy – 'And I wish him joy! Three Times a Day!' and as to a husband only 'stopping for breath! Three Times a day!' were intended, and were taken by the audience as indecent.

Actresses, dancers and singers were paid to call attention to their bodies and appreciated in proportion to their appeal to immoral minorities. Insofar as moralists sensed this phenomenon, they were completely justified in objecting to the halls' standard fare. Nevertheless, their detractors believed they saw more than was actually exposed – hence Madge Ellis's action for slander against members of the NVA who wrongfully accused her of appearing in bare legs (Daily Mail 1897). They also heard more than was actually sung, but as Marie Lloyd (1897) explained:

They don't pay their sixpences and shillings at a music hall to hear the Salvation Army. If I was to try to sing healthy moral songs they would fire ginger beer bottles and beer mugs at me. I can't help it if people want to turn and twist my meanings.

Many men empathised with George Fairburne's rendition of 'I Haven't Told the Missus Up To Now', a tune published with a cover showing a balding man in a stage box looking through binoculars at a ballet dancer in a very short transparent tutu. The relevant lyrics claimed:

I'm a very strong admirer of the ballet and the play,
But I haven't told the missus up to now!
And to watch the fairies dancing I pass many an hour away,
But I haven't told the missus up to now!
When I see their graceful attitudes with love I'm burning hot,
And when the angels flap their wings, they mash me on the spot,
And I feel as if I'd like to go at once and kiss the lot,
But I haven't told the missus up to now! (Cornell)

Male complicity in preserving this sanctioned source of erotic entertainment was intense. The Middlesex magistrate whose verdict on St James's Hall (Piccadilly) reads 'Not guilty, but don't do it again' was in good company. Most fashionable West End restaurants and music halls considered the presence of appropriately dressed prostitutes to be an asset in advertising the establishment, drawing male
clients and increasing legitimate revenues; the coincidence of prostitutes and alcoholic drink attracted the attention of the moral majority, but the addition of sexually implicit performance in music halls guaranteed its wrath.

When male spectators had access to female performers, the erotic value was most intense. A Comic Singer With Daughters in the profession anonymously complained of this practice at the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties (Leicester Square):

If soliciting by women is illegal in front of the house why are the men well known for their seductive ways (the military officers as a rule) encouraged and brought behind the scenes to solicit and entice young girls to partake of supper, drives, &c. which means indirectly for an immoral purpose.

Distance loaned enchantment, but proximity was better. The situation had been known since the Restoration, but respectable Victorian managers claimed to put a stop to it. This comic singer asked a damning supplementary question: 'Why can paper and envelopes be obtained in the stalls and letters sent behind & taken by one of the attendants making appointments with the girls?' He pointed out that when 'young girls appear in fleshing tights only to represent the nude figure or bathing ladies [wear] a small gauze hung round the waist which could be plainly seen through thus making things more suggestive [than if there was] no extra covering around the loins [...] abdomen or posterior' it is no wonder that men were aroused, but the convenient provision of stationery and messengers unmistakably linked the dancers' costuming to spectators' arousal and sanctioned solicitation.

His concluding point, 'let us have a little propriety ... or is the Alhambra too powerful to be interfered with?' is important: the Alhambra's shareholders reaped generous dividends during this period, and the profiteers had no reason to give up a winning formula. Precisely the same complaints were made of the Alhambra ten years later.

Manuscript evidence suggests that the 1890s campaign against music halls was methodically conceived and executed, focusing on comic songs, balletic choreography, acrobatic sequences and tableaux vivants that inflamed desire and spawned solicitation. The arguments invariably rested on how women's bodies should or should not be represented in the public spaces of music halls. But however persistently the Victorian moral majority campaigned against West End music halls, it was never more than marginally and temporarily successful in expunging vulgar or indecent costumes, gestures, words and behaviours. Parallels with the moral majority's actions in recent times - whether through endorsing candidates, instructing voting constituencies, blockading abortion clinics, condemning nude art, restricting sexual freedom or otherwise judging the consequences of free expression - are potent. As the soldiery of the Right, the moral majority is still motivated to interfere whenever sexually implicit depictions gain public attention. Recent controversies over funding by the Arts Council of Great Britain, the USA's National Endowment for the Arts and Canadian Secretary of State demonstrate similar political agendas and sectarian participation. Attempts to restrict leisure choices still disturbingly bring together feminists critical of women's exploitation or objectification in performative situations and a moral majority searching for damning adjectives and causal relationships between performance and sexual immorality. Working against both, the forces of capital and politicians' self-interest perpetually exert greater influence than the force of reform.
Endnotes

1 Public Record Office (London), LC/1/185, letter from Robert Hume Lodge, 30 January 1867.
2 Sung by Macker. 'She'd a Black and Rolling Eye', written by G. Ware (London: [1863]).
3 LC/1/220, 28 January 1869.
4 Great London Record Office, LCC/MIN/10,803, verbatim testimony, 1889.
5 LCC/MIN/10,855, Inspector's Report, 30 December 1890.
6 This is consistent with closures earlier in the century. Penelope Summerfield notes that 'half of the proprietors refused licences between 1860 and 1864 had foreign surnames'. Immigrant communities posed problems for police, and this was one way of controlling their members. See 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire: Deliberate Selection in the Evolution of Music Hall in London', Popular Culture and Class Conflict: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure ed. Eileen and Stephen Yeo (Brighton: Harvester, 1981) p. 214.
7 The restaurant managed jointly with St James's Hall was synonymous with the open prostitution of Piccadilly Circus, yet the Middlesex Licensing Bench would not rule against granting it a drinking licence. LCC/MIN/10,899 March 1893.
8 LCC/MIN/10,870, Letter from Edward Webb, 7 March 1894.
9 Ibid.
10 LCC/MIN/10,870, Inspector's Report, 26 November 1893.
13 British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings, c.295 (foreign sculpture).
14 LCC/MIN/10,870, verbatim transcript, 10 October 1894.
15 Ibid.
16 LCC/MIN/10,870, verbatim testimony, 14 October 1894.
17 LCC/MIN/10,870, letter from W.A. Coote, 23 October 1894.
18 LCC/MIN/10,803, verbatim testimony, 1894.
19 LCC/MIN/10,803, verbatim testimony, 10 October 1894.
20 Ibid.
21 LCC/MIN/10,803, Letter, 15 October 1894.
22 LCC/MIN/10,868, Notice of Objection filed by Carina Reed, 29 September 1894.
23 LCC/MIN/10,868, 14 October 1894.
24 LCC/MIN/10,916, Letter, 24 November 1900.
25 LCC/MIN/10,828, Inspector's Report, 4 March 1897. Lyric of the song were subsequently requested by the Committee.
26 LCC/MIN/10,889, Carina Reed, 8 October 1896.
28 LCC/MIN/10,916, Inspector's Report, 18 May 1904.
29 LCC/MIN/10,899. This is in connection with an application to oppose the hall's drinking licence in March 1893.
30 LCC/MIN/10,769, Letter, 14 October 1899.
31 LCC/MIN/10,769, Letter from N.S. Parker, 5 January 1899.

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