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# **Exploiting Ambiguity: *Murder!* and the Meanings of Cross-Dressing in Interwar British Cinema**

## **Abstract:**

The crime film *Murder!* (1930), directed by Alfred Hitchcock for British International Pictures, and based on the novel *Enter Sir John* (1929) by Clemence Dane and Helen Simpson, has long been cited in debates about the treatment of queer sexuality in Hitchcock's films. Central to these debates is the character of Handel Fane and the depiction of his cross-dressed appearances as a theatre and circus performer, which many critics have understood as a coded reference to homosexuality. This article explores such critical interpretations by situating *Murder!* more firmly in its historical context. In particular, it examines Fane's cross-dressed performances in relation to other cultural representations of men's cross-dressing in interwar Britain. These include examples from other British and American films, stories in the popular press and the publicity surrounding the aerial performer and female impersonator Barquette (Vander Clyde). The article argues that *Murder!* reflects and exploits a broader fascination with gender ambiguity in British popular culture, and that it anticipates the more insistent vilification of queer men in the decades after the Second World War.

## **Keywords:**

Alfred Hitchcock; British film; cross-dressing; queer film; queer history

## Introduction

*Murder!* (1930), a mystery-thriller directed by Alfred Hitchcock for British International Pictures, and co-written by Walter C. Mycroft and Alma Reville, was produced in the midst of the British cinema's transition to synchronised sound. The plot follows an amateur sleuth, the West End actor-manager Sir John Menier (Herbert Marshall), as he tries to prove the innocence of the beautiful but aloof stage actress Diana Baring (Norah Baring), who has been sentenced to death for killing Edna Druce, the leading lady in a theatrical touring company. The real murderer, as Sir John uncovers, is Handel Fane (Esmé Percy), Diana's fellow actor and would-be lover, who kills Edna ostensibly to prevent her revealing the secret that he is 'half-caste', or has 'black blood'. In the film's final act, Fane, who has now returned to his former job in the circus, where he performs an aerial act dressed as a woman, kills himself, confessing the details of his crime in a suicide note addressed to Sir John. Released from prison, Diana joins Sir John as the co-star in his latest production and, it is implied, his future wife.

As one of Hitchcock's most celebrated early talkies, *Murder!* has attracted considerable critical attention. Much of this attention has focussed on the character of Handel Fane, with a fairly broad agreement among critics that Fane's cross-dressing is a necessarily coded reference to the character's homosexuality, designed to get around restrictive censorship regimes and social taboos. In their influential 1957 study of Hitchcock's oeuvre, Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol asserted that Fane's cross-dressing, as one of the 'many feminine tics' given to the character, indicates that his real secret is not that he is 'half-caste', but that he is 'a sexual half-breed, a homosexual' (1979: 27). This was also the line of argument that François Truffaut put to Hitchcock when he interviewed him in 1962, arguing that the film was 'a thinly dis-

guised story about homosexuality'. Hitchcock, for his part, did not deny this interpretation, but neither did he elaborate upon it, choosing instead to point out the film's literary allusions (1984: 75).

Subsequent scholars have revised this critical account, taking earlier writers to task for tacitly or explicitly endorsing the view of homosexuality as a 'problem' or a 'perversion', but largely supporting the idea that Fane's cross-dressing should be seen as a proxy for queerness. With the rise of lesbian and gay film criticism, and the growing objections to cinema's role in perpetuating harmful cultural stereotypes, *Murder!* became part of a long-running debate about 'Hitchcock's homophobia'. In this debate, the character of Fane was frequently grouped with Mrs Danvers in *Rebecca* (1940), Brandon and Phillip in *Rope* (1948) and Bruno Anthony in *Strangers on a Train* (1951) as one of the director's many 'murderous gays' (Hepworth 1995; Wood 1995; Swaab 1995; Doty 2011).

With some exceptions, the debate about whether Handel Fane belongs to the canon of Hitchcock's queer killers, and whether this is indicative of larger homophobic trends in the director's work, has tended to obscure the specific national and historical context in which *Murder!* was made.

<sup>1</sup> In particular, there has been almost no discussion of how the film's depiction of Fane and his cross-dressed staged routines relates to other contemporary portrayals of cross-dressing produced at the time, either in films or elsewhere in popular culture. This article addresses that gap by examining Fane's cross-dressed performances alongside similar examples from British and American cinema, as well as in relation to the real-life aerial performer Barquette. The film's allusions to Barquette were remarked upon at the time and have been noted since by at least one of Hitchcock's biographers (McGilligan 2003: 134), although they have not yet been examined in detail.

An examination of *Murder!* in light of other representations of cross-dressing in interwar culture benefits from recent historical scholarship on the topic. Historians of interwar Britain have now amassed a wealth of evidence to show how narratives and images of cross-dressing developed during the period, and how they intersected with beliefs about gender and sexuality. These include ideas about same-sex desire and early articulations of transgender subjectivity (see Oram 2006; Sigel 2012: 125–51). Historical research has unearthed examples from British theatre and music hall, but also from the popular press, where stories of men ‘masquerading’ as women or women ‘posing’ as men proliferated. The 1930s have emerged as a crucial moment in these histories, in which, as Alison Oram writes, ‘[t]he presentation of men’s “masquerading” as entertaining and theatrical more or less ceased’, and instead ‘increasingly became code for sexual offences which could not be directly named’ (2007: 82). Oram is writing specifically about British newspaper coverage of men found to be dressing as women on the street, in nightclubs or at private parties. But this assessment also has implications for representations of cross-dressing in films of the period, especially those, like *Murder!*, that tell stories of crime and deception.

This article argues that the depiction of Handel Fane in *Murder!* encodes some of the competing meanings ascribed to men’s cross-dressing in interwar Britain. On the one hand, it continues the tradition of portraying cross-dressing as a harmless ‘masquerade’, with strong links to theatrical performance. On the other hand, it presents cross-dressing as a more troubling form of disguise that threatens to undermine conventional categories of masculinity and femininity. In this respect, *Murder!* not only expresses the cultural fascination with gender-crossing in interwar Britain, but it also reflects a preoccupation with themes of disguise and ‘faking it’ that would be-

come prevalent in the British cinema of the 1930s. Against the background of growing concern in some quarters about the sexualised meanings of men's cross-dressing, feminine disguises could also be seen as evidence of sexual immorality or dangerous psychological imbalance. While this association would become more prevalent in British popular culture after the Second World War, *Murder!* suggests that the vilification of queer men was already well under way before this point, and that the cinema, as well as the tabloid press, played an important part in the process of shifting public attitudes.

### Enter Handel Fane

Handel Fane's cross-dressed performances in *Murder!* were an addition to the screenplay when it was adapted by Hitchcock, Mycroft and Reville from Clemence Dane and Helen Simpson's 1929 detective novel, *Enter Sir John*. In the novel, Fane is presented in terms that emphasise his identity as a 'half-caste'. His position as an outsider comes not only from his mixed-heritage background (his mother is referred to as 'Eurasian'), but also from his physical appearance, including his skin colour. When the character is first introduced, he is 'the shy, dark-skinned Handell [*sic*] Fane' (29), and he is later described in more detail as 'tall, olive-skinned, black-haired, with deep eyes under a good brow; a straight nose with flaring nostrils, flushed cheek-bones, and a full well-cut mouth' (61). Although his ethnicity in the novel is a secret, it is something that Martella Baring, the woman falsely accused of murder (renamed Diana for the film) is apparently able to recognise because of her upbringing in colonial India. At times, the narrative goes some way to expressing sympathy with Fane's plight as a racialised 'other', suggesting that some of his behaviour can be explained

by a feeling of alienation, and allowing him to escape at the end of the story. But it also strongly implies that Fane is physically incapable of behaving in the controlled, phlegmatic manner of the novel's hero, Sir John, meaning that he will never be accepted by 'respectable' British society.

In comparison with Dane and Simpson's narrative, *Murder!* is less explicitly concerned with Fane's status as a 'half-caste', and more interested in the character's 'ambiguous masculine-feminine identity' (Allen 2004/2005: 117). In a departure from the novel, in which Fane first appears anxiously waiting for news of the police investigation the morning after the murder, Fane's on-screen debut takes place as the theatre company are midway through that evening's performance. In a further change, Fane is first shown playing a cross-dressed role (Figure 1). His initial appearance thus sets the scene for his more elaborate cross-dressed circus routine later in the film. As Richard Allen notes, it is also strangely sinister. Played by Esmé Percy, Fane walks 'menacingly towards the camera' in a pose that, for Allen, suggests the 'defiant effrontery of Fane's drag performance' (2004/2005: 119). [FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.]

In many ways, Esmé Percy was an odd casting choice to play the part of a villain in a crime film. At this point in his career, he was best known as a stage actor, and was closely associated with the work of George Bernard Shaw, not least through his role as general producer of Charles Macdona's Bernard Shaw Repertory Company (*The Stage* 1957). He had, however, played several cross-dressing parts in the theatre, including an early role as Pentheus in the Greek tragedy *The Bacchae*, causing one reviewer to lament his decision 'to put on a piping voice and a mincing gait when Pentheus was dressed as a woman',<sup>2</sup> and in a production of a one-act farce by Shaw, in which the male leads all played female characters (*The Era* 1929). Reviewing Percy's

first film appearance in *Murder!*, James Agate (1930) also remembered his ‘extraordinary performance of the Russian Countess’ in Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell’s 1927 play *All at Sea*.

While Percy had some experience of playing cross-dressed roles prior to appearing as Handel Fane, the kind of play being performed by the touring company in *Murder!* is a far cry from the theatrical modernism with which Percy was most associated. The brief glimpses of the action that we see from the wings belong more to a tradition of broad farce, in which cross-dressing forms part of a pattern of mistaken identities and comic misunderstandings. As the police try to investigate Edna’s murder, the actors chase each other on and off the stage, swap clothes and tie each other up, all to gales of laughter from the off-screen audience.

To contemporary film-goers, these scenes may have suggested the fast-paced stage farces of Ben Travers, associated with the Aldwych Theatre in London. At the time that *Murder!* was being made, and in the rush for suitable material for sound films, several Aldwych farces were already making their way onto the screen, beginning with the enormously popular *Rookery Nook* early in 1930 (Sutton 2000: 157–64). Drawing on plays such as the Aldwych farces, later British films regularly deployed scenes of men’s cross-dressing for comic effect. Gordon Harker, for instance, can be seen disguising himself in outfits from the ladies’ section of a department store during a chase sequence in the musical *Love on Wheels* (1932). George Lacy plays a struggling actor who poses as the Duchess of Stonehenge in the comedy *Oh! What a Duchess* (1934). The comedian Sydney Howard also appears in drag in *Girls, Please* (1934), when he fills in for the headmistress of a boarding school (fitting in a brief Mae West impersonation), and Robertson Hare, a stalwart of the Aldwych team, dresses in women’s clothes as part of a complicated scheme to save his character’s



reputation in *Aren't Men Beasts* (1937). For some critics of British cinema, it seemed that filmmakers were using cross-dressing in the service of farce and slapstick so often by this point that such scenes had become emblematic of what they saw as the derivative nature of the so-called 'quota quickies', or second-feature films, of the 1930s. In 1937, a writer for *World Film News* complained that the 'mirthful *piece de resistance*' of the average British 'quota' comedy was 'the spectacle of the hero dressing up as a woman'. While this comment speaks to a highbrow disdain for forms of 'low' humour, it also suggests the persistence of the farce tradition in British cinema and its popularity with audiences.

#### 'The female impersonator man'

In *Murder!*, the farcical scenes taking place on stage offer an ironic commentary on the main action, which similarly involves mistaken identity and disguise. The backstage sequence also introduces the motif of doubling, which plays an important part in the narrative. In the trial that follows, the core of the defence's argument is that the stresses of stage life have produced in Diana a 'dual personality'. She is innocent, it is argued, because she killed Edna during a 'dissociative fugue', in which she effectively became two different people: one 'violent and cruel', as a juror explains, and the other 'just an ordinary woman'. The actors in the touring company likewise 'evince split personalities', Patrick McGilligan notes: 'they show one face while being questioned by police, then break off in midsentence and race onstage in character' (2003: 134). In the case of Fane, this dual nature has a racial and, potentially, a sexual dimension, as well as having implications for the central mystery narrative. Percy's

high-pitched delivery, a source of discomfort for his early theatrical reviewers, becomes an important plot point in *Murder!*, when it transpires that a key witness mistook Fane's voice for a woman's.

Curiously, although Fane seems to be one of at least two male actors in the theatre company who dress in women's clothes in the course of the play-within-the-film, we are led to believe that Fane alone specialises in such roles. Later, during the jury's deliberations, and apparently on the strength of the evidence given in court, Sir John remembers Fane as 'the female impersonator man'. The language he uses is odd, not only because Fane's position in the company is described by the stage manager, Ted Markham (Edward Chapman), as leading man, but also because the term 'female impersonator' was one associated primarily with music hall, variety or revue, rather than theatrical farce. British female impersonators in the 1920s, like Bert Errol, Jimmy Slater and Dougie Harris, performed songs, dance routines and comic sketches in drag and sometimes appeared as dames in pantomime, but they rarely acted in stage plays (Gray 2004; Baker 1994: 194–5). Cinema audiences at the start of 1930 were able to see numerous examples of this tradition in the film *Splinters* (1929), adapted from the stage shows of a successful 'concert party' formed during the First World War, including a notable turn from the company's leading female impersonator, Reg Stone, singing in drag for appreciative troops (see Bloomfield 2018). The lavish Gaumont-British musical *First a Girl* (1935), starring Jessie Matthews as a woman pretending to be the glamorous female impersonator 'Victoria', also alludes to the music hall tradition.

While the misuse of the term 'female impersonator' to describe Fane may be a slip of the scriptwriters' pen, or else a deliberate way of showing how out of touch Sir

John is with the world beyond his West End bubble, it also has the effect of firmly associating Fane with cross-dressing and femininity from the outset.<sup>3</sup> For some viewers, this alone may have suggested a troubling effeminacy. Although cross-dressing had long been a fixture of British theatrical comedy and music hall, there were also people who viewed it with suspicion, including stage censors. Commenting on a script involving cross-dressing that landed on his desk in 1932, a reader in the Lord Chamberlain's Office (tasked with overseeing the licensing of stage plays) commented that '[a] man dressed up as a woman is always more or less offensive', especially when that man 'really puts on feminine airs'. Although, in this instance, the reader thought that the play's authors 'had no intention of suggesting the homosexual idea', or that audiences would 'read anything of that sort into the play', his comments clearly suggest that such performances were open to queer interpretations (Nicholson 2003: 220–1).

The example from the Lord Chamberlain's Office also reveals the censors' belief in a stratified audience, in which some 'knowing' play-goers would read sexual meanings into theatrical cross-dressing, while others would not. This is similar to the thinking among Hollywood censors at the time, in their attempts to develop a system of censorship that would allow films to be produced 'from which conclusions might be drawn by the sophisticated mind, but which would mean nothing to the unsophisticated and the inexperienced' (Maltby 1995: 40). There are no surviving British censorship records for *Murder!*, although, as the film's subsequent critical history has shown, it has also proved available to 'knowing' queer readings from subsequent viewers. To some extent, Fane's early cross-dressed appearance in the film invites such a response, framed as it is by darkly comic dialogue, which, as Allen suggests, hints at Fane's ambiguous identity (2004/2005: 119). When he first sees Fane, the po-

lice inspector mistakes him for one of the female members of the company. Correcting him, Markham explains that Fane is their leading man and ‘a 100% he-woman’. Fane also reassures the inspector, ironically, that he is ‘not the other woman in the case’.

‘Extremely clever way of hiding’

Although some film-goers may have viewed theatrical drag performances with suspicion, Fane’s first appearance in *Murder!* associates cross-dressing primarily with the world of stage entertainment and harmless masquerade. Following this first appearance, the character remains off screen for much of the central part of the film. His revelation as the real killer of Edna Druce, in a tense scene between Sir John and the imprisoned Diana, sets the narrative off on a new trajectory, focussed on whether or not the amateur detective will successfully locate Fane and extract a confession.

The second time we see Fane in person, albeit fleetingly, comes soon after the prison scene, when Sir John and Markham, who has now taken on the role of detective’s sidekick, track Fane down to a circus, where he is performing in an aerial act. Although the film does not yet show the act in detail, the dialogue makes clear that it involves cross-dressing, with Markham reminding Sir John that Fane was always good at dressing as a woman. As with Fane’s initial on-screen appearance, the portrayal of his aerial routine differs significantly from Dane and Simpson’s description in *Enter Sir John*. In the novel, Fane is found not in a circus but in a suburban music hall, where he is performing with a Jewish acrobat as one half of an act called the Saltarelli brothers. Wearing heavy make-up to look ‘grotesque’, like a clown, Fane

serves as the comic foil in the double act, getting his stunts wrong on purpose, perhaps, Markham thinks, because he is no longer capable of performing ‘the straight stuff’ (1929: 231–3).

The decision to substitute the novel’s pathetic acrobatic act for a more dramatic cross-dressed aerial routine in the film extends Fane’s role as a professional female impersonator. Once again, Sir John’s response to the situation is odd: ‘Extremely clever way of hiding’, he notes, as he watches Fane’s performance. As Peter Swaab (1995: 20) has pointed out, Fane’s role as a cross-dressing trapeze artist, performing in front of a crowd of people, is surely a very public way to hide. However, Sir John’s comment works to associate Fane even more closely with secrecy and criminality. In particular, it links the character’s cross-dressing to other stories circulating in British popular culture between the wars in which men disguised themselves as women in order to escape detection or for more ambiguous and potentially sexual purposes.

Stories involving cross-dressing disguises were particularly popular in the interwar press. Often, such stories were presented as novelty items, and the behaviour of the people involved was explained away as a prank that had gone too far. An item in *The Times* from 1920, for instance, reported on the case of Charles Steele, arrested while staying at a hotel under the name Frances Laura Steele, who had supposedly ‘made a bet with a man in a train [...] that I could masquerade as a woman at any hotel without being detected’.<sup>4</sup> Newspaper articles like this one rarely questioned such explanations, and they seldom explained why men found to be ‘masquerading’ as women were arrested in the first place (usually on suspicion of prostitution, or ‘importuning for immoral purposes’ [McLaren 1997: 214]). But, by the 1930s, some press reports of criminal cases involving cross-dressed men were starting to give more

space to the remarks of magistrates and judges, who spoke about the men involved as immoral or perverted. A police raid on a drag ball at a house in Notting Hill in 1932, which resulted in 27 men receiving prison sentences, produced copious news items and editorials in the press. In these accounts, journalists revealed that the men's 'scandalous' behaviour at such private parties was not only confined to dressing in women's clothes and cosmetics and calling each other by feminine names, but also extended to dancing together and 'kissing and hugging' (*Illustrated Police News* 1932, 1933). Some newspapers also hinted more insistently at queer sexual activity between men, mentioning police descriptions of events 'taking place behind screens and in the garden', or noting that 'at times the lights were put out', while 'couples danced disgracefully'.<sup>5</sup>

*Murder!* was produced before the most scandalous cross-dressing cases of the interwar years. But, by 1930, some newspapers had already started to report on men's cross-dressing in sensational terms. A notable story at the start of the year, which was written about widely in the provincial and national press, concerned 21-year-old Austin or Augustine Hull, commonly known as Cissie, who appeared in court in Brighton on charges of theft. The court heard how Hull had been 'masquerading' as a woman, and had left a series of lodging houses without paying. Newspapers wrote in detail about the clothes Hull was wearing at the time of the arrest, with headlines such as 'Man's Pose as Woman', 'Court Story of Amazing Masquerade', 'Feminine Voice and Clothes', 'Man Dressed in Skirts' and 'Tiger-Skin Coat & Silk Stockings'.<sup>6</sup>

As Angus McLaren (1997: 207–31) has shown, Hull became the subject of a much more high-profile case the following year, when a man called George Burrows claimed that Hull had been living with him, under false pretences, as his wife. Hull

was then arrested and brought to trial for committing gross indecency, or criminal homosexual activity. The trial was sensational partly because the judge forced Hull to appear in the dock dressed in female ‘disguise’. But it also attracted the attention of British sexologists, who subsequently campaigned for Hull to receive medical treatment, rather than time in prison, on the grounds that s/he was a congenital ‘invert’ (that is, born physically male but with a female personality) and not a ‘pervert’. Hull’s 1930 case did not elicit the same kind of public response, although several newspapers quoted Hull’s mother, who explained to the court that her son had always wanted to be a girl.<sup>7</sup> Newspaper stories like these suggest the fascination with narratives of gender-crossing in the British popular press between the wars and point to the wide range of interpretations that media representations of men’s cross-dressing could elicit.

#### Cinematic disguises and ‘faking it’

Prior to *Murder!*, filmmakers also produced their own narratives linking cross-dressing disguises to criminality, although they rarely questioned the psychology of the characters involved. Stories of escaped convicts dressing as women to avoid capture go back to some of the earliest fiction films. British crime films such as the Hepworth company’s *The ‘Lady’ Thief and the Baffled Bobby* (1903) and *The Interrupted Honeymoon* (1905) presented sympathetic portrayals of quick-witted male criminals, who used their resourcefulness to outsmart the authorities by adopting feminine disguises (see O’Rourke forthcoming). A notable interwar reworking of this motif can be seen in the American feature film *The Unholy Three* (1925), directed by Tod Browning for MGM. Beginning in the world of the carnival sideshow, the film centres on

the ventriloquist and small-time crook Echo, played by Lon Chaney, who goes into hiding from the law by disguising himself as Mrs O'Grady, the elderly owner of a bird shop, alongside his accomplices Hercules and Tweedledee, who disguise themselves as Mrs O'Grady's son-in-law and grandson, respectively. Chaney spends much of the film in costume as Mrs O'Grady, and he is often shown changing quickly in and out of his disguise in a way that emphasises both the character's ingenuity and the star's actorly skill in transforming his appearance.

It seems highly likely that *The Unholy Three* was a direct influence on the makers of *Murder!*. The 1925 version was well received by reviewers in Britain, and Chaney's performance was especially highly praised for its realism, in spite of the film's outlandish premise (*The Bioscope* 1925). A sound remake of *The Unholy Three*, directed by Jack Conway, with Chaney once again in the lead, was being made while *Murder!* was in production (in fact, the two films were given British trade shows in the same week), and it was released in September 1930 to favourable reviews, made poignant by Chaney's death just weeks earlier (*The Bioscope* 1930).<sup>8</sup> It is entirely possible that Hitchcock and his collaborators had seen the silent version of the film, and they may have even known about the upcoming talkie remake.<sup>9</sup> Compared to Chaney's character, Handel Fane in *Murder!* is a much more isolated figure. Rather than going undercover with a criminal gang of outcasts, as Echo does, he performs his aerial routine alone. This potentially makes him more sympathetic to audiences, but it also makes him more enigmatic. Like the subjects of contemporary newspaper stories, Fane is presented as a criminal, but the motives behind his decision to adopt a cross-dressed disguise remain obscure for much of the film.

In the context of British cinema, *Murder!* also contributes to a preoccupation with forms of masquerading and 'faking it' that would become prevalent during the



1930s. As discussed by Steve Chibnall (2007: 112–13) and Lawrence Napper (2009: 148–9, 167–8), British films of this decade abound with examples of characters adopting new personas in order to traverse class boundaries, often with the intention of moving ‘up’ in society, in ways made possible by the advent of a new, less class-dependent commercial culture. As Chibnall notes, such ‘social masquerades’ often overlap in films with ‘gender masquerade’ to create complicated and sometimes tangled plots (2007: 97).

A good example of how the interest in ‘faking it’ intersected with concerns about cross-dressing disguises, and which also suggests the influence of both *Murder!* and *The Unholy Three* on later filmmakers, is the British crime film *Hotel Splendide* (1932), an early directorial effort from Michael Powell. The convoluted plot involves a man who inherits a failing hotel, which happens to be built on a patch of land previously used by a criminal gang as the hiding place for a valuable pearl necklace stolen years earlier. Among the hotel guests is the ringleader of the gang, ‘Pussy’ Saunders (played by Anthony Holles), in disguise as the elderly invalid Mrs LeGrange. There are obvious parallels between Holles’s appearance and mannerisms as Mrs LeGrange and Chaney’s Mrs O’Grady. However, the film withholds the revelation of Mrs LeGrange’s real identity for much of its running time, focussing attention less on actorly ingenuity and more on the uncertainty surrounding the elderly guest’s real motives. When it finally comes, the unmasking triggers a dizzying number of revelations from other guests who are not what they seem, ending with Pussy’s arrest at the hands of undercover detectives.

Powell’s ‘quota’ crime film takes the idea of masquerade to extreme, almost parodic lengths. In common with *Murder!*, it associates cross-dressing firmly with se-

crecy and criminality, although here the criminal's intention is to pass as part of respectable society, or at least to blend into the larger cast of eccentric characters. Understood in figurative terms, the idea of 'passing' in this way could have had resonances for queer viewers at a time when, as Ryan Linkof (2014: 122) notes, with reference to Brian Desmond Hurst's crime drama *Sensation* (1936), issues of 'exposure, revelation, privacy, and criminality' were central components of queer identity for many homosexual men. As critical accounts of *Murder!* have shown, Fane's cross-dressing disguise can also be thought of in relation to epistemologies of the closet. Fane's disguise differs from that of Pussy Saunders, though, in that it remains more sporadic, being adopted as part of a theatrical routine rather than in everyday life. As the film's later depiction of Fane's circus routine demonstrates, his disguise is also much more spectacular, complicating the notion of cross-dressing as a way of concealing something that the character would prefer to remain hidden.

#### 'Claudette, the mystery woman'

After Sir John and Markham have tracked down Fane to the circus, the character once again becomes central to the film. In a reworking of the 'Mousetrap' scene in *Hamlet*, Sir John attempts to trick Fane into confessing his crime by having him audition for a part in what turns out to be a dramatisation of the events leading up to Edna's murder. This is also the only time that the film presents Fane out of drag for an extended period. Esmé Percy's performance emphasises Fane's barely concealed fear of being found out, and draws attention to small details of dress, such as his leather gloves, the ornate walking cane he carries and the gold ring on his little finger, which he nervously plays with as he converses with Sir John (Figure 2). For Allen (2004/2005: 94–

5), these same details mark Fane as a fashion-conscious dandy, which in the popular imagination of the interwar years, he argues, carried connotations of decadence and perversity, via an association with the queer figure of Oscar Wilde. Whether these cues would have been meaningful to contemporary cinema audiences is debatable. For instance, compared to some of the ‘pansy’ characters appearing in Hollywood films of the early 1930s, Fane’s dandyism in this scene is notably subdued. But, in an era in which, as Justin Bengry (2009: 140) notes, the conventions surrounding men’s fashion were particularly conservative, any divergence from the norm may still have been seen by some viewers as effeminate and, potentially, sexually suspect. [FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE.]

Fane’s next and last appearance in *Murder!* is much more visually flamboyant. Not only does it show Fane’s circus act in more detail, but it also contains some of the film’s most expressionist touches, including shots taken from Fane’s perspective as he swings on the trapeze and imagines the accusing faces of Sir John and Diana, until finally he hangs himself in the middle of the circus ring. There are no precedents for this part of the film in *Enter Sir John*. Instead, the novel culminates in a car chase through London and a last-minute escape for Fane through a police station window and away down the Thames. There was, however, a real-life precedent for Fane’s cross-dressed trapeze routine in the figure of the American performer Vander Clyde, known to interwar audiences as Barbette (Figure 3).

Performing exclusively as Barbette, Clyde was famous across Europe and America between the wars. Originally from Texas, and trained as a cross-dressed aerialist in the circus, he later made the move into vaudeville, where he developed a successful solo act. Under contract with the prestigious William Morris agency, Clyde left America for Europe in 1923, first performing in Britain, then Paris, and for the

next decade he returned to Europe every year, continuing to work on the American vaudeville circuit in between tours (Jeffreys 2004). Clyde's biggest success in the 1920s came in France, where he was celebrated by Parisian intellectuals and artists, notably Jean Cocteau, who wrote an essay in praise of Barbette and commissioned the photographer Man Ray to take a series of portraits documenting Clyde's transformation from a muscular young man to a glamorous woman (Damase 1980). Cocteau also cast Clyde (as Barbette) in a brief cameo in his 1930 film *Le Sang d'un Poete* (*The Blood of a Poet*). [FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE.]

For Cocteau and his followers, what was special about the Barbette act was not only the confidence with which Clyde performed as an aerialist, but also the act's blurring of gendered identities. On the one hand, Barbette's appearance on stage in a diaphanous skirt, a cape adorned with ostrich feathers, blonde hair and pink tights emphasised femininity. Yet, Barbette also displayed a physical strength that, in Cocteau's view, went beyond what was expected of a female performer. For many French commentators, this androgyny represented an ideal kind of beauty, reflecting trends in modern fashion, as well as suggesting a temporary escape from conventional gender roles (Lyford 2007: 165–83).

Although Clyde toured Britain regularly until the early 1930s, he does not seem to have become as famous on that side of the Channel, nor did the Barbette act elicit the same level of theorisation among British intellectuals. Nevertheless, Clyde's performances in Britain were widely advertised in the press, and they clearly made a strong impression on those who saw them. Frank Foster, a ringmaster with Bertram Mills' Circus, offered a detailed description of Barbette's appearance at London's Olympia during the 1926–1927 season. The act began with what Foster (1948: 118) called 'surely the most imposing entrance ever devised for a performer' at the venue,

in which Barbette appeared at the top of a wide, carpeted staircase lit from beneath with pink lights and illuminated from above with spotlights. Foster's description continues:

The audience saw a beautiful and glamorous girl [...] ravishingly dressed. Barbette descended the stairs, the spangled train of her dress sweeping behind. In the ring, Barbette made a delightful feminine curtsy and the train was handed to a female attendant. Then Barbette sat on a *chaise longue*, the dress was slipped off, silken hose gracefully unrolled from lovely legs, shoes removed. Standing erect in trunks and brassière, Barbette appeared the embodiment of feminine beauty. (1948: 118)

After this carefully choreographed and sexually provocative prelude, Barbette proceeded to perform on the tight-wire, ending with ballet movements, then changed to the trapeze and the flying rings. Clyde invariably finished his act by swinging on the trapeze from different parts of his body and executing bigger and bigger arcs over the stage, before finally returning to the ground and removing his blonde wig to reveal his bald head (Jeffreys 2004).

The makers of *Murder!* could have seen Barbette's performances at Olympia at this or the following season, or else at one of a host of variety theatres over the next few years. In any case, an early draft of the script strongly suggests that Barbette was a key influence in the film's depiction of Fane's cross-dressed routine. In the pre-production script, Sir John and Markham find Fane performing his trapeze act at 'the Olympia circus', where Barbette had made such an impact in the late 1920s, and the same venue is given as the setting for the film's finale. Fane's *nom de théâtre* in this early draft also closely echoes that of Barbette: he is billed in Sir John's copy of the programme as 'Claudette' (Reville 1930: 122, 132).<sup>10</sup> As if to underline the allusion

to Barquette, a note in the script for the film's climactic sequence calls for a close-up on the act's name in the running order, where it appears as 'Claudette, the Mystery Woman. The Woman Trapeze Artist.' An added detail in this description anticipates the fatal moment of Fane's death with dark humour: 'Above her name appears the sentence "something you have never seen before". Underneath her name "something you may never see again"' (Reville 1930: 142).

The close-up of the running order, along with all other references to 'Claudette' and 'the Olympia circus', were omitted from the final film (some are crossed out by hand in the surviving copy). However, the staging of Fane's circus routine remains noticeably similar to Barquette's act. Having evaded Sir John's line of questioning in his dressing room, Fane makes his entrance into the ring dressed in a flowing silk gown and ostrich-feather headdress. Removing the gown, Fane climbs the ladder to the trapeze in a low-angled shot that shows off his close-fitting feminine costume (Figures 4–6). The wig called for in the script is absent, so there is no big moment of revelation greeted by 'a round of applause from below' (Reville 1929: 142). Instead, Fane almost casually discards the headdress and begins his fatal aerial routine. [FIGURES 4-6 ABOUT HERE.]

Although the references to Barquette are more obscure in the final version of *Murder!* than in the earlier draft, some viewers had no difficulty making the connection. In his review for *Tatler*, James Agate (1930) noted that Fane 'appears to copy in every detail the performance of that well-known music-hall performer, Barquette'. The name Claudette may have even survived in an early cut of the film shown to the trade or in the advance publicity material.<sup>11</sup> Why the filmmakers decided to play down the association with Barquette is not clear. It could be that Barquette's celebrity in Britain

was too limited, or else that basing a villainous character too closely on a living person was seen as imprudent, either by BIP or the British censors. It may even be that rumours about Barbette's private life made the filmmakers wary of drawing too close a connection. Speaking to his friend Anton Dolin much later in his life, Vander Clyde claimed that the reason he never performed in Britain after the early 1930s was that he was caught in a sexual liaison with another man in the dressing room of the London Palladium (Castle 1982: 196–7). Whatever the truth in this piece of show-business gossip (at the time, Barbette's absence from the British stage was blamed on a purely administrative problem with his work permit [*Variety* 1933]), it is possible that stories about Clyde's homosexuality were already circulating in the professional entertainment world by 1930.

Fane's aerial routine in *Murder!* does not try to replicate the glamour or sexual suggestiveness that contemporary audiences found in Barbette. Instead, the dramatic musical score and subjective camera work in this sequence emphasise the grotesque and potentially unhinged nature of Fane's routine, employing what Swaab (1995: 20) calls a 'visual language of mental extremity and instability' borrowed from French and German silent cinema. Several reviewers compared the film to E.A. Dupont's carnival drama *Variété* (1925, released in Britain as *Vaudeville*), which also features tense scenes of aerial acrobatics.<sup>12</sup> But, while it eschews Clyde's sexualised glamour, *Murder!* does borrow from the publicity methods surrounding Barbette. Like many female impersonators in the music hall, Clyde and his publicists traded on ambiguity, trying to maintain a sense of mystery around Barbette's gender, so that the showmanship of Clyde's final gesture (removing his wig) would not be lost. Advertising material for his act carefully avoided gender-specific pronouns, and the programme for the

Bertram Mills show at Olympia expressly asked patrons for their help in preserving ‘the Barbette secret’ (Tait 2005: 75).

*Murder!* similarly exploits the idea of ambiguous masculine-feminine identity as an entertaining spectacle, whose entertainment value lies partly in its ability to keep audiences guessing. Fane’s cross-dressing act in this and earlier scenes provide some of the most visually striking moments in the film, while also adding to the uncertainty surrounding the character. The film thus shares in the interwar trend of using gender ambiguity as a sensational selling point. As Oram (2007: 119) argues, discussing newspaper stories about early medical ‘sex-change’ procedures in the 1930s, popular culture in Britain during this period was slowly responding to new scientific ideas that promised to demystify the workings of sex and gender, but it also remained wedded to older discourses that saw ambiguously gendered bodies as ‘freakish’ and titillating. Between them, Barbette’s act and *Murder!* suggest the extent to which interwar audiences found uncertainty over gender identity both entertaining and unsettling, often at the same time. They also show the extent to which filmmakers and publicists were eager to capitalise on this interest by providing spectacular displays of gender ambiguity in action.

## Conclusion

Handel Fane’s cross-dressed performances in *Murder!* repay close analysis. Rather than simply being the prototype for Hitchcock’s later ‘murderous gays’, the character of Fane reflects the fascination in interwar Britain with gender ambiguity and the competing meanings that men’s cross-dressing produced. While critical accounts of



*Murder!* that see Fane as a closeted or coded homosexual tend to overlook the national and historical circumstances in which the film was made, the character remains 'queer' in the sense that he resists easy categorisation. As Allen (2004/2005: 109) argues, Fane's final performance in the circus ring not only reinforces his ambiguous masculine-feminine identity, but it also allows the character to escape Sir John's efforts to pin him down and bring him to justice by giving him the opportunity to stage his own sensational finale.

Fane's death opens the way for the more conventional heterosexual pairing of the detective hero and the falsely accused Diana. Fane's suicide note, read aloud by Sir John at the end of the film, seems designed to clear up any residual confusion over the character's motives. Recounting his feelings following Edna's death in the third person (and in the style of a theatrical melodrama), Fane writes: 'He walks home a murderer – a murderer on an impulse, to silence the mouth of a woman who knew his secret and was going to reveal it to the woman he dared to love.' In the German-language version of the film, *Mary*, produced by BIP simultaneously with *Murder!*, it is only at this point that Fane's secret is finally revealed: in this case, that he was an escaped convict in fear of being captured again by the police (Kerzoncuf and Barr 2015: 105). In the British version of the story, Sir John instead provides a reminder of Fane's 'half-caste' status, adding that the pity was that Diana knew about his secret the whole time.

That scholars have often found Fane's motivation unconvincing or insufficient to explain his actions speaks partly to the relative silence in the film surrounding what the character's 'half-caste' status might mean in practice. In contrast to Dane and Simpson's novel, for instance, there is no discussion in *Murder!* of the contempt and rejection that Fane believes public knowledge of his 'black blood' would bring (1929:

256–7). But the lingering suspicion that there is a sexual motive to Fane’s cross-dressed disguise expressed in critical accounts also points to the impact of later cinematic images of cross-dressing villains, not least in Hitchcock’s own *Psycho* (1960). McGilligan (2003: 136) is not alone in viewing *Murder!* through the lens of subsequent depictions, when he describes Fane as the ‘first sketch of a character later realized as Norman Bates’.

Although the similarities between Fane and Bates are suggestive of Hitchcock’s ongoing interest in the complexities of gender and sexuality (Doty 2011: 477), not to mention his awareness of the commercial value of sensationalised treatments of gender ambiguity, the differences between these two characters is also instructive. In Alexander Doty’s assessment, the representation of the unhinged Bates in *Psycho*, who murders women while dressed as his dead mother, is formed out of the filmmakers’ attempts to evade the censors, ‘while playing around with half-baked, popularized [...] notions of gender “dysfunction” and sexual perversion’ (Doty 2000: 166). For British filmmakers and audiences in the 1930s, many of the notions describing gender ‘dysfunction’ or sexual perversion in psychological terms, especially those derived from Freud and his followers, were simply not yet available, having only just begun to filter into British medical and criminological discourse (Waters 1998).

Historians of sexuality have argued that it was not until the years after the Second World War that men’s queerness became widely vilified in Britain. While members of the social and political elite were already worried about male effeminacy before this point, as expressed in interwar news stories detailing the ‘scandalous’ goings on between men at drag parties and other queer venues, many working-class communities seem to have been remarkably tolerant or ambivalent towards feminine appear-

ance and behaviour in men, even when this was interpreted as a sign of same-sex desire. Matt Houlbrook (2005: 161) cites the popularity of drag acts in working-class neighbourhoods of London as one example of ‘a broader comprehension and tolerance of gender inversion’ well into the 1930s. In most accounts, it is the tabloid press that has been held largely responsible for shifting or crystallising public attitudes to queer men in the post-war years, especially through the re-emergence of newspaper exposés about homosexuality, such as the *Sunday Pictorial*’s 1952 series ‘Evil Men’, which identified ‘male degenerates’ or ‘perverts’ as a serious threat to British family life and national security.<sup>13</sup>

Although much more remains to be discovered about the influence of films in informing understandings of gender and sexuality in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century, the cinema, as a mass medium with a huge audience, surely played its part in shaping public attitudes towards men’s queerness. The case of *Murder!* reveals that images of the queer villain in British popular culture predate the Second World War and the subsequent media scandals of the 1950s, even if these images had not yet become dominant in the popular imagination, and were instead outnumbered by farcical comedies that deployed men’s cross-dressing as a punch line (a trope that would prove extremely resilient). Seen as part of a larger network of cultural representations, *Murder!* suggests that the interwar cinema in Britain played an important part in circulating ideas about male effeminacy, giving space to older understandings of men’s cross-dressing as comic, titillating and even glamorous, while anticipating the more sensational depictions of queer villains in the years to come.

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### **List of images and captions:**

- Figure 1. Esmé Percy as Handel Fane in *Murder!* (Canal+ Image UK Ltd.)
- Figure 2. Fane in Sir John's office. (Canal+ Image UK Ltd.)
- Figure 3. Barbette (Vander Clyde) pictured in O.P. Gilbert, *Men in Women's Guise* (1926). (Cambridge University Library.)
- Figures 4-6. Fane begins his aerial routine. (Canal+ Image UK Ltd.)

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions to this include Bourne (1996: 4–5), who includes the film in his discussion of gay and lesbian representations in British films of the period, and Allen (2004/2005), who examines the film’s links with contemporary eugenicist theories of race and the Wildean ‘dandy’ stereotype.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Court Theatre’, *The Times*, 11 November 1908, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> As McDonald (2013: 240–1) notes, *Enter Sir John* contains numerous instances that work to subtly undermine its hero’s authority by showing him to be uncomfortable outside of London’s high society, and many of these moments make it into the film.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Man’s alleged masquerade as a woman’, *The Times*, 30 December, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Raid on a dance’, *News of the World*, 8 January 1933, p. 8; ‘Alleged scenes at West-End dances’, *News of the World*, 26 February 1933, p. 8. See also Houlbrook 2002, 2005: 68–92.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Man’s pose as woman’, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 31 January 1930, p. 7; ‘Posed as woman’, *Scotsman*, 1 February 1930, p. 10; ‘Masqueraded as a woman’, *Daily Mail*, 8 February 1930, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Masqueraded as a woman’, *Daily Mail*, 8 February, p. 7; ‘Plea for erring son’, *News of the World*, 9 February, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> P. Burnup, ‘Young English actors in screen satire’, *Daily Mail*, 15 September 1930, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> As one further piece of evidence, it is notable that a bird shop, similar to the one run by Chaney’s Mrs O’Grady, appears in Hitchcock’s 1936 film *Sabotage*, where it serves as the front not for a gang of burglars, as it does in *The Unholy Three*, but for a sinister bomb-making outfit.

<sup>10</sup> The script, still with the working title *Enter Sir John*, is credited to Alma Reville, although Hitchcock and Mycroft get the on-screen credit.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Herring referred to Fane posing as ‘a female impersonator called Claudette’ after watching a trade screening of the film: ‘A good British “talkie”’, *Manchester Guardian*, 2 August 1930, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> C.A.L. [Caroline Lejeune], ‘The pictures: Hitchcock and “Murder”’, *Observer*, 10 August 1930, p. 9; R.J. Whitley, ‘The film world reviewed’, *Daily Mirror*, 4 August 1930, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> D. Warth, ‘Evil men’, *Sunday Pictorial*, 25 May 1952, pp. 6, 15. The series continued on 1 June 1952, p. 12, and 8 June 1952, p. 12.