

“A Bit of Woman in Every Man”: Creating Queer Community in Female Impersonation

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In 1939, two entrepreneurs named Doc Brenner and Danny Brown catapulted onto the entertainment scene when they produced the first version of the Jewel Box Revue at the Jewel Box club in Miami, Florida.¹ The production resembled other variety shows of the earlier vaudeville era. Their line-ups generally included a performing emcee, several singing starlets, some comedy skits, burlesque stripteases, and up to three large ensemble dance numbers. While the form of Brenner and Brown’s show was familiar to their audiences, the pair had added an innovation that managed to draw crowds beyond their expectations. Female impersonation had been present in vaudeville shows at the time, but it was constrained to single skits, which were deemed novelty acts. Brenner and Brown’s innovation was to build an entire traveling show around female impersonation. The cast was comprised mainly of men who would, with differing degrees of care and accuracy depending on their act, dress and carry themselves as women on stage. The Jewel Box Revue began to tour major American cities in the forties, and, by all accounts, the show was very popular. Jerry Ross, a performer who joined the Revue right after World War II, remembers that the lead singers “got rave reviews from everyone who saw

¹ Jewel Box Revue Program, n.d., Box 5, Kramer Initiative Transgender Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University.

the show.”² *Variety* is quoted on the back of a Jewel Box Revue program from the late fifties reporting the positive impact of the show’s popularity on Pittsburgh nightlife.

Doc and Danny’s Miami Beach ‘Jewel Box Revue’ at Balconades in Pittsburgh, has prompted a flock of other niteries around there to go in for female impersonator shows in effort to boost drooping trade. Biz has been terrific right from the beginning of the Jewel Box engagement, and has shown no let up in the more than eight weeks. If anything, it’s building every stanza.³

On the other side of the country, Frank Reid and Fred Coleman launched a similar enterprise on Seattle’s notoriously licentious First Avenue. Throughout the forties, businesses boomed in Seattle, which had been an important military port during World War II. Inspired by the model of Finocchio’s, a pioneering female impersonation cabaret that opened in San Francisco in 1937, Reid and Coleman capitalized on the city’s newfound vivacity, and, in 1946, they transformed a rundown Victorian-era hotel and former speakeasy into the Garden of Allah cabaret, Seattle’s premier female impersonation revue.⁴ The club’s opening night featured the Jewel Box Revue and quickly attracted not only the straight tourism that made Finocchio’s famous, but also local gay men and lesbians, a demographic that had not been particularly encouraged or protected at Finocchio’s.⁵

It is true that some members of the female impersonation industry feared and retaliated against the general association of sexual deviance (particularly homosexuality and transvestitism) with any sort of cross-dressing. Articulating a popular attitude, Sailor Orv Buerge recalled his surprised reaction to a female impersonation revue in 1934: “We just looked

² Jerry Ross, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 82.

³ *Variety* clipping, n.d., on back of Jewel Box Revue program, Box 5, Kramer Initiative Transgender Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University.

⁴ Finocchio’s program, 1950, Queer Music Heritage, <http://www.queermusicheritage.us/oct2002f.html>.

⁵ Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1-3.

at each other and walked out. We said, 'To hell with those queers.'"⁶ Theoretically, any homoerotic overtones or overtly queer performers would repel the straight public like Buerge that constituted a majority of their audience. However, this paper will argue that the atmospheres of queerness provided by these burgeoning female impersonation revues accounted for much of the appeal to straight audiences. Moreover, while the existence of the industry relied on a rhetoric that denied queerness, large-scale female impersonation revues were highly instrumental in creating queer communities and carving out queer niches of urban landscape in post-war America that would flourish into the sexual revolution of the sixties.

Female Impersonation and Normativity

Fostering queer communities was never the stated goal of these female impersonation establishments. Theoretically, their purpose was solely to provide wholesome entertainment, unconnected to any sexual deviance. According to the mission statement in the Jewel Box Revue program, Brenner and Brown had nothing but artistic aspirations for their venture.

"Recognizing that female impersonation is a true art, and not the burlesque it had come to be," the program claims, "they decided to bring back the glories of a neglected field in entertainment."⁷ Indeed, managers often took great care to hire extremely talented men to perform. Impersonator Jack "Jackie" Starr, a member of the Jewel Box Revue before the war and a headliner at the Garden of Allah for ten years after the war, was a man of many talents. Well-trained in acting, voice, and classical ballet, not only was Starr one of the age's only male

⁶ Orv Buege, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 9.

⁷ Jewel Box Revue program.

entertainers to dance *en pointe*, but he also had several stints as a fill-in for the famous uptown New York stripper Gypsy Rose Lee and with the Radio City Music Hall as a Rockette.⁸ Female impersonators have historically been eager to emphasize the very real skill of men such as Jack Starr. The spring 1968 issue of *Female Mimics*, a magazine about and for the female impersonators, is careful to remind their readers that impersonation is an art “perfected through hours and hours of arduous rehearsal.”⁹ This claim to artistry helped to legitimize for straight audiences an industry often stigmatized by an association with sexual deviance.

To further their claims to legitimacy, female impersonation revues often recalled famous historical examples of theatrical cross-dressing. The first issue of *He-She* magazine in 1966 asserted that female impersonation “existed nearly 6,000 years ago and has persisted despite public opposition or prejudice against this bizarre form of dress.”¹⁰ The Elizabethan tradition of men playing all theatrical female roles was frequently cited, as were more antiquated literary references to figures such as Achilles, whose mother dressed him as a girl to hide him from Odysseus, or Heracles, who was said to wear women’s clothing while serving Omphale, the queen of Lydia. So anxious were the female impersonators to root their trade in historical and artistic tradition that they occasionally indulged in some alarming historical sensationalism. “It is said,” reports Carlson Wade of *He-She* magazine, “that the virgin Queen Elizabeth I, daughter of Henry VIII was really a boy!”¹¹

This desire to find popular links to cross-dressing helped the female impersonators to craft allusions to contemporary popular culture as well. The performers found a lot to mimic in

⁸ Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 151-153.

⁹ “At Home with a Female Mimic,” *Female Mimics*, Spring 1968, 47.

¹⁰ Carlson Wade, “Men in Skirts,” *He-She*, 1966, 15.

¹¹ Carlson Wade, “Men in Skirts,” 8.

the new, glamorous Hollywood personas of stars like Katharine Hepburn, Grace Kelly, and Marilyn Monroe, celebrities familiar to any audience throughout the war and the postwar period. "Mimics will duplicate popular female stage, screen, or television stars," one article explains. "The interpretations are in good taste and seriously portrayed."¹² Mr. Lynne Carter, for example, was "famed for his impersonation of Pearl Bailey."¹³ Billy Parkin, an employee at the Garden of Allah, affectionately recalls that Billy DeVoe, impersonator and frequent emcee, was known as "The Blonde Lana Turner" based on his legs and style of dress.¹⁴ Frequently, however, these acts offered more of parodies or lampoons of Hollywood than perfect imitation. Jewel Box impersonator Gita Gilmore, for example, was well renowned for her Mae West imitation. It is clear from pictures, however, that Gilmore, though immaculately dressed, was rather heavysset and ostentatious in a way that would render an accurate impersonation impossible.¹⁵ Similarly, a 1974 issue of *Female Mimics* reports that comedian Jim Bailey had made his way to the top of the entertainment industry through "clever and biting impressions of Barbra Streisand and Phyllis Diller and a host of other female celebrities."¹⁶ This sort of social satire offers another legitimate function for the female impersonation revues that is entirely separate from any queer identity.

Indeed, divorcing the profession of female impersonation from queer identity was very important to many in the impersonation community. Many of these men had worked hard to get female impersonation to the new, lofty position it enjoyed in the nightclub entertainment

¹² Carlson Wade, "Men in Skirts," 59.

¹³ "The Jewel Box Revue," *Female Mimics*, 1963, 52.

¹⁴ Billy Parkin, interview in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 34.

¹⁵ Photo of Gita Gilmore, Jewel Box Revue photos, n.d., Box 66, Folder 6, Candida Scott Piel Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University.

¹⁶ "Editorial" in *Female Mimics*, 1974, 3.

circuit, and any association of extra-theatrical homosexuality or transvestitism could permanently damage the impersonators' ability to be taken seriously as artists or even to draw straight audiences. Plagued by this popular conception that "all mimics are homosexuals who want to be women,"¹⁷ even the famously gay-friendly Garden of Allah cabaret went so far as to hire a couple of off-duty police officers for every show in order to make sure that two patrons of the same sex did not touch each other in any way that could be considered erotic.¹⁸ It was crucial, in such a social atmosphere, to define female impersonation as a category apart from drag queens and transvestites, and the community forums of impersonation magazines like *Female Mimics* and *He-She* did their best to make this distinction clear. For example, a 1968 edition of *Female Mimics* contained several interviews with anonymous female impersonators expressing their masculinity. "I like being male," reports one. "I like the male role in sex...Maybe I'll get married and raise a family. Sounds strange, doesn't it? But many mimics are that way...Some are more masculine than those rugged he-men you see in the movies!"¹⁹ A letter to the editor of *He-She* from former female impersonator Terry Taylor toes a similar line when he makes a point of congratulating the magazine for having "shown the public a good view of the female impersonator, letting them know that this is an art of performance, rather than a way of life."²⁰ Virginia Prince, editor of *Femme Mirror*, a regular publication for femmiphiles (heterosexual men who present themselves as women to varying degrees), was also eager to mark the distinction, fearing that the association could be harmful to legitimate

¹⁷ "At Home with a Female Mimic," *Female Mimics*, Spring 1968, 48.

¹⁸ Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 14.

¹⁹ Anonymous, quoted in "At Home with a Female Mimic," *Female Mimics*, Spring 1968, 47.

²⁰ Terry Taylor, "Letter to the Editor," *He-She*, 1966, 55.

“femmiphiles” by encouraging men who weren’t professionals to try to pass themselves publicly as women.

The professional impersonator on the stage is 99 times out of 100 NOT an FP [femmiphile]. He may be beautiful and talented, but usually it is just a job he does...Feel your femininity, and express it, but do not impose it on society just to prove that you can, because with this attitude in mind, you will probably give yourself away.²¹

In some cases, female impersonators were so eager to distance the profession from a queer lifestyle that they adopted a homophobic attitude in some of their publications. One such example is a 1972 pamphlet, careful to draw a distinction between female impersonators and drag queens. In a reproachful tone, the anonymous author uses the drag queen, whom he or she has already established to be inherently homosexual, to make an implicit link between prostitution and homosexuality. “The Drag Queen, not being in show business where his talents of dressing and acting as a female could be profitable, and not only dressing in the clothes to calm his sensual desires will turn to ----prostitution.”²² A 1966 issue of *He-She* argues that female impersonators are so highly “trained in the art of deceptive make-up and feminine manner, they are a far cry from the barroom fag with his simpering ways.”²³ *Female Mimics*, too, refers to gay or transgendered men as “incomplete” or “mincing” males and reports, “these are a small percentage of the world of female mimics but their exaggerated behavior, their often outlandish gestures make them stand out and overshadow the normal percentage of female mimics who can be as masculine as prize fighters or wrestlers when out of costume.”²⁴ This aggressive

²¹ Virginia Prince, “A Word About Going Out,” *Femme Mirror*, March 1962, 1.

²² Anonymous, *The Drag Queen* (Seattle: Empathy Press, 1972).

²³ *He-She*, 1966, 3.

²⁴ “At Home with a Female Mimic,” *Female Mimics*, 48.

emphasis on the heterosexuality of female impersonators and their art demonstrates the extent to which the industry required protection from a nation languishing in a homophobia institutionalized by the McCarthy era. However, as the female impersonators themselves so often demonstrated, things are not always exactly what they claim to be, for, despite their public relations efforts, female impersonation revues constituted a very clearly queer space.

Building Queer Communities

First of all, the legitimizing heteronormative idea that these revues were fundamentally anchored in an ancient theatrical history of nonsexual cross-dressing is misleading at best. The most commonly cited example of this ancestry is Shakespearean cross-dressing. One Jewel Box Revue program asserted that, “Even Shakespeare originally created the role of Juliet to be played by a young MAN, not a woman.”²⁵ While it is true that men played all female roles in Elizabethan theater, that practice was a product of the period’s legal prohibition of women on the stage, more than of the desires of the playwrights or performers. Many of the historical examples are misleading as well. *He-She’s* “Men in Skirts” article features long segments on historical figures like Nero and the Abbé de Choisy, whom the article claims were female impersonators. Again, while there is general consensus among historians that these men dabbled in cross-dressing, it was almost certainly done for personal fulfillment rather than for any sort of commercial enterprise, which therefore brings their cross-dressing closer to transvestitism, defined in the same article as “yearn[ing] to wear feminine clothes throughout

²⁵ Jewel Box Revue program.

the day and not just for the purpose of entertainment.”²⁶ For one thing, the flimsiness of the hyped ancestry reveals how new this type of venue actually was, but, more importantly, this narrative woven by producers and magazines served as nothing more than a smokescreen to misdirect the industry’s newly created hive of homosexual, transvestite, and transgender activity.

While it is certainly true that many of the men involved in female impersonation were heterosexual and/or eventually settled into heterosexual lives, there is bountiful evidence to suggest that the promotional material and magazines that surrounded the industry gave gross underestimates of the inclusion of gay and transgender men in the female impersonation community. One of the features of the new impersonation shows that emerged during and after wartime was that, in many cases, these new cabarets and tours were owned and operated by gay entrepreneurs. Brenner and Brown, of the Jewel Box Revue, never revealed their sexualities in their own promotional material, but anecdotes and interviews reveal that they were a couple. To drive home this point, Jerry Ross reported that both Brenner and Brown’s mothers travelled with the show and that Mrs. Brown affectionately referred to her son as her little “faggilist.”²⁷ Still, as a stationary urban revue whose owners, Reid and Coleman, were openly gay, The Garden of Allah cabaret holds a more decisive place in history as the first openly gay-owned gay bar in Seattle and one of the first in the United States.²⁸

This is particularly important because it helped to foster a welcome environment for homosexual and transgender communities. At the end of World War II, when staggering

²⁶ Carlson Wade, “Men in Skirts,” 58.

²⁷ Jerry Ross, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 85.

²⁸ Preface, Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, xi.

numbers of released soldiers and sailors, some of them gay men and lesbians, returned to taste the social freedoms of newly accessible urban centers, gay communities were able to form with a new ease. The subsequent anti-homosexual reaction to this influx produced a frenzy of police raids and entrapment of homosexuals in bars all over the country, which in turn allowed the Mafia to get a hold on the gay bar/entertainment industry in cities like New York City and Chicago. With the Mafia came increased police corruption and exploitation of gay and lesbian customers.²⁹ Even nightclubs run by conspicuously heterosexual non-Mafia people like the notoriously cranky Finocchio family of San Francisco's club Finocchio's were not always considered to be gay-friendly. Robin Raye, an impersonator who performed at the Garden of Allah, Finocchio's, and The Jewel Box Revue at various times in his career, said of Mrs. Finocchio, "I don't think she liked gay people, but she certainly knew how to use them."³⁰

In addition to the owners of the clubs, many of the performers had some sort of queer or deviant leanings. In Don Paulson's collection of interviews with patrons and performers at the Garden of Allah cabaret, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, he establishes that many female impersonators were gay or bisexual, and several made up the first generation of candidates for modern sex-reassignment surgery. Jackie Starr, for example, was openly bisexual, had long-term relationships with both men and women, and fathered several children.³¹ In his interview with Paulson, Jewel Box Revue headliner Ricky Reynolds talks very candidly about his own scandalous homosexual relationship with an FBI agent and his experiences with fighting gay-

²⁹ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), 18.

³⁰ Robin Raye, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 121.

³¹ Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 153.

bashing.³² Countess Estelle, a Garden favorite and USO entertainer, discussed her transgender feelings with Paulson. "I've always wanted to have a sex change. Since I was five, I've felt more like a woman than like a man...I feel Countess Estelle is the real me."³³ Hardy comedienne impersonator Hotcha Hinton dressed as a woman both on and offstage and fought fiercely to be referred to as a woman. "If a telephone operator answered with 'Yes, Sir,'" friend and colleague Skippy LaRue recalled, "Hotcha would fly into a royal rage and scream into the phone, 'I'm a woman; can't you tell a lady when you hear one?'"³⁴ Lee Leonard, a Seattle-based female impersonator, went down in history by becoming Liz Lyons in his sixties making him one of the oldest people to have a sex change.³⁵ Almost all of Paulson's interviews reveal the Garden of Allah and similar cabarets to be atmospheres where forms of queerness were accepted and, to a certain degree, normal. Paulson goes so far as to say that all of the star impersonators at the Garden of Allah were gay.³⁶ Many of the interviews themselves read like coming-out stories, linking involvement with these female impersonation revues as the defining moment that pushed these men to self-discovery.

The new gay-run tours and clubs provided queer members of their cast, staff, and audience with a higher degree of personal comfort. Regular customer, Rita Kelsey, remembers the extent to which the Garden administration would protect from any homophobic influence. "[Frank Reid] tried to be neutral but the evenings were for the gay kids."³⁷ Garden Impersonator Mother Cabrini, whose anxiety over his homosexuality had driven him to drug

³² Ricky Reynolds, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 97.

³³ Countess Estelle, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 78-79.

³⁴ Skippy LaRue, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 149.

³⁵ Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 38.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

³⁷ Rita Kelsey, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 58.

addiction, also recalled the relative comfort of being gay in the Garden. "It was 'our place,' it was my place to find out who I was."³⁸ In the preface to *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, Paulson states that he believes the protection and affirmation that the gay-run Garden cabaret gave Seattle gay men and lesbians, as well as the performers, allowed important steps to be taken towards the creation of a greater urban LGBTQ community. "Being 'out' at the Garden in an oppressive time for gays and lesbians," Paulson claims, "was a giant step toward having the confidence to form political groups, challenge police authority, and pound on the doors at City Hall."³⁹ A gay community had carved a home for itself in the heart of the urban center in the shape of a gender-bending female impersonation club.

The revues were, at this point, in the awkward position of being very clearly and appealingly queer and dominated by gay men and lesbians. However, at the same time, their place in society relied on the idea of being nothing more than a slight twist on heterosexual nightlife. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to assume that the revues' unofficial, but palpably queer, aura did not constitute a significant amount of the appeal for the straight audiences that went to see the shows. "It was straight audiences that supported the [Jewel Box] Revue," asserted Jerry Ross, and much of the content of the shows consisted of very open homoerotic play with the audience.⁴⁰ Kim Drake, impersonator and emcee at the Garden of Allah, used to introduce the show with an acknowledgement of the club's reputation and of what the audience came for.

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. You know who you are, but all your reputations were ruined anyway the minute you walked down the stairs. So you

³⁸ Mother Cabrini, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 45.

³⁹ Preface, Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, xi-xii.

⁴⁰ Jerry Ross, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 81.

might as well sit back and relax and enjoy the show because we are going to enjoy it. Welcome to the gay, glamorous, gorgeous Garden of Allah where boys meet girls and sometimes you can't tell the difference.⁴¹

The punch line of any female impersonation act is, of course, that the ostensibly womanly figure performing is actually a man. While this is usually revealed at the end of the act, audiences who court this kind of entertainment are never really fooled by the illusion. Everyone in the club knows that the performers are men from beginning to end. Many of the performances like Gita Gilmore's Mae West impersonation did not even take great care to keep up the illusion. Harry, a *Female Mimics* cover girl, used his masculinity very heavily in his act, for example. "You'll notice," reports the magazine, "that he doesn't believe in hiding his manly hairy legs—and his make-up accents rather than hides his features."⁴² In such cases where the men so poorly resemble women, the straight audience can have no real doubt as to the sex of the performer.

Still, the acts, many of which include elaborate stripteases and raunchy burlesques, are intended to titillate the audience with a hint (or sometimes more) of homoeroticism that would be highly unacceptable outside of the cabaret. Drake offers an explanation of female impersonators' allure that is, indeed, entirely personal and even sexual. "They have the fantasy of it being a woman and all the tenderness and expertise a guy can give."⁴³ Danny Brown of the Jewel Box Revue comes very close to acknowledging this appeal explicitly in the Revue's program, when he says, "we appeal a lot to the intellectual who can understand this quirk in man's nature. There is a bit of woman in every man."⁴⁴ This knowing without acknowledging represents a sort of tourism for a straight audience, a way to explore homosexual or transgender

⁴¹ Kim Drake, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 104.

⁴² "Harry," *Female Mimics*, Spring 1968, 45.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Danny Brown, quoted in Jewel Box Revue program.

mental space while still hiding behind the idea that the audience is being tricked into thinking the performers are women.

This microcosm of straight voyeurism of the queer community is shown in larger scale in many American cities in this time period. In *Gay New York*, historian George Chauncey describes the emerging spectacle of gay street life in New York City during Prohibition and throughout the thirties. A highly visible street culture of drag balls and swishy queens constituted a brand new type of nightlife for straight and gay city-dwellers alike. Late-night cafeterias with plate-glass windows like Stewart's and the Life Cafeteria, both at Sheridan Square, would fill up with gay men, creating a show of camp for the straight patrons and passersby. Chauncey points out that these locations were even noted in tourism books like the *1939 WPA Guide to New York City* and suggests that showcasing the gay men was part of a business plan. "Cafeterias," the guidebook said, "seem to have premised their late-night operations on the assumption that by allowing lesbians and gay men to gather there they would attract sight-seers out to gawk at a late-night 'fairy hangout.'"⁴⁵

This sort of spectacle took a slightly more sinister form by way of circus sideshows. Hotcha Hinton, for example, would take annual leave from the Garden of Allah in order to travel with a circus. Skippy LaRue, Hotcha's friend and cohort, recalled some of the highly erotic X-rated shows that the impersonators would put on for men only. "We would be all tucked in and taped and it would appear to look like the real thing. By this time the men were so horny they'd believe anything."⁴⁶ Female impersonation of this sort is even more clearly

⁴⁵ George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 167.

⁴⁶ Skippy LaRue, quoted in Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah*, 133.

homoerotic, but at the same time mimicking a very clear heterosexual model of eroticism that makes it acceptable.

The public visibility aspect of female impersonation gives its importance another dimension to queer community. In addition to fostering a comfortable urban space in which young people could be out, large-scale shows, especially national tours like the Jewel Box Revue, had an almost educational function. By providing cities across America, however temporarily, with a visible and partially accepted queer community, the emergence of these revues during and after World War II helped many young gay and transgender men around the country self-actualize and empower themselves in the following decades. Both *Female Mimics* and *He-She*, which emerged in the sixties around the decline of many of the larger shows, revealed themselves to be interested in encouraging a new generation of men in using the female impersonators of the postwar era as a queer lifestyle model. Still unwilling (or unable) to explicitly refer to female impersonation as a mostly queer community, these magazines displayed their encouragement of transgender men or transvestites in their published letters to the editor. Most of the men whose letters were published described themselves as “amateur” female impersonators, and nearly all of them included pictures of themselves in usually everyday feminine attire to be published alongside their letter. These letters and pictures show no hint of glitter or performance, but rather average-looking men who have transformed themselves into average-looking women for what is almost certainly personal pleasure rather than commercial profit. One letter to *He-She* from a reader in Chicago illustrates the extent to which female impersonation and the publications that surround the industry have helped to bring together a national transvestite community:

I admire your courage in presenting the case for the transvestite to the general public. There are far more of us than is generally realized, but many of us don't realize that there are others with the same taste for changing roles as we possess. To know we are not alone is to improve our mental outlook.⁴⁷

The large-scale female impersonation revues of the postwar era, transitioning in the sixties from Vaudeville-type female impersonation shows to the lip-synching spectacles now called drag revues, had created queer communities that were able to subtly market their queerness while building confidence and identity from within. Even though they had to hide to a certain extent behind an official rhetoric of heteronormative entertainment, the appeal of many of these shows was the ability for straight audiences to peek safely into an alternative lifestyle. This also enabled urban, closeted gay men, lesbians, transgender men and women, and transvestites to view an exaggerated and campy refuge in the city where they could be out and find others like them. This hope extended into rural and suburban areas, where even hearing about a travelling troupe of female impersonators playing in big cities could be an affirming step towards self-discovery. In this way, large-scale drag revues during and immediately after World War II helped to expand queer communities and keep them focused on who they were in a time of institutionalized homophobia.

⁴⁷ R.K., "Letter to the Editor," *He-She*, 1966, 50.