Book Reviews

Sisters of Salome. By TONI BENTLEY. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002. Pp. 240. $32.00 (cloth). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. Pp. 226. $16.95 (paper).

Toni Bentley's book *Sisters of Salome* raises a number of important questions, but they aren't related to the subject matter of the book. A former professional ballet dancer, performing at the top of her field with George Balanchine's New York City Ballet for a decade, Bentley is clearly a multitalented artist. She writes well. The book is very readable by a nonspecialist audience and well illustrated with photographs that make the descriptions of costumes and physical bodies of its four protagonists—Canadian dancer Maude Allen, Dutch performer and wrongly convicted spy Mata Hari, Russian dancer and actress Ida Rubinstein, and French actress and writer Colette—come alive. But graceful writing and good illustration can't illuminate the larger question raised by this book: Who is its audience, and why? And can such a crossover book really ever work?

The book focuses on the lives onstage and off of four well-known female performers who once dominated the theaters and society salons of Western Europe during the period from the turn of the century to the First World War. A heady political cocktail of the time mixed immigration, radical artistic shifts, and increasing pressure for women's suffrage and related changes in the public status of women. Using the popular image of the time of the femme fatale, the dangerous woman whose sexuality gave her power over men, Bentley unites these four women as exemplars of a wider social phenomenon. Each in her own way, she suggests, was a sister of Salome, the nubile seductress who traded access to her sexuality for revenge and power when she demanded that King Herod kill John the Baptist. The image of his bloody severed head delivered to her on a platter stands as an emblem for what Bentley terms "men's ideas, desires, and fears about the erotic woman . . . an archetype of the castrating woman [that] still thrives today" (19).

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Of the four, only Collette did not at some time in her career portray Salome, but even she performed her share of orientalized, slightly clad seductresses and in her life, Bentley argues, used her sexual power and physical beauty to attract and manipulate powerful men—and, at times, as a Sapphic Salome, powerful women. Underlying each life story is Bentley's contention that a feminist or protofeminist urge to claim sovereignty over one's own body, profession, and destiny drove these women to use the power of feminine seduction to gain their wider ends, questioning any sharp division between exhibitionism and power, "prostitution" and political savvy. They all "found stripping in some exotic manner to be a very attractive endeavor." As social rebels who rejected a middle-class model of wife and mother, each gained a public presence, even adulation, and, as Bentley put it, "did not seek liberation by doing the work of men but rather used the very suppression that had imprisoned them to free themselves . . . not by succumbing to men's fear of their sexuality, but by using it" (13).

The book unfolds as an illustration of this thesis, with evidence drawn from the life stories and performance histories of each stage persona. Blow-by-blow accounts trace the trajectories of these women from young to old, chronicling their loves and losses, their intrigues, their interpellation into high society, their always dangerous position as actress/dancer in danger of disrepute, and the political battles over "decency" raised by some of their material (like various versions of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*). Those who know Colette as a writer may find interesting material in Bentley's descriptions of her forays onto the stage as an actress in passionate embrace with her female cross-dressing lover. But overall the four main portions of the book, each devoted to one of the performers, read like a catalog of stage premieres and love affairs, scandals and successes, and the merging between all of the above. The narratives are entertaining enough in their retelling and are skillfully drawn, but the book raises the larger questions of just how an unacademic academic press book is to be received, and for whom is it intended?

First published by Yale University Press in 2002, the book was reissued in 2005 by the University of Nebraska Press. It received reviews in the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times*, which named it a "New York Times Notable Book," touting it titillatingly on the back cover blurb as being "as delicious and revealing as a Dance of the Seven Veils." *Booklist*, also on the back cover, declares: "This fascinating slice of popular culture will appeal to both social and dance historians." But I don't think so.

Sisters of Salome has some of the trappings of an academic book—a few footnotes for each chapter and a bibliography—along with an academic press pedigree, but it lacks the one defining criteria for academics: original research and original arguments. Recognizing that "original" usually means work built on and grounded in the work of others and not some autochthonous creation, we still demand not only a careful detailing of the contributions

of others but also more than a retreading of bits and pieces from other books. A glance at the footnotes reveals the almost total absence of any new research and an overabundance of "as quoted in" citations dependent on secondary sources. Even these are too few for the amount of information collected in the narratives. A brief thanks to the work of scholars who came before appears in the acknowledgments section but does not substitute for close engagement with and citation of that work, neither of which is foregrounded in the text.

So why is this book "notable," and why would *Booklist* anticipate that social and dance historians will find it useful? As for the notable part, I suspect it is the author who herself is notable and, having previously been part of the New York arts scene as a dancer, who continues to be so now as a writer and author of three other books. The introduction traces the author's curiosity about the power of striptease for the women who do it, detailing her own ultimately successful attempts to perform as a stripper in public and the resultant feeling of power. Drawing parallels between her work as a ballerina and that of professional strippers, she notes: "Partial, simulated, decorated, and disguised nudity is part of the appeal of a ballerina" (4). Returning the "male gaze" and sharing similarity of purpose, as she writes, she "knew what triumph felt like" as she performed a striptease dance at a New York City club, the Blue Angel, after retiring as a professional ballet dancer (11). This personal connection to a search for power through public wielding of sexuality aligns her with the four once well known performers in the book, her "sisters" from a century ago. It also sutures the celebrity of the author with the celebrities and sexuality she details in the book, layering her own appeal onto the book and theirs onto the author.

Aside from the draw of the celebrity factor among an artistic cognoscenti, the book may appeal to an educated elite with an interest in the stage but little knowledge of it or of feminist or sexuality studies scholarship. Historians and their students, though, will find little to engage them in the way of evidence or in new ground in arguments about women's lives or sexualities as experienced in the early part of the century. Marketed, I suspect, as a crossover book, the sort that can bring much-needed large print runs to academic presses, which always have little monetary margin, *Sisters of Salome* shows why that category is such a tough nut to crack. Lacking the coffee table glamour that its seductive visible possibilities might generate, lacking the publicity machine of a Knopf or Doubleday, and lacking the academic rigor expected of research in university press books, *Sisters of Salome* is an argument against academic cross-dressing. Unlike its heroines, who succeeded flamboyantly, *Sisters* fails to find its mark and misses its audience.

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