

# Q&A with Andrew L. Erdman

## **YOU'VE WRITTEN EXTENSIVELY ABOUT VAUDEVILLE. WHAT WAS IT, EXACTLY?**

Like many pop culture terms, “vaudeville” encompasses quite a bit, from an aesthetic sensibility to an industry that organized entertainment for profit. Americans had long enjoyed a range of amusements—anything and everything from oddity exhibitions to opera singers.

Some vaudeville shows were continuous, pop in and out whenever you like. There were smalltime vaudeville theatres, venues for immigrant audiences, and vaudeville’s dark sister, burlesque, which had forked off from vaudeville and become a thing of its own.

I think the best way to describe vaudeville is this: it was a popular art form in which many different kinds of talents—and one had to use the word talent loosely sometimes—appeared in the same show under one roof. Of course, many were rather bawdy. Increasingly, shows were packaged and systematized in circuits across North America. At the same time, big business began creating vaudeville theatre chains, brands if you like, which promised family-friendly shows.

More than anything, vaudeville meant variation. Woodrow Wilson once famously said something like the best thing about vaudeville is if you don’t like what you’re watching, wait ten minutes. There’ll be something new. That is so fundamentally American, I think. Looking back on my childhood in the 1970s, I can see that variety shows like Carol Burnett, Sonny & Cher, and even later programs like Letterman all inherited a lot of vaudeville DNA.

## **HOW DID YOU GET INTERESTED IN DRAG ICON JULIAN ELTINGE?**

I first encountered Julian Eltinge while researching my last book about vaudeville queen Eva Tanguay. For publicity purposes, the two arranged a faux, gender-bending marriage. I feel this deep connection to late-1800s and early-1900s history, especially in New York City. The vaudeville halls, the immigrant Lower East Side, the horses pulling carts of coal and seltzer—it feels far away and evocative yet very personal and close.

I like to say I’ve longed to live in a New York I never knew. However, that’s not entirely true. My grandfather was born in a cold water tenement on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. When I was a kid, he used to take my brother and me to Coney Island. He’d talk about when he was our age, going to a theater and paying a dime for five hours of movies, cartoons, newsreels, cliffhanger serials, and maybe a magician or a ventriloquist somewhere in there.

He was such an example of the Horatio Alger American myth of “pulling yourself up,” which he did—though it helped that City College was free and his rent in Bushwick when my mother was born, in the 1930s, was thirty-six dollars a month. (I remember my grandma saying she was worried they wouldn’t be able to afford the forty-eight dollars a month for rent when they moved to Flatbush!)

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## DO YOU HAVE ANY PERSONAL CONNECTION TO DRAG?

I didn't think so. But recently it dawned on me that at the competitive, all-boys sports summer camp I attended for years, we crossdressed. The camp was run by a staunch anticommunist who used to regale us with stories of the Korean War so theatre, music, and crafts were marginal activities. But we put a lot of effort into our plays and musicals. We did *Arsenic and Old Lace* and *Brigadoon* among others. In all those productions, camp boys—no pun intended—played women's parts. Sometimes it resulted in a kind of crazy comedy with, say, a twelve-year-old boy in a dress playing a seventy-year-old woman. But I can also remember the kid who played one of the ingenues in *Brigadoon* and thinking how gentle, sensual, and, well, womanly he was.

It just reinforces how remarkably fluid our behaviors, attitudes, and wishes can be when the context changes. We saw it in World War One and Two. Drag of all kinds was completely normalized in troop shows. We're like the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* that spontaneously change sex when in a single-sex environment. It's not perverse. It's adaptive. We are much more creative and multifaceted than we think. This is apparently quite scary to some. I wish they'd seen our *Brigadoon* at summer camp.

## CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROCESS FOR *BEAUTIFUL*?

The archival work is such a joyful romp for a document nerd like me. You never know what you will find.

You can now explore archival materials electronically that were once only accessible in person. One good example is the Keith-Albee Archive of vaudeville managers' notes at the University of Iowa. It is a treasure trove of internal memos and notations from the managers of various theaters in the huge Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit. Venue managers had to watch every act and report back to the head office. The notes are short and straightforward so theatres would not waste time with unpopular or inappropriate acts.

To see how management perceived Eltinge and how he compared to the other acts on the bill, I looked at hundreds of entries from the years he first entered vaudeville (1905 - 1906). He was an immediate hit, generally an easy artist to work with, and genial to management. By comparison, many vaudevillians showed up drunk, refused to perform in a certain position on a bill, or told jokes too off-color for the time. Another discovery, contrary to his longstanding reputation, Julian Eltinge was quite popular with men in the audience not just the women who supposedly liked him for his fashionista appeal. Sometimes it's hilarious reading other entries like, "Newsy Russian Dance Troupe. Performed amazing feats. Audience loved them. One dancer nearly fell off the stage. 13 minutes."

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## RESEARCH PROCESS FOR *BEAUTIFUL* CONTINUED

I also visited wonderful archives, such as the Northport Historical Society on Long Island, near Julian's first country home in Fort Salonga.

Another crucial aspect of historical research involves getting a sense of what the culture at the time had to say about relevant concepts and ideas, such as gender, masculinity, style, and sex—all of which were changing. That means looking at newspapers, popular literature of the day, and scholarly work—for example, lengthy diatribes by psychologists on whether cross-dressing could make a man “effeminate”—all of which is fascinating.

Contemporary research is important to read as well. Books like George Chauncey's *Gay New York* and William Leach's *Land of Desire* (about the rise of retail culture in America) are two of my favorite scholarly works: brilliantly researched and accessible.

## WHAT DO YOU WANT READERS INTERESTED IN HISTORY AND OUR CURRENT CULTURE WARS TO TAKE AWAY FROM *BEAUTIFUL*

It's easy to say, “History repeats itself.” But as someone trained in historical methods, I know this ignores the complexities that come with different times and societies. While there have always been attacks on gender-nonconforming persons and practices, it doesn't mean they all occurred for the same reasons.

Researching Julian Eltinge and his time has been troubling and comforting. One thing I've learned is the almost predictable way in which elements of a preexisting dominant culture clamp down when they get spooked. Some degree of gender play and sexual freedoms were present through the 1920s—until the economic shit hit the fan, that is.

In the late 1920s, actress Mae West wrote some successful plays about sex, prostitution, and gay subculture. But her play, *The Drag*, was shut down by police, and Mae spent ten days in prison. The trials and press coverage revealed how anxious conservative authorities had become. These fears were weaponized and put into action by the “scientific thinking” of early 1900s sexology that allowed for people to be labeled “perverts” or “inverts” and thrown in a psych hospital by police.

The late teens and 1920s were similar to the 1960s and the 1990s—times of freedom and experimentation running up against conservatism.

So what we are seeing now is, in part, nothing new: same rote techniques, same targeted groups. But what I think is unique and cause for hope about our period is that the myth of “normal” or a return to “the good old days” is more seen for the patent myth or fantasy it is.

I do wonder if Julian Eltinge would have allied himself with centrism and conservatism. Or, would he have recognized how fragile and dysfunctional the system was, as many an artist and gender activist does today?