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Rhinestones in the Desert: The Rise and Fall of the Las Vegas Showgirl and the Productions That Shaped Her

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RHINESTONES IN THE DESERT: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE LAS VEGAS
SHOWGIRL AND THE PRODUCTIONS THAT SHAPED HER

By

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Bachelor of Science – Business Administration International Business
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

Showgirls are a cultural icon that is linked intrinsically with Las Vegas, where the image of a showgirl is prevalent and often ubiquitous. This thesis will look at the showgirl in Las Vegas and a brief history of the how she came to be, as represented by *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. This will include a discussion of the specific people and elements that contributed to the presentation of the showgirl: Donn Arden, who created the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles, Company Manager Ffolliott "Fluff" LeCoque, scenic designer Ray Klausen and costume designers Bob Mackie and Pete Menefee.

This is a necessary thesis as there is very little concrete documentation available regarding showgirls and their milieu, other than the information provided for publicity purposes in order to promote Las Vegas entertainment and tourism. This study is important as it will provide an authentic, factual record of the Las Vegas showgirl and the productions that she appeared in, particularly *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*.

In writing this thesis, I used an ethnographic approach using oral interviews with Ffolliott LeCoque, Ray Klausen, Pierre Rambert, Michael Pratt and Pete Menefee, print and online sources and access to the private scrapbooks of Ffolliott LeCoque. Additionally, my own entertainment background in Las Vegas has given me the necessary knowledge to discuss this topic expertly.

The showgirl spectacles were one of the major theatrical types of entertainment in Las Vegas. I argue that the showgirl and the productions that shaped her are a dying form of entertainment in Las Vegas because of the high costs needed to produce the shows, changes within the casino structure that affected how the showgirl shows were produced and societal changes that has affected how we view the showgirl and the Las Vegas production shows.

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I could not have written this thesis without the support and encouragement of the wonderful and talented people I have been fortunate to work with over my years as a performer and manager in Las Vegas entertainment. I am greatly obliged to everyone who contributed their experiences and insights to the history and culture of the showgirl and the Las Vegas stage spectacles. I would like to acknowledge the assistance I received from Joe “Nate” Bynum and Lezlie Cross of the UNLV Theatre department in completing this thesis, as well as Su Kim Chung of the Special Collections at UNLV. Thank you to Joy Morais and Michael Pratt for your many years of encouragement and friendship. Special thanks to Ffolliott “Fluff” LeCoque and my husband Henryk Janasik for their unwavering support, guidance and above all friendship and love.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Ffolliott “Fluff” Chorlton LeCoque.

To Fluff,

With love always, Diane

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INTRODUCTION

Showgirls are cultural icons that are linked intrinsically with Las Vegas, from their first appearance in 1958 at the Stardust hotel and casino to present-day Las Vegas, where the image of a showgirl is prevalent and often ubiquitous. In an article dated April 15, 2007, *Las Vegas Review Journal* writer John Przybys wrote that Las Vegas had contributed its own modern version of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, with the number one marvel being the showgirl. He wrote, “The showgirl is synonymous with Las Vegas, the very embodiment, as it were of Las Vegas’ class, charm and general yowza appeal.” Although the showgirl is thought of as a vital and important component of the Las Vegas culture, there is a lack of accurate information about the Las Vegas showgirl and the entertainment milieu that created this iconic symbol of sexuality in the Las Vegas desert.

As much as the showgirl is considered an essential part of the Las Vegas mythic culture, there has been very little accurate documentation of one of the major theatrical forms of entertainment in Las Vegas. This is an important and neglected field of theatrical entertainment which is why this thesis is important. While the showgirl herself is a cultural symbol of Las Vegas, she would not exist without the spectacular shows that made her iconic. A showgirl is more than a pretty girl in a bikini with a few feathers. In order to understand the Las Vegas showgirl, it is necessary to examine how she was shaped by the shows she performed in. This thesis will examine the legacy of the showgirl by looking at the European and American theatrical influences that led to the development of the showgirl and the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles, with a specific focus on *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. This thesis will also discuss key people who were responsible for creating and maintaining *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. Additionally, this thesis will look at the physical elements that were vital in creating the epic status of the Las

Vegas showgirl through an in-depth examination of the costuming, sets and stage of the last Las Vegas showgirl spectacular, *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. In this thesis, I will argue that the traditional Las Vegas showgirl has become passé due to the costs of the spectacular showgirl extravaganzas, changes in the structuring of the Las Vegas hotels and casinos, the introduction of other theatrical entertainments to Las Vegas and societal changes that has left the showgirl to slowly exit stage right.

Review of Literature

There is a distinct lack of accurate, documented information and acknowledgement of the Las Vegas showgirl and the showgirl spectacles. In looking for source material for this thesis it was difficult to find relevant scholarly information. Any published information in books regarding the Las Vegas showgirls is at best a chapter or a series of pictures. Those chapters are mostly pictorial in nature, with little scholarly information provided as to the shows, showrooms and designers. There are a few published books on the Paris showgirls. While these books provided valuable historical information they were limited in their scope as they were written and published in the 1970s and 1980s and two of the books were written only in the French language.

Methodology

In researching this thesis, I utilized primary and secondary sources. My secondary sources included books, newspaper and magazine articles in addition to online articles and reviews. My primary sources were obtained by conducting oral interviews with individuals who are or were part of the Las Vegas entertainment industry, specifically as regards to showgirls and the Las Vegas production shows. These interviews were conducted with the designers, performers and management of the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles and were recorded either in

person or as a phone interview. I will also be drawing from my own personal experiences with the Las Vegas spectaculars, rather than the scanty written record.

I attended *The French Connection* panel discussion, sponsored by the Special Collections at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas and *Costume! A Behind the Scenes Look at the Method & Artistry of Costume Design* panel discussion at the Nevada State Museum as background for this thesis. As part of my research, I traveled to New York City and was able to use the archives of the Shubert Organization. I also traveled to Paris and London in order to meet with people who were associated with the Paris showgirl shows. While in Paris I was able to view the latest editions of the *Lido de Paris* and the *Moulin Rouge* spectaculars.

I utilized the Special Collections at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas and their collection on showgirls as part of my research. Several key people who were instrumental in the creation of the showgirl spectaculars have donated their papers to the Special Collections which was invaluable. I also have a large collection of personal ephemera that I was able to utilize as part of my research that consisted of contracts, photos, articles, scripts, technical information, sketches, programs and my own personal collection of books. My career spanned forty years as a performer, dance captain and swing in several of the large Las Vegas showgirl spectaculars before becoming the Assistant Company Manager, then Company Manager for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* I was also involved with the creative and financial aspects of the shows. My professional experiences in the Las Vegas showgirl milieu from performer to management to creative have given me a unique perspective on the subject of showgirls and the showgirl spectaculars. I have written this thesis in the first person because much of the information that I have drawn on is archived within me.

Ffolliott "Fluff" LeCoque, the long-time company manager of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*,

was an invaluable source of all things pertaining to the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles. I am thankful for her support in this thesis as she was always generous with her time and knowledge. In addition to her oral interviews and observations, I have a collection of her personal scrapbooks, photos, programs, clippings and memorabilia that I was able to consult as part of my research.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One: “Conceived, Created and Directed By...” will begin by looking at the historical evolution of the showgirl and the American and European theatrical influences that molded and presented her as an iconic idealized woman. There are many misconceptions about the showgirl’s historical origins, which continue to haunt the image of the showgirl throughout history to the present day. It is these misconceptions that have led people to identify showgirls with prostitution, vice and a general loss of ethics. I will show that the iconic showgirl can be traced back to the early part of the nineteenth century and the London theatres. I will next examine the dance halls and music halls of Paris, beginning with the *Bal du Moulin Rouge*, a combined dance hall and pleasure garden that opened in 1889. A major influence on the Las Vegas showgirls came from the productions which were created and performed in America, beginning with the *Ziegfeld Follies* of 1907. This section will look at Florenz Ziegfeld and how his productions influenced the development of the showgirl and the showgirl spectacles.

The remaining section of the chapter will discuss the role of the artistic director for the showgirl spectacles. This section will conclude with a profile of artistic creator Donn Arden, the celebrated producer, director, choreographer and creative force behind the Las Vegas showgirl and the showgirl spectacles. Arden was regarded as the master of the Las Vegas spectacular showgirl shows and was responsible for creating and bringing the 1958 edition of the

Lido de Paris from Paris to Las Vegas. Although *Minsky's Burlesque* had opened two years earlier at the Dunes Hotel in 1956, burlesque, which featured strippers as the main focus of the show, was a different form of entertainment than the French showgirl spectacular *Lido de Paris*.

Chapter Two: "Company Manager-Personification of Elegance" will take a step away from the visible production elements that are part of the showgirl spectacle and take a look at a unique position in Las Vegas entertainment, the company manager. The Las Vegas company manager has a specific management position that is much more involved than the traditional stage manager position. This chapter will discuss the role of the Las Vegas company manager along with an examination of the duties and functions of the company manager. A portion of that discussion will compare the role of the Las Vegas company manager to the management roles within a Broadway show. Although most legitimate theatrical productions employ a stage manager, not all theatrical productions include a company manager as well. The information in this chapter is based on the duties and functions of the company manager for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* show. This information was gathered through oral interviews, observations and also through personal experience.

This chapter will focus on the most well-known company manager in Las Vegas history, Ffolliott "Fluff" LeCoque. LeCoque's association with Arden lasted for almost forty-five years, beginning with her first job for him in the early 1950s until his death in 1994. In addition to her role as company manager for many of Arden's shows, LeCoque also created choreography and performed in his shows in Hollywood and Las Vegas as his lead performer. LeCoque inspired and trained more showgirls in Las Vegas than anyone else over her long career as company manager at the Desert Inn and MGM Grand, now Bally's hotel. In addition to discussing her role as company manager this chapter will explore her training, background, experiences,

determination and talent and how as company manager, LeCoque maintained the artistic integrity of the showgirl.

Chapter Three: “How Large is that Ship? It’s Enormous!” will take a detailed look at the scenic and production elements of the Las Vegas stage spectacles that elevated the showgirl, literally, to new heights. The figure of the showgirl as the impetus of the extravaganza was supported by the fantastical scenic elements and special effects of the productions.

As stage shows evolved from nightclubs and the showrooms became bigger, the demands for larger sets and scenic elements grew. The fabulous sets that displayed the showgirl to perfection were an important aspect of what made her iconic. The visual effect of dozens of showgirls cascading down a golden staircase suspended from the heavens was incredible. The scenic designs and effects could also transport the audience to exotic locations and experiences while viewing a Las Vegas showgirl spectacular. Onstage depictions of Casanova’s Venice, as in the 1977 edition of the *Lido de Paris, Allez Lido* or the ill-fated Titanic in *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, were achieved twice nightly through the mechanizations of the stage and scenery.

In order to show how the physical elements of the productions contributed to the iconic status of the showgirl, this chapter will focus on the stage and scenic elements of *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. I will first examine the role of the scenic designer of the spectacles by looking at the background and methodology of Ray Klausen, award-winning scenic designer. Next, I will take a closer look at the production elements found within *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* show. This will include both the stage, which was specifically designed to Arden’s specifications when the hotel was built and the scenic effects. The last section of the chapter will look at the manufacture of specific scenic elements used in *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, specifically the *Titanic* and *Samson and Delilah* production numbers.

Unfortunately, because of the topless nature of the Las Vegas production shows and the limitations and expenses of film in 1958, there are few details of any of the elaborate and spectacular scenic elements of the Las Vegas production shows of that era. Whatever photos exist of the complete production numbers pre-present day are rare and are not complete. These photos were usually generated by the hotel publicity department, which preferred to focus on the showgirls. This chapter will provide details regarding those scenic elements, which would otherwise remain undocumented.

Chapter Four: “Baubles, Bangles and Beads” takes a detailed look into what many people believe to be the most important element in the creation of the iconic showgirl: the costumes. As mentioned earlier, a showgirl is not just a pretty girl in a bikini and a few feathers. The costumes of the showgirl spectacles were elaborate works of art that were brought to life when the showgirl effortlessly moved across the stage. Whether one is looking at a *Ziegfeld, Lido de Paris* or a *Folies Bergère* showgirl, one characteristic that they all have in common are the extravagant, expensive, outrageous, glorious, fantastic costumes.

This chapter will utilize specific details regarding the costumes for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* stage spectacular to illustrate the design and manufacturing processes and the traditions and craftsmanship involved in the production of the elaborate showgirl costumes. Due to the topless nature of some of the costumes, photos of the shows usually depicted the female dancers or the showgirls wearing a bra that was not part of the original costume design.

This chapter will begin by looking at the role of the costume designer for the large showgirl spectacles. This will be followed by a discussion of the background, methodology and design process of Bob Mackie and Pete Menefee, the costume designers for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. In an oral interview, Menefee was able to provide large amounts of specific information

regarding the costumes that he designed for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. The next section of the chapter will discuss sourcing and manufacturing of the elaborate showgirl costumes for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. Materials were sourced from all over the world with feathers from South Africa or South America and crystal rhinestones from Europe. The large frames for the elaborate costume pieces were manufactured in New York and Paris while beading and appliqué work and final assembly were done in Hollywood. The final section of the chapter will look at the costs of manufacturing the elaborate costumes for the showgirl spectacles.

Chapter Five: "End of an Era" will discuss the changing Las Vegas entertainment milieu and how those changes affected the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles. By the beginning of the twenty-first century traditional Las Vegas showgirls and the showgirl spectacles were a dying breed. This chapter will begin by first looking at the role of the casino and Las Vegas entertainment. As organized crime was pushed out of Las Vegas to be replaced by the large corporations that now run the casinos, the corporations took over all aspects of the casino, including entertainment. I will also discuss how the change to corporate Las Vegas in the mid-1980's affected the structure of the Las Vegas showrooms and entertainment in the casinos. This will be followed by a discussion on how Las Vegas entertainment changed to independent productions from hotel-owned productions.

This chapter will also discuss other forms of entertainment that began to compete against the showgirl spectacles with such family-friendly entertainments provided by Broadway musicals and the introduction of Cirque du Soleil to Las Vegas. The final section will look at societal changes that caused the Las Vegas showgirl to become a mere shadow of her former glorious self. This section will begin with the perception of showgirls as portrayed in film, television and advertisement, exotic dancers and the introduction of burlesque and clubs into the

casinos.

Conclusion

Now passed into legend, showgirls were once one of the most enduring and visible symbols of Las Vegas. By a thorough examination of the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles through primary and secondary sources, this thesis provides sorely needed documentation about the history and evolution of the showgirl, key creative people and the processes used to create the showgirl spectacles. This thesis will also argue that, due to changes in Las Vegas entertainment, the traditional Las Vegas showgirl and the extravagant Las Vegas showgirl productions are no longer a viable form of entertainment in Las Vegas today.

CHAPTER 1: CONCEIVED, CREATED AND DIRECTED BY...

In a modern, twenty-first century Las Vegas, the showgirl is everywhere. But her image has been distorted from her iconic stature by movies, advertising and strip clubs. Films such as *Showgirls* (United Artists 1995), rolling billboards driven through the Las Vegas Strip, advertising *Showgirls Direct to Your Rooms!* and a Las Vegas strip club titled *Déjà Vu Showgirls* are some examples. Rather than being found inside the casinos performing onstage in the elaborate Las Vegas spectacles, the showgirl is most often seen now on the sidewalks in front of the casinos. You can see her daily, dressed in home-made showgirl costumes, posing for photos with tourists for small change or passing out brochures for the latest time-share opportunity.

This chapter will focus on how the Las Vegas showgirl came to be and the historic forces that molded her into legend. This chapter will begin by looking at the European and American influences that led to the development of the Las Vegas showgirl. The next section will examine the role of the creative director for the elaborate showgirl spectacles. Donn Arden will be the focus of the final section of this chapter with a look at his background and contributions to the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles.

Many of the images and beliefs regarding showgirls perpetuated in film and in print are often misleading and inaccurate. This is due to the promotion of the Las Vegas showgirl by the hotel publicity machines, which were often used as an enticement to attract visitors to Las Vegas. Pretty girls were used as a staple of advertising throughout the history of Las Vegas, with photos showcasing the dancers and showgirls from the production shows. These photos showed the girls at the pool, gambling, playing golf, horseback riding or even more unusual images, such as sitting on a rocket or promoting atomic testing in the Nevada desert. The girls themselves were

happy to do the photos as it was fun for them and they enjoyed helping to promote Las Vegas and the shows. In 1962, *Las Vegas Magazine* sponsored a promotion to *Win a Showgirl as Your Slave for Three Days* and according to the contest,

“We are actually going to give away for three whole days a Las Vegas Showgirl to be your own personal slave. She’ll mow your lawn, carry your tools to work, even help you at work (if you can get the boss to approve). You can take her to dinner (when the wife’s not looking), she’ll make your lunch and even deliver it to you, if you command. We promise that the girl will be an actual showgirl from one of the top Las Vegas shows. She’ll be as pretty as the lovely “samples” we’re showing on these pages. We haven’t decided who the girl will be, we want to see if you prefer a blonde, brunet, or redhead...we’ll fit specifications to preference.”

As much as that promotion evokes laughter and even disbelief in this modern day and age, it was typical of how the publicity departments utilized the mythic and iconic stature of the Las Vegas showgirl to promote Las Vegas as a special destination. Las Vegas was filled with unique attractions, such as gaming, entertainment and yes, showgirls, that could not be easily found in America’s home town.

The Las Vegas showgirl is so closely tied to the image of Las Vegas, that one can forget that they were first introduced to Las Vegas less than sixty years ago, with the 1958 debut of the French spectacular the *Lido de Paris*, at the Stardust Hotel. Prior to the *Lido de Paris*’ debut, Las Vegas entertainment in the casinos featured the stars of the nightclub circuits, such as Sophie Tucker or Joe E. Louis. Beginning in 1950, Donn Arden staged nightclub acts for many stars such as Betty Grable, Jack Benny, Carmen Miranda, Danny Kaye and Betty Hutton for their appearances at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas. They would often be accompanied by a line of five

or six chorus girls. In a 2016 story profiling showgirls, *Vegas Seven* magazine said “Back in the 1950s, showgirls brought the sexy sophistication of Paris, the cosmopolitan glamour of New York City and the big-budget glitz of Hollywood to a desert boom-town...” (Rodgers 19). Arden himself in a 1988 interview for the *Los Angeles Times* said that “before I got there, Vegas had burlesque but no high-class girl shows” (Bell 6).

European and American Influences: Nineteenth Century

Chorus girls have been part of the Western culture from the early 1800’s onward. But a chorus girl of the nineteenth century is very different from today’s chorus girl. In America, a new form of theatre known as the spectacle was first introduced in 1824 at the Park Theatre in a production titled, *Cherry and the Fair Star*. This was a mostly visual production that emphasized “eye-filling scenery and exciting stage effects” but only lasted for thirty-three performances (Mordden 9). But the spectacle as a form of theater became more popular in America when chorus girls from the European ballet companies were imported into the productions. The most successful of these extravaganzas was *The Black Crook*, which opened on September 12, 1866 in New York City at Niblo’s Garden. The production lasted five and a half hours and included a *Grand Ballet of Gems*. According to author Ethan Mordden, the extravaganza was a success due to a combination of elements that included amazing sets, lively choreography, familiar music and “the addition of the sensational dancing girls” (13).

The ballet girls of the London theatres in the early nineteenth century were also known as chorus girls. But according to the authors of the 1975 book *The Natural History of the Chorus Girl* Derek and Julia Parker, they were usually employed more for their looks than for their training. (11) In 1830, one individual wrote of the chorus girls; “Of all the places for ...downright lasciviousness and intemperate intrigue, there is nothing in London equal to the

King's Theatre". (D. Parker and J. Parker 12)

In Paris, the dancers of the corps de ballet faced a similar dilemma, as they were often hired for their looks and for their appeal to men of the upper classes, rather than their dance abilities. During the 1860s and 1870s, many a man of wealth would have a mistress cultivated from the corps de ballet of the Paris Opéra. The Foyer at the Paris Opéra was originally designed to be a rehearsal space for the dancers, but it soon turned into a venue where the male members of the audience could walk around or sit, watching a pretty dancer warm-up or practice.¹ According to authors Derek and Julia Parker, business arrangements for sexual favors were made between the dancers and their patrons, sometimes with the dancer's mother doing the bargaining between them (33).

London burlesque shows of the nineteenth century also utilized chorus girls, performing comic songs and sketches and chorus dancers in skimpy costumes. At the Haymarket Theatre in 1854, Miss Lydia Thompson, along with the theatre corps de ballet, was presented "for the delight" of the London audiences in a production entitled *A new and original Cosmiographical, Visionary Extravaganza and Dramatic Review* (D. Parker and J. Parker 21). Miss Thompson began to perform in America with her *British Blondes* in 1869, which led to the development of burlesque entertainments in America. Burlesque was different than the spectacle, as burlesque did not emphasize scenic spectacle. Burlesque was also considered racier than the spectacles. Burlesque employed topical references, jokes and a high-kicking chorus line in contrast to the spectacles which featured fairy-tale or romantic tableaux and the corps de ballet chorus girls (Mordden15). Vaudeville can also be traced back to burlesque, rather than the spectacles.

Theatre historian Oscar Brockett states that Tony Pastor was responsible for changing burlesque

¹Edgar Degas (1834-1917) was a French impressionist painter who was known for his paintings and sculptures of the dancers of the Paris corps de ballet during the 1860 and 1870s.

from its naughty persona into the more audience friendly vaudeville. (322)

French Dance Halls and Music Halls

In addition to the chorus dancers of the corps de ballet, there was another type of chorus dancer who performed in the pleasure gardens and music halls of Paris. According to Charles Castle's book, *The Folies Bergère*, the *Folies Bergère* was the first dance hall to open in Paris in 1869² but was forced to close almost immediately due to the start of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 (20). When the *Folies Bergère* reopened in 1871 at the end of the Franco-Prussian War, the entertainment provided by manager Leon Sari featured circus acts and chorus girls. (Fig. 1) Before 1890, circus acts were the norm for entertainment in the Parisian music halls.

Immortalized by Toulouse-Lautrec in his posters and prints, the dancers of the pleasure gardens were another popular type of chorus dancer. The dancers were known for their performances of the scandalous *chahut*, which is more commonly referred to today as the French can-can.³ The origins of the French can-can began with the *polka-piquée*, performed in the dance halls of Paris (D. Parker and J. Parker 29). The dances were intended to show off the dancer's legs with high kicks, leaps and splits. This dance generated quite a bit of interest from the men and created even more excitement when the dancers wore no underwear while performing the dances. The chorus dancers of the *Folies Bergère* were mid-way between the outrageous dancers of the dance halls and the corps de ballet/courtesans of the Paris Opera.

By the 1880s, there were several dance halls in Paris but the most well-known was the *Moulin Rouge*.⁴ The *Moulin Rouge* opened as a combined dance hall and pleasure garden in 1889. There was a small dance floor where the dancers would perform the high kicks of the can-

²The *Folies Bergère* was used as a political meeting place during the Commune.

³The *polka-piquée* evolved into the *quadrille naturaliste*, the *Robert Macaire* and finally the *chahut* or French can-can.

⁴The *Moulin Rouge* opened on October 6, 1889, in Montmartre on Place Blanche where it is still found today. This area of Paris was known for its artistic bohemian lifestyle and dubious characters of thieves and prostitutes.

can and the quadrille. One particular dance skill involved kicking off a man's hat, while he was seated next to the dance floor. Another movement had the dancer holding one leg by the ankle, high above her head, while dancing on the other foot. (Fig 2) The pleasure garden also had a covered stage for music-hall acts to perform. But competition from the other music halls such as the *Casino de Paris* and the waning interest in the can-can, contributed to the closing of the *Moulin Rouge* in 1902. The *Moulin Rouge* reopened as a variety theatre in 1903 before burning down in 1915. The *Moulin Rouge* was rebuilt and reopened in 1925, but encountered difficulties, converting to a movie palace in 1929. During the German occupation of Paris in World War II, the *Moulin Rouge*, the *Folies Bergère* and the other theatres struggled to stay afloat. Beginning in the 1960s, the *Moulin Rouge* began to present the glamorous, extravagant spectacles that are today considered a landmark of Paris, complete of course with the can-can (Pessis and Crépineau 9).

Although nudity had been seen on the Paris dance halls as early as 1894⁵, the showgirl made her first appearance at the *Folies Bergère* in 1918, attracting attention from all over the world. For the doughboys of World War I, the breasts of the girls at the *Folies Bergère* became a symbol of what they were fighting for. "Twenty magnificent girls, dressed in Italian military uniforms, each with one fair breast exposed" were on hand when Italy joined the war (Perry 42). Paul Derval, the longtime director of the *Folies Bergère* introduced the first nude showgirl into the *Folies Bergère*, but the name of this first showgirl is unknown. According to author Charles Castle, Derval wrote in his memoirs that "She was an adorable little blonde, exquisitely made and curly as a lamb. The day she appeared on the stage for the first time, a mesmerized hush fell

⁵At the Moulin Rouge in 1893, the models who posed for the artists had an argument about who had the best legs, knees, thighs, etc. One of the models threw off all of her clothes and was hauled into court, sparking a riot. The theaters jumped on this and presented stripteases with titles such as: *Le Coucher d'Yvette* (Yvette's Bed), *Suzanne et la Grande Chaleur* (Suzy in a Heat Wave) and *Le Bain de Maid* (The Maid takes a Bath).

over the house, followed by an immense sigh of admiration” (106). In the scene, she portrayed the goddess of love and was pulled across the stage on a wheeled cart, sitting on a bed of flowers and holding a jeweled bow and arrow. Derval further commented that “One of those darts must have found its way into the heart of a regular patron for she married a short time afterwards and bore her husband two adorable children” (106).

It was at this time that a definite division was made between a chorus dancer and a showgirl, as the chorus dancer danced and a showgirl did not. Derval began to hire chorus dancers from the dancing schools in England, who were trained and drilled to perfection. Derval imported to Paris self-contained dancing English troupes such as the Tiller Girls⁶, the Jackson Girls and the Bluebell Girls. The Bluebell girls are still employed to this day at the *Lido de Paris* in Paris and were brought over in 1958 for the first showgirl spectacle in Las Vegas at the Stardust. “I wanted them tall, with long necks to show off the costumes with their big feathers, cloaks and trains,” Bluebell remarked about her dancers; “I wanted long legs because they show up better... The ballet training is essential because it produces good posture and an elegant look. I’ve made my reputation on elegance and class” (UNLV Special Collections). This illustrates how important the training and stature was for the Paris and Las Vegas showgirls.

The revues under Derval’s direction flourished and were known for their sumptuous displays, outdoing even Ziegfeld’s productions. “Even Ziegfeld in America, who perhaps surpassed the revues in elegance, could not attain their sumptuous look. Luxury became their hallmark” (Castle 68). The ascendancy of the showgirl in the French music halls also allowed the producers to no longer have to rely on the stars and their hefty salaries, to bring an audience to the theatres. Maurice Chevalier, one of the early stars of the French music halls commented that

⁶John Tiller (1854-1925) was an English musical theater director who originated precision dancing in the chorus line. He had several lines of Tiller Girls who performed all over the world, including at the *Ziegfeld Follies*, *George White Scandals* and the *Folies Bergère*. The Radio City Rockettes were based on the Tiller Girls.

“The truth of the matter is that, round 1918, the nude show-girl quietly took possession of the *Folies Bergère*’s stage, thus dispensing, by her own unrivalled and perennial appeal, with the need for highly paid celebrities” (qtd. in Castle 107). No longer having to pay the exorbitant salaries of the stars of the music halls, the producers poured that money into the extravagance of the productions. Paul Derval produced thirty-three editions of the *Folies Bergère* from 1918 until his death in 1966. This shows how the extravagant spectacles were under the guidance of one individual very early on in the history of the showgirl spectacles.

Ziegfeld Follies

In America, the spectacle continued to be performed, but it was really transformed by Florenz Ziegfeld and his exposure to the French revues and music halls of the *Folies Bergère*, *Casino de Paris* and the other productions. Ziegfeld (1867-1932) was born into a prominent Chicago musical family⁷, but was more interested in vaudeville, Wild West Shows and nightclubs. Ziegfeld’s first success was built around the European strongman Eugene Sandow. Sandow was appearing at the *Casino Roof Garden* in New York City when Ziegfeld lured him away to perform at the Trocadero during the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Ziegfeld advertised Sandow as the perfect physical specimen and Chicago society women would flock to see an up-close look of Sandow’s form and figure (R. Ziegfeld and P. Ziegfeld 22-23). After touring with Sandow, Ziegfeld started producing shows in New York City with middling success. Ziegfeld partnered with Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger in 1906, who were part of a producing group often referred to as *The Syndicate*.⁸ Any producers who did not cooperate with them were not able to book their shows in their theaters, according to Brockett (371). Ziegfeld presented his

⁷Ziegfeld’s father founded the Chicago Musical Academy in 1867.

⁸The Syndicate controlled almost all of the theatres in America and refused to send out any productions that included any banned performers. They also refused to allow plays that they felt wouldn’t be popular with the mass of audiences.

first review in 1907 at the *New York Theatre Roof*, which had been renamed the *Jardin de Paris*. Ziegfeld's first wife, Anna Held⁹ had previously performed at the *Folies Bergère* and Ziegfeld was heavily influenced by her and the Parisian revues. In the book, *The Story of 42nd Street* the authors state that Held advised Ziegfeld to build the shows around a single topical subject, rather than the unrelated acts of vaudeville. They also credit her with telling Ziegfeld to put the emphasis on the beautiful girls, saying that it was "probably her best suggestion and the one that Ziegfeld turned into the hallmark of his shows" (Henderson and Green 101). From 1907 to 1931, Ziegfeld personally produced nineteen editions of his *Follies*, glorifying over three thousand beautiful girls (R. Ziegfeld and P. Ziegfeld 349-350). Once again this shows how much one individual was the guiding influence for the showgirl spectacles.

The first nude showgirl in America was presented by Ziegfeld in his *Follies of 1918*, approximately around the same time she was seen onstage in Paris, at the *Folies Bergère*. The timing of the two events shows how closely Ziegfeld was influenced by the trends in the French music halls. Ziegfeld was also influenced by Paul Derval's attention to detail and that only the best would do. Ziegfeld's reputation was enhanced by his extravagant displays of costumes and sets and the audiences were enthralled by his lavish productions. In contrast to other revues that would feature approximately twenty girls with two or three different costumes, Ziegfeld's casts were massive. His shows would have a cast of approximately one hundred and twenty performers, with twenty or more costume changes, all created by the leading designers of the day. Ziegfeld's *Follies of 1907* cost \$13,000 to produce, which was a considerable amount at that time.¹⁰ However, \$13,000 seems like a bargain in view of the \$300,000 Ziegfeld spent on later

⁹Anna Held (1873c-1918) was the star of the European music halls and Ziegfeld's first (common-law) wife. Held had a naughty-coquette style of performance. She was best-known for the song *Won't You Come and Play With Me?*

¹⁰ According to the calculator at www.measuringworth.com, \$13,000 in 1907 would be between \$250,000 to \$6.8 billion dollars in 2016.

productions in the 1920s (D. Parker and J. Parker 85-86).

Ziegfeld's introduction of the nude in his *Follies of 1918* was considered daring, not only for the audience but also for his showgirls. Ziegfeld had to ask for volunteers from his chorus girls to be part of the tableaux. They were "warned that any girl would seem overdressed in that first tableau if she wore as much as a string of pearls around her throat" (Castle 105). Up until that time, Ziegfeld had only suggested the idea of nudity in his extravaganzas with clever lighting and costuming. Ziegfeld hired the designer Ben Ali Haggin¹¹ to produce living pictures, known as tableau vivant in the Paris music halls, for his productions. (Fig. 3) These productions consisted of scenes presented onstage with live performers, who had to be silent and motionless as they replicated a famous picture or painting. *The Pageant of the Masters* held annually in Laguna Beach, California is a modern day example of a tableau vivant.

Unlike the unknown first nude showgirl of the *Folies Bergère*, the first nude showgirl of the Ziegfeld Follies was Kay Laurell. She appeared as *September Morn*, standing on an enormous globe, with strings of pearls around her throat. Kay was called "the original American Venus" (Castle 106). Ziegfeld was the first to actively use his showgirls for promotion, making them as famous as the shows in which they were performing. The Ziegfeld Girl became its own brand and some early film stars, such as Olive Thomas, Louise Brooks and Marion Davies originally were Ziegfeld Girls. Ziegfeld was considered a master of publicity and promotion, including self-promotion. His efforts of publicity would rival that of the Las Vegas publicity machines. Ziegfeld had Held declare that she only bathed in milk in order to keep her skin fair and beautiful. Ziegfeld had forty gallons of milk delivered to the hotel suite where she was staying and in order to get as much publicity as possible, Ziegfeld invited the reporters into her bath, to see her bathing in person! Ziegfeld followed this up by having the dairyman sue him for

¹¹Haggin's grandfather owned a multimillion-dollar copper mine.

non-payment so Ziegfeld could claim that the milk was sour in order to continue the free publicity (Carter 16).

In addition to his *Follies*, Ziegfeld also produced a series of shows for the nightclub he located on top of the New Amsterdam Theatre, beginning in 1915. These shows titled *Midnight Frolics* were performed after the *Ziegfeld Follies* show had ended so the audience could continue their night's entertainment. The *Midnight Frolics* were a combination of vaudeville and musical comedy acts and, of course, pretty girls. Less elaborate than the staged extravaganzas of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, these shows were a precursor to the nightclubs and floor shows of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in America. There was no traditional stage, but the audience sat at tables around a dance floor, where the entertainers performed. This was an arrangement similar to the Parisian pleasure garden dance stages where the French can-can dancers would kick their legs up over the heads of the audience as they also sat at tables around the dance floor. Scenic elements were added, including a four-foot-high platform, a telescopic stage, some background scenic drops and a plate-glass walkway suspended below the balcony (R. Ziegfeld and P. Ziegfeld 62-63). But instead of the grand spectacle of the *Follies*, the *Midnight Frolic* focused on fun and frivolity, in a glamorous setting.

Ziegfeld continued producing shows and eventually became part owner of the New Amsterdam Theatre in 1920. In 1927 he opened up his own self-named theater, the Ziegfeld. In addition to his *Follies* and *Midnight Frolic's* shows, Ziegfeld also produced musicals. Some of his popular musicals of the day were *Sally* (1920) *Kid Boots* (1923), *Rio Rita* (1927) and *Rosalie* (1928). Ziegfeld also produced one of the most historic Broadway musicals, *Show Boat*, in 1927. But Ziegfeld lost everything in the 1929 Wall Street crash and his *Ziegfeld Follies* shows were no longer profitable, due to declining interest and expanding costs to produce the massive

spectacles. When Ziegfeld died in 1932, he left a mountain of debt, estimated to be between one and two million dollars (R. Ziegfeld and P. Ziegfeld 283, 170).

The Role of the Artistic Director

When discussing showgirls and the shows that featured them, it is very important to note that the shows were realized under the auspices of a singular person, such as Derval at the *Folies Bergère* in Paris or Ziegfeld and his *Ziegfeld Follies* in New York City. Although each stage spectacular opened through the combined talents and efforts of the individual designers, choreographers, performers and technicians, it was the artistic directors who were the creative geniuses who produced and drove the spectacles.

The artistic director for the showgirl spectacles has always had a huge responsibility and a large role to fill. Sometimes they were listed in the programs simply as the director or producer or creator or staged by. But that person really was making all of the artistic decisions regarding the productions, so I will refer to them as the artistic director for the purposes of this thesis. The artistic director is responsible for hiring all the designers, choreographers, composers, performers and staff. Sometimes, the artist director will take on several roles himself within the productions. *Folies Bergère* artistic director Michel Gyarmathy designed the sets and the costumes for the editions of the *Folies* he directed in Paris. (Castle 250) Jerry Jackson was also the choreographer, composer, costume designer, lyricist and set designer when he stepped in as the artistic director for the 1975 edition of the *Folies Bergère* in Las Vegas (French Connection).

It is the responsibility of the artistic director to make all the decisions regarding the show, beginning with the theme and title of the show. Each edition of the French production shows would be given a title which would distinguish it from the previous show. For the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles such as the *Lido de Paris*, *Casino de Paris* and the *Folies Bergère*, it was

vital that the artistic director keep the connection to the show's French origins. *Allez Lido* (1977), *Merci Beaucoup* (1975), *Voila!* (1968) and *C'est Manifique* (1958) were titles of some of the Las Vegas *Lido de Paris* spectacles. With those titles, the audience definitely knew they would be seeing a French-styled showgirl show. When Jacki Clerico took over the ownership of the *Moulin Rouge* in 1962, his first show was called *Frou-Frou*. It was so successful, that from 1963 through today, all of the titles of the *Moulin Rouge* shows began with an F: *Frou-Frou* (1963), *Frisson* (1965), *Fascination* (1967), *Fantastic* (1970), *Festival* (1973), *Follement* (1976), *Frénésie* (1978) *Femmes, Femmes, Femmes* (1983), *Formidable* (1988) and *Féerie* (1999) (Pessis and Crépineau 169-174). The French theme continued for each act and scene of the *Lido de Paris* show as well. You definitely knew you were at a French themed revue when you looked at a program for the *Lido de Paris*, *Folies Bergère* or *Moulin Rouge*. The 2015 program for the *Moulin Rouge* show, *Féerie* lists the opening number as *Le Moulin Rouge, aujourd'hui et hier...Le Moulin Rouge, toujours...*¹² The fourth edition of the Las Vegas *Lido de Paris* show, *Voila!* (1962) at the Stardust hotel had scenes such as *Rendezvous in Paris*, *Voila Le Lido* and *L'Opera de Paris* (*Lido de Paris* and *Moulin Rouge* programs). (Figs. 4 & 5)

When producer-director Donn Arden was hired by the MGM studios to create a show for their new casino in Las Vegas in the early 1970s, he spent several months reviewing MGM's entire film library for ideas according to a *Los Angeles Times* interview (Bell. "Donn Arden's Art..."). The theme of the MGM Grand hotel was Hollywood, specifically MGM movies. The inside of the casino was decorated with huge portraits of legendary MGM movie-stars such as Clark Gable, Lana Turner and Judy Garland. Arden, who was particularly known for his dramatic, over-the-top production numbers also said in the same interview that he wanted to stage the burning of Atlanta from *Gone With the Wind* for his new spectacular show in Las

¹²Translated from the French: "The *Moulin Rouge*, today and yesterday...the *Moulin Rouge* always"

Vegas. With approval and money from his bosses at the MGM, Arden was ready to go until Margaret Mitchell's estate refused to give permission to proceed. Arden's new show *Hallelujah Hollywood* debuted at the MGM Grand hotel in Las Vegas in 1974 with production numbers inspired from the MGM movies such as *The Pirate* (1948), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *Kismet* (1955) and the *Ziegfeld Follies* (1945). When *Hallelujah Hollywood* opened, the reviews were overwhelming positive, calling it "the production of the year, if not, of the decade" (Delaney "On & Off the Record"), "sophistication of a flawless visual spectacle" (Trahan "Hallelujah Hollywood Beautiful...") and "... all the spectacular things an extravaganza has ever been and ever will be wrapped up in one fantastic, eye-popping presentation" ("*Hallelujah Hollywood is Here*").

Lido de Paris Artistic Director: Pierre Rambert

In an oral interview conducted in 2015 in Paris, Pierre Rambert, the creative and the artistic director of the *Lido de Paris* discussed details on his role as the artistic director for *Bonheur*. Rambert said that he was very fortunate in his career to have worked with so many creative and brilliant people and that he was just "continuing the work that was started by the creators of the Lido, René Fraday and Pierre-Louis Guerin and Miss Bluebell, naturally and then Donn Arden and Folco, all the great artists." Rambert began his training early, around ten years of age. He attended the *Conservatoire de Paris* as a student of literature and music and later, theater and ballet. Rambert performed with Roland Petit and Zizi Jeanmaire in the *Casino de Paris* revue, *Zizi je t'aime* and with several other ballet companies. When he returned to Paris with no money, he says he contacted Madame Bluebell at the *Lido de Paris* to inquire if she needed any dancers. Madame Bluebell responded that she always needed dancers!¹³ (Banel

¹³Original quote in French: "Je me souviens de ma voix timide lui demandant si elle avait besoin de danseurs...Cher monsieur, j'ai toujours besoin de danseurs!" (tutti-magazine.fr)

“Interview de Pierre Rambert”). Rambert joined the *Lido de Paris* in 1977 as a principal dancer before becoming a dance captain and then Madame Bluebell’s assistant. Rambert shared the role of creative and artistic director with Bob Turk for the 1994 edition of the *Lido de Paris, C’est Magique* before becoming the sole artistic and creative designer for the 2003 edition of *Bonheur* at the *Lido de Paris*. Rambert believes that all of his experiences contributed to his creativity and that without all those influences his language as a director would be totally different.

Rambert says that the biggest challenge when creating a show such as the *Lido de Paris* is to be able to reinvent the show each time, while still keeping the same intellectual concepts and codes that are identified with the *Lido de Paris*. Arden himself advised Rambert that “once you have that legacy, then do your own thing” (Rambert *Oral interview*). Arden also told Rambert that if he didn’t have his name on a poster by the age of forty-five, to give it up and find another line of work. Rambert says that he was forty-five when his name appeared on the poster for *C’est Magique*.

In his oral interview, Rambert says that your life experiences provide you with references you can draw on during the long process of creation. His influences go back through both European cultural influences of the ballet, of music, of art, of opera as well as American cultural influences of choreographers such as Jack Cole, Busby Berkley, Bob Fosse and the theater of Broadway. Rambert says you do not even realize the daily nourishment you are taking in is there and then “two years later, three years later, ten years later it comes forth and goes to staging, to the aesthetic, with choreography, musical choices”. He states that eventually it goes to what’s essential which is creating the right kind of emotion. Rambert feels strongly that if you are an honest creator, you want to teach people something, to take them somewhere.

For *Bonheur*, Rambert discussed how he felt he was taking a huge risk by stopping the

show for a love song with a woman crying over her lost love that lasted two and a half minutes. This hadn't been done in a *Lido de Paris*, the artistic director for the *Folies Bergère* in Las Vegas show before because, according to Rambert, most people did not go to the *Lido de Paris* to witness a bad love affair. The title of the show *Bonheur* translates as happiness. Rambert explained how he felt happiness is not something simple, not something one-dimensional and could go all over the place. He wanted to show the audience that happiness "could also happen through trials, through bad love affairs". Rambert said he was trying to achieve an emotional reaction, rather than having it treated as a cabaret number. He eventually realized the number had to build and speak to the people about something they knew. Rambert says that this number touched the audience as it was a different focus from the gorgeous women with lavish costumes and the extravagant set changes in front of the audience. Rambert said he was right to take the risk and to "never be traditional, always try to invent" (Rambert *Oral interview*).

Rambert stated that he began the process for creating *Bonheur* twenty-two months in advance, as soon as he got the go-ahead from the owners of the *Lido de Paris*, the Clericos. Rambert spent three months writing the skeleton of the show before hiring and bringing the rest of the designers onboard. He had nineteen months to finish the script, finalize budgets and approve sketches, the building of the sets, casting, and rehearsals. Rambert in his oral interview explained that if you take the work of being the creative director on your shoulders, you have to know that for absolutely everything, everyone is going to come to you for an answer as that is the role of the artistic director. He says "So you better be on top of it". Rambert said that it was important to do your homework. This is the time spent between you and your own intelligence, your own vision of things, your own sensitivity to music, to painting, to dance, to nature, to a beautiful sky, to the ocean to whatever it is or else it is going to go haywire. Unfortunately, he

said that he has seen so many people not prepared or not knowing what they are going to do.

Rambert said that hopefully, they can manufacture something. He says he would be incapable of working that way.

In his interview, Rambert likened the role of the artistic director to that of the spine of the body. If the spine is strong, that's a good thing, because it supports the rest of the body, which is comprised of everyone else involved. Unlike writing a book where you only need paper, pen and someone to proof your book, Rambert said that for a show you need musicians, dressers, technicians, set designers, lighting designers. You need a hundred people and then over a hundred various craftsmen because afterwards you need painters for the sets, you need embroiderers; you need people who know how to make feathers and all that.

Rambert said he trusts and respects his designers completely, as they spend many hours, days and week discussing the new edition, the themes, the contents, and the emotions along with cultural references that may influence the designers. This back and forth dialogue is helpful in determining exactly how the show is being viewed. For example, when Edwin Piekny, the costume designer for *Bonheur* told Rambert when they were discussing a sketch, "Well, ok Pierre. I got what you meant but I see it different". Rambert said he replied to Piekny, "Ok Edwin. Show me, show me." (Rambert *Oral interview*) In this case, Rambert says he went with what Piekny had suggested as Rambert could understand how the change that the costume designer had suggested would make the vision of the show clearer to the audience. The program for *Bonheur* says that the show's central storyline is "a woman's quest for happiness...through an emotion-packed journey to a land of spectacular fantasy and discovery..." (*Bonheur* program) This description illustrates how Rambert introduced something new into the showgirl spectacular by combining his vision of emotion with the traditional elements of feathers and jewels.

Donn Arden: The Modern Ziegfeld

The name most associated with the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles was Donn Arden (1915-1994) who was responsible for bringing the first showgirl extravaganza to Las Vegas in 1958. *Las Vegas Mercury* writer Gregory Crosby credits Arden for “making the classic showgirl one of the city’s most enduring institutions.” Arden’s productions were purely visual, presented with a flair for spectacle and beauty. Las Vegas *Lido de Paris* company manager Michael Pratt stated that Arden’s shows had an “elegance and sophistication of how they were put together” that was really unmatched (Pratt *Oral interview*). Every one of the people who worked with Arden commented on the level of sophistication he brought to his shows that elevated them beyond a typical feather show. He was very knowledgeable about every aspect of show business and how different elements would work together to surprise the audience time and again. Long before the debut of the musical *Miss Saigon* and its famous helicopter, Arden had done a number for the Paris *Lido de Paris* that had jewel thieves breaking into the Louvre museum. Pratt recalled that as part of the number, they slid down to the stage from helicopters that were hovering over the stage. This was a very sophisticated and spectacular approach to a jewel heist number.

Arden was ruthless in his quest to hiring the best performers for his shows and was notorious for knowing instantly whether a performer had what it took to be in one of his shows. Arden knew right away whether someone was any good, sometimes as soon as a singer opened their mouth or a dancer walked across the stage. Depending on his mood, Arden could be either very charming or not. In *The First 100*, producer Breck Wall recalled that Arden would “rant and rave all the time...but he really knew what he was doing. He had an eye for talent and everybody else was just wasting his time” (256).

According to the Special Collections at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, Arden Carlyle Peterson was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1915. His father died early on and Arden was raised in a single-family home. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Arden says he started tap dancing for quarters in the speakeasies around St. Louis when he was a teenager. The money he earned from dancing helped support him and his mother and paid for dance lessons. Arden was influenced by the movie musicals of the 1930s, particularly those of Fred Astaire. Shortly after high school he changed his name to Donn Arden¹⁴. He started taking dance lessons from Robert Alton¹⁵ whom Arden regarded as “both a mentor and an inspiration” (Bell, “Donn Arden’s Art..). Arden won a local Charleston contest in the 1930s, along with another dancer named Ginger Rogers, which launched him into vaudeville. Arden patterned his solo act on the style of Fred Astaire before his agent told him to get a female partner. In typical Arden style, Arden didn’t get one female partner, he got four: two sets of twins. The new act was called *Donn Arden and the Artists Models*. (Fig. 6) They were so successful; they would be held over for several weeks wherever they performed. Arden said that was when he first got into staging and choreographing. He had to change the act with new costumes and dance routines when they were held over and he thought why not add more girls and be a house line¹⁶? (Bell 6). This arrangement went over so well; his troupe was able to stay three or four years at the same vaudeville house. After that, Arden started putting together house lines of dancers for other theaters. Arden said that he had up to twelve shows running at the same time in the U.S. by the time he was twenty (Hopkins and Evans 256). Arden eventually wound up dancing less and choreographing and staging more which added immensely to his later skills as a choreographer and director.

¹⁴Arden added the extra ‘n’ to Don on the advice of a numerologist who believed nine to be a lucky number

¹⁵Robert Alton (1902-1957) was an American dancer and choreographer for Broadway and Hollywood, noted for discovering Gene Kelly. His shows on Broadway included: *DuBarry Was a Lady*, *Panama Hattie*, *Anything Goes*, *Pal Joey*, *Hazel Flagg*. *Hollywood: Harvey Girls*, *Easter Parade*, and *Show Boat*.

¹⁶House lines of dancers were attached to the theatre (house) to perform between acts and back-up the stars.

According to a [1988] interview in the *Los Angeles Times* Arden moved to New York City and “cornered the girl market before modeling came in” (6). In a precursor to his requirements for his Las Vegas showgirls, Arden stated that he wouldn’t hire anyone under 5’9” to be in a dance line, saying “I wanted ‘em tall and leggy”. Another trademark became apparent at this time as well when he said that the girls knew he would dress them for the shows better than anyone else, spending \$50 on shoes for each dancer. That was a lot of money in the 1930s when the average cost of a pair of shoes for a woman was less than five dollars. The dancers Arden provided for the nightclubs featured beautifully costumed and elegant lines of girls.

Arden spent several years staging shows for American troops during WWII before returning to the major nightclub circuit. Arden staged shows for the *Lookout House* in Cincinnati, the *Latin Quarter* in New York City as well as nightclubs in New Jersey, Miami and Los Angeles. He also staged shows at *Frank Sennes’ Moulin Rouge Hollywood* showroom in Hollywood in the 1950s.¹⁷ Foreshadowing his later work in Las Vegas showrooms, the *Moulin Rouge Hollywood* had a seating capacity of 1250 and the show had “more than 100 beautiful singers and dancers who paraded around the large stage in costumes costing in excess of \$75,000”. The *Moulin Rouge Hollywood* also provided a children’s show that was performed on Sunday afternoon, featuring a kiddie circus, complete with clowns, balloons and toys. (Fig. 7) LeCoque said that Arden always loved circuses and would often stage circus numbers in his shows. The *Finale* of Arden’s *Hello Hollywood Hello* (1978) extravaganza in Reno was an enormous circus number.

In the 1950s, almost every Hollywood star and celebrity had an act that played in the Las Vegas showrooms. The stars that starred in film musicals such as Donald O’Connor or comedians such as Red Skelton seemed to be a perfect fit for the Las Vegas entertainment stages.

¹⁷Frank Senne’ *Moulin Rouge Hollywood* opened in 1953 in the former Earl Carroll Theater in Hollywood.

The gentlemen who ran the nightclubs in Cleveland wanted Arden to do the shows for their new property in Las Vegas, the Desert Inn. Arden said many years later that he “felt obligated to go...they were ‘the boys’ and they paid well” (Hopkins and Evans 256). Arden was hired by Desert Inn Entertainment Director Frank Sennes in 1950 to stage the shows for several headliners such as Betty Grable, Betty Hutton, Jack Benny, Carmen Miranda and Danny Kaye. Sennes knew Arden’s work personally as Arden had created and staged all of the shows for Sennes at the *Moulin Rouge* Hollywood. By this time, Arden was very experienced as he had been staging shows for the nightclubs, ice-shows, the *Lido de Paris* in France in addition to headliner acts.

As the popularity of Las Vegas continued to grow, the costs associated with the headliners grew accordingly. For instance, the Riviera hotel paid Liberace \$50,000 per week in 1955 (Paskevich and Weatherford “Stage Struck...”). Although the casinos were making huge amounts of money, \$50,000 per week was still a lot of money for the casinos to pay for a weekly salary for a headliner. The ever increasing salary costs for the headliners paved the way for the introduction of the showgirl spectacular shows to Las Vegas. With the debut of the *Lido de Paris* show to the Stardust Hotel in 1958, casinos in Las Vegas had another entertainment alternative to the headliners. Just as it had happened at the *Folies Bergère* in the 1920s which led to the rise of the showgirl spectacles in Paris, the Las Vegas showgirl shows were seen as a less expensive alternative than a headliner. As in Paris, the Las Vegas spectacular and lavish showgirl shows became the stars rather than the headliners and the casinos didn’t have to rely on temperamental and expensive headliners.

By the opening of the *Lido de Paris* in 1958, Arden was already well known for choreographing and staging elaborate shows. Arden’s work in the large touring Ice Capades and

Ice Follies shows, his elaborate stage shows in Hollywood and his new and exciting editions of the Lido de Paris in Paris were all very successful and contributed to his reputation in the entertainment business. Arden's "special genius was in the creation of elaborate and breathtaking set-pieces, using a wide variety of materials and designing backdrops and stage areas which would show off the dancers to the best advantage" (Perry 172). Although the nudity was shocking for the American audiences, it wasn't done in a prurient manner. LeCoque says that the nudity wasn't meant to be pornographic like a strip club, but rather to elevate them like beautiful works of art (Hopkins and Evans 256). Arden didn't believe in complete nudity as he thought it was more exciting and provocative to leave something to the imagination, instead of what he called "here's two tits syndrome" (Castle 130).

When the *Lido de Paris* opened at the Stardust hotel, audiences saw the showgirls parading across the stage in their signature showgirl walk that Arden required them to learn. "There's a certain way a girl can walk, particularly when you're going across the stage," Arden said in a 1989 interview. "By simply twisting the foot, it swings the pelvis forward, which is suggestive and sensual. If you twist right and swing that torso, you get a revolve going in there that's just right. It isn't the way a woman should walk, necessarily, unless she's a hooker. You're selling the pelvis. That's the Arden Walk" (Hopkins and Evans 256). Ironically, this walk was often the most challenging aspect of being a showgirl for twenty-first century dancers that often required hours of practice to get it just right. The trained dancers had no problems picking up the intricate choreography, but were often flummoxed by the mechanics of trying to coordinate their legs, hips and feet to produce the correct swing and rhythm. This was further complicated by the wearing of the three-inch dance heels, as many dancers did not train extensively in heels in their dance classes anymore. When performed correctly, the showgirl would glide across the stage

effortlessly. If it wasn't performed correctly, it could look awkward and forced. It usually would take several weeks of practice to master the walk with the appropriate insouciance and attitude. Some performers never quite achieved the correct swing but were often encouraged by fellow cast members as they continued to practice the surprisingly difficult walk. At *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* the cast would give out awards for *Best Showgirl Walk* at the end of each contract period, which was a great honor to receive.

By the 1970s, Arden was already the preeminent director and creator of spectacular entertainment. Not only was Arden the genius behind several editions of the French stage spectacular *Lido de Paris*, both in Paris and in Las Vegas, he also created and staged other successful Las Vegas shows at the Desert Inn hotel. These shows were also full of spectacle but were created as a salute to America and Hollywood, rather than having a European flavor. In *Hello America!* (1964) Arden began the show in turn-of-the century New York and the Gay Nineties before moving on to San Francisco's Nob Hill and Barbary Coast, Chicago at the 1893 World's Fair., the sinking of the Titanic and finishing up with a Statue of Liberty finale number. *Hello, America!* was placed in the Congressional Record in 1965 for an outstanding display of patriotism by Mr. O'Neill of Massachusetts.¹⁸O'Neill stated that:

Hello America, with its clean and wholesome appeal to the entire family, has initiated and perpetuated a patriotic spirit that has given a new look to the entertainment field...I respectfully suggest that congressional recognition and commendation be accorded "*Hello America*" as a patriotic venture of the highest order and that these remarks be recorded in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD (Las Vegas Sun. *Congressional Record*).

Arden's productions of *Pzazz! 68 A Hollywood Happening* (1968) and *Pzazz! 70 and all that Jazz Baby* (1970) at the Desert Inn hotel were also enthusiastically received and greatly

¹⁸Congressman Thomas "Tip" O'Neill (1912-1994) was the former Speaker of the House of Representatives.

successful. Hank Greenspun wrote in the *Las Vegas Sun* newspaper that not even the work of Ziegfeld could compare to a Donn Arden show and that “From the rousing opening to the resplendent closing the audience sat electrified and entranced knowing they were watching one of the greatest shows ever produced in Las Vegas, or anywhere else for that matter.” Arden continued his Hollywood themed extravaganzas at the MGM Grand Hotels with his productions of *Hallelujah Hollywood* (1974-1980) in Las Vegas and *Hello Hollywood Hello* (1978-1989) in Reno. When *Hello Hollywood Hello* opened in 1978, *Time* magazine published an article that imagined a heavenly conversation between Louis B. Mayer and Busby Berkeley. Although the article was tongue-in-cheek, it did touch on Arden’s spectacular use of beautiful girls and special effects that used to be found only in the onscreen movie musicals. Arden’s method was to “start the show with an exclamation point, get it over with and get it off” (“Show Business: Well Hello, Reno”). *Hello Hollywood Hello* opened with an actual plane onstage, complete with beautiful showgirls standing on the wings, before quickly disappearing back into the cavernous stage.

Although Arden died on November 2, 1994, his legacy lives on around the world for elevating the Las Vegas showgirl and the stage spectaculars to glorious heights. Arden was considered such a significant influence on entertainment in Las Vegas that he was included in the 1999 book *The First 100 Portraits of the Men and Women Who Shaped Las Vegas*. Over the years, many producers have tried to replicate the showgirl shows that Arden created, with little success. Arden brought a sophistication and level of class to his productions that couldn’t be copied. This was often referred to as the Arden touch or the Arden magic. In what could be considered a circular pattern: Donn Arden brought the first showgirl spectacular to Las Vegas in 1958 with the *Lido de Paris* and *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* was the last of the showgirl spectaculars left in Las Vegas when it closed on February 11, 2016.(Fig. 8)

Conclusion

This chapter successfully explored how the Las Vegas showgirl came to be by looking at her historical background in America and Europe. Beginning with the nineteenth century chorus girl, I was able to provide detailed information about the beginnings of the showgirls and the venues they were featured at. Next, I was able to show how the showgirl developed by looking at the designers, producers and theaters of the *Ziegfeld Follies* and the *Folies Bergère* of the early twentieth century. The following section discussed the role of the artistic and creative director. This was assisted with an in-depth interview with the *Lido de Paris* artistic director Pierre Rambert on his creative process while creating the show *Bonheur* at the *Lido de Paris*. This chapter concluded with a detailed look at the background and influences of Donn Arden. Arden's showgirl spectacles at the *Lido de Paris*, *Hello America*, *Pzazz 68 and 70*, *Hallelujah Hollywood*, *Hello Hollywood Hello* and *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* were responsible for elevating the Las Vegas showgirl to her iconic status.

CHAPTER 2: COMPANY MANAGER—PERSONIFICATION OF ELEGANCE

The success of the imported *Lido de Paris* stage spectacular in 1958 was not lost on the owners of the hotels in Las Vegas. One year later, Lou Walters brought over the celebrated *Folies Bergère* from Paris and Frederic Apcar opened his *Casino de Paris* extravaganza at the Dunes hotel in 1963. All of these shows had immense casts filled with singers and dancers and showgirls. Once the productions opened, the creative director and his team of designers and choreographers would move on to their next show. This left the day-to-day running and maintenance of the show to the company manager. In this chapter, I will look at the role of the company manager for the Las Vegas showgirl shows. I will begin by discussing the duties and functions of the company manager, with particular emphasis on the company manager position of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* showgirl spectacular. The second half of this chapter will look at the background and experiences of legendary company manager, Ffolliott "Fluff" LeCoque. LeCoque spoke to me in great detail about her long history as company manager, how she transitioned from performer to company manager and her performing experiences. The information for this chapter was gathered primarily from those conversations and interviews. LeCoque inspired, led, mentored, taught and trained thousands of singers, dancers and showgirls in her long career as a performer and company manager.

Role of the Company Manager

The role of the company manager for the Las Vegas production shows holds a unique position in today's theatrical management world. A stage manager is responsible for some of the duties of the company manager, but does not make payroll, distribute salaries or handle contracts according to the "Duties of A Stage Manager" document from Actors' Equity Association. A company manager is not as common as a stage manager on theatrical productions. If a

production does have a company manager and a production manager, the company manager will usually be responsible for the cast and the production manager will usually be responsible for the tech crew. This is exactly how the Las Vegas showgirl spectaculars were structured as well. The technical director, production or stage manager was in charge of the crew and the physical elements of the sets, lights and sound. The company manager was in charge of the performers and all artistic aspects of the production. However, both the company manager and stage manager worked together and would have meetings to discuss any concerns regarding the production. It is necessary to point out however, that the casts of the Las Vegas showgirl spectaculars generally were at least eighty or more performers. For the 1974 production of *Hallelujah Hollywood* at the MGM Grand hotel, LeCoque had a cast of one hundred and thirty-two performers to manage. The truly remarkable thing is that she did not have an assistant for that production and the show ran seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year for six years. For *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, with a similar sized cast, LeCoque was able to have an assistant company manager for the thirty-four year run of the show.¹⁹

Duties of the Company Manager

When she was company manager for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, LeCoque was asked by Bally's hotel to prepare a job description of her position. In her job description she wrote that the company manager was directly responsible for the quality of performance level and for maintaining and keeping the show in first class condition (Company Manager job description). In order to do so, the Las Vegas company manager was expected to perform many multiple functions and roles. The company manager job description went on to list her duties which included casting, conducting and scheduling all auditions and rehearsals, directing changes in

¹⁹ LeCoque had four assistant company managers during *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*: Michael Pratt (1980-1991), Adrian LePeltier (1991-1993), Liz Lieberman (1993-1995), Diane Palm (1995-2012). Palm became company manager in 2012.

staging and choreography, giving choreographic and performance notes to the performers, monitoring the production, recording the blocking books, calculating and submitting the cast payroll daily, typing contracts and addendums, distributing and receiving contracts, making budgets, staging and restaging the production nightly to accommodate the absence of performers and counseling performers as to theatrical standards, etiquette and professional integrity. The job description stated that the company manager was expected to create, supply, cast and manage payroll for publicity and marketing events. In addition to those roles, the Las Vegas company manager must also liaison with the various hotel departments to provide reports and documents concerning accidents, worker comp reports, employment, termination, status changes, safety, attendance, scheduling of vacations and leaves of absence. During the run of the production the Las Vegas company manager would perform the traditional roles of the casting director, choreographer, stage manager, payroll manager, business manager, choreographer, artistic director, employment department, human resources department and the worker's comp department along with publicity and marketing.

When LeCoque became company manager in the 1950s at the *Moulin Rouge Hollywood*, she was also performing in the show as one of the principal performers. LeCoque remarked that although there had been female choreographers, the company manager was usually a man's job. She didn't know why that was but speculated that maybe the bosses didn't think that a woman was capable of being tough enough. She explained that as the company manager you had to be able to tell the male performers in the show what to do. A lot of them didn't like it because they weren't used to a woman telling them what to do back then. According to LeCoque once they understood that you knew what you were doing, you gained their respect.

LeCoque provided an experience while performing at the Desert Inn that illustrated this

point perfectly. LeCoque forgot exactly what year this happened, but she knew it was after she had returned from Paris in 1953 and was working at the Desert Inn with the headliners: (Fig. 9)

The format was the typical nightclub format of a line of girls in an opening production number, an act, another production number, an act, then a third production number and a star to close the show. Before the show there would be dinner and dancing with an orchestra. For this particular night, it was a very special night because the orchestra was being broadcast to the Far East: Hong Kong, Shanghai and other places. They would announce “The orchestra from the Desert Inn in Las Vegas etc”, so it was a very big deal. When it was time for the show to start, they would raise the dance floor up about three feet off the floor. LeCoque recalled that they were wearing these long, beautiful elegant black dresses and big sweeping hats with big brims. The dresses were tight to the knees and then flounced out. She said that you really couldn’t kick or do anything except walk around and do chasses. LeCoque says that they came out and started to do their choreography and started to fall down. “And we couldn’t get up because we couldn’t bend our knees. We had to roll over on our sides, get on to our knees and try to get up while the hat was going every which way. It was a pan of worms!” Somebody had waxed the dance floor. LeCoque says she called up Allard Roen, who was in charge of the Desert Inn at that time for the syndicate and said, “Somebody waxed the floor, WHO waxed that floor?”. Roen told her it was so and so and “he’s back there, tell him to take it off.” LeCoque said that she had seen this guy backstage and she knew he was in charge because he had the keys. She said he was a man in his sixties with snow-white hair, 5’10” tall, well-dressed, well-built and had a “dour-face.” LeCoque said she never saw him crack a smile. She went backstage and told him that Mr. Roen said to take the wax off the

floor, that they had all fallen down and couldn't do the number. He said, 'No I won't.'

LeCoque said, "Listen you old bastard, you take that wax off the floor 'cause I'm calling Allard right now!" So she called Allard and told him. And he said to her, "You said what?" LeCoque replied, "I called him an old bastard and told him to take the wax off the floor." After that, the wax came off the floor and LeCoque never saw the dour-faced guy again. Many years later, LeCoque was talking to Bill DeAngelis, entertainment director for the MGM Grand Hotel and former stage manager for the Desert Inn Hotel and told him the story. LeCoque said that his face turned white and he said, "You called him what?" LeCoque repeated what she had said earlier to the man. LeCoque recalled DeAngelis being white as a sheet as he asked her, "Do you know who that was?" LeCoque responded that "No, she didn't know who he was." DeAngelis replied, "That was ice-pick Willie" and LeCoque replied "Who's that?"

This story illustrated the difficulties that LeCoque faced dealing with men who were not accepting that a woman could be in charge. It also illustrated that once you showed you knew what you were doing, you gained their respect.

Functions of the Company Manager

When I asked LeCoque why she was able to make the transition from dancer to company manager, she thought it was because she was an excellent teacher. LeCoque taught all the choreography for all of Arden's shows, after he had opened the show and left. She had to know every single step that everybody did in a show because she had to hire and teach all the replacements. When Arden would leave to do another show, he had to leave someone in charge to make sure the show was run correctly. LeCoque says the shows used to change every two weeks for the shows in Hollywood at the *Moulin Rouge Hollywood*. But that was when Arden

just had a line of girl dancers behind a star. When the shows started getting bigger, he didn't need to change the show as often. The shows went from changing every two weeks, to a month, then three months, six months and then finally a year.

The shows kept growing in size and became more expensive and elaborate. LeCoque recalled that there would be times when she would be performing in the show at night and rehearsing a different show during the day or rehearsing and hiring new people to put into the show. LeCoque auditioned dancers every Friday afternoon from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. Arden would come in if they needed to hire dancers unless he was out of town checking on his other shows. He was producing and directing shows all over the world. He had the *Lido de Paris* in Paris, plus ice shows like *Ice Capades* and *Ice Follies* and shows in South America, Beirut and other locations. If Arden wasn't available, then LeCoque would hire the dancers. LeCoque says she sometimes rehearsed twenty-four hours straight. The shows performed six days a week, two shows a night with a third show on Sunday afternoons. LeCoque was able to transition from a dancer to company manager because she was able to teach, could understand the workings of the show and was responsible for putting in the replacements for the show. But more than that, she got the job done and did it well. LeCoque always considered the show and what she needed to do to make it as good as she could (LeCoque *Oral Interview 9/7/2015*).

When running the shows as company manager, LeCoque considered managing people to be the greatest challenge. One of the most difficult things for the company manager to achieve in a long-running show is to keep the performance aspect of the dancers and singers up. Not only does a performer need to maintain stamina and energy for the performances, they also need to be able to deliver a quality performance. Many Broadway performers bemoan the grueling performance schedule of eight weekly shows and how difficult it is physically. Yet, Las Vegas

performers would normally perform thirteen weekly shows. These types of punishing schedules could often lead to a drop in performance level and it was the job of the company manager to monitor the performance levels of the company. LeCoque mentioned that it takes a great deal of experience on the part of the performers to find a level where they can do the same show, night after night and make it fresh and exciting for themselves. Sometimes it was hard for her as company manager because she didn't know when she hired them if they could sustain the energy over the length of the contract. A technique she would employ to combat that drop in performance energy, would be to move people around in order to challenge them with new choreography or numbers. Sometimes the girls in the show would ask to change lines and become showgirls or vice versa, just to do something new. But LeCoque cautioned that the ability to deliver and sustain a performance is really something that the performer had to find within themselves. She used the example of how actors can burn out onstage after doing a role for two years or so as a similar analogy: "They can no longer find it and so it shows in the performance" (LeCoque *Oral interview 4/20/2000*).

One aspect of the job of the company manager was to give corrections for incorrect choreography or a lazy performance. During the course of the run of the show, the performers might inadvertently alter some of the choreography or vocal notes. It was the company manager's job to watch every single step of choreography and listen to each note of a song to make sure that the choreography and songs were performed correctly. If the performer did something incorrectly, they would be given a correction. The performers came from all different backgrounds and training, but from the audience's point of view, everything had to be at the same level. According to LeCoque, that couldn't always be achieved, but that's what you aimed for. She also said that's why some people got more corrections than others as she was trying to

bring them up to the level where everyone else was at. The whole purpose of giving a correction was to learn from the correction and understand that it's part of the business to improve their performance and to improve the show. LeCoque said that it could be very frustrating because sometimes people took it personally and did not want to be corrected, to be thought of as imperfect. LeCoque said that there is no such thing as perfection and that there was not one single person who gave an absolutely perfect performance two shows a night, six days a week. She recalled, "There's always little mistakes made or they begin falling in a pattern or they ease off, get complacent. They don't realize that their energy going over the footlights is what excites the audience." However, LeCoque explained that if she saw something in a performer, she liked to give them a chance to improve. For example, if a performer didn't have a great deal of training, but the desire to be better, she would give them a chance to improve. "If she doesn't improve, she doesn't stay, but give her a chance" (LeCoque *Oral interview 4/20/2000*).

It could be difficult to have people not bring their personal problems into work with them. According to LeCoque, when you're onstage you can't let your personal problems show as people are paying to see you perform. She said, "You're supposed to be out there smiling and entertaining. It's up to the performers to keep themselves fresh and their energy up because that's what makes you professional. You can't show that you're sad, you're supposed to be out there smiling and entertaining" (LeCoque *Oral interview 4/20/2000*). Although this was sometimes a difficult adage to follow, most performers were able to keep their personal problems away from work. If they did have a problem they would oftentimes come to the company manager for advice or just to have someone to talk to.

Ffolliott "Fluff" LeCoque Biographical Background

Before becoming a company manager, LeCoque started out as a performer in nightclubs

and shows in Hollywood and Paris and moved up through the ranks. LeCoque was born in Butte, Montana in 1923 and her family moved to Seattle, Washington when she was about three.

LeCoque recalled that as a child, she was always dancing as soon as she heard music. LeCoque said that her parents couldn't stop her from dancing "and away I went". LeCoque remembered seeing the Salvation Army playing on the corner when she was about three years old. She ran over and started to dance and they would pass the tambourine around (LeCoque *Oral interview* 8/4/2013). Her parents enrolled her in formal dance lessons and she began taking lessons from Ruth Wood, who had been a disciple of Isadora Duncan.²⁰ After that LeCoque took from Arville Avery who had worked with Fanchon and Marco elaborate productions.²¹ LeCoque remembered the traveling shows as being fantastic. She recalled very vividly one show that started with a single lean female figure with a little crown on her head on stage. All of a sudden the back of the stage came up behind her, up, up, up. On this set piece "were the 'eyes' of a peacock's tail. When everything got into place, the eyes opened up and there were girls inside the eyes of the peacock's tail feathers" (LeCoque *Oral interview* 8/4/2013). LeCoque was about five or six years old and said this made a huge impression on her, as could be seen later in her career. LeCoque continued training in all forms of dance as a young girl with Sallie Sue White, who had taken over the dance studio that LeCoque trained at. LeCoque started performing at various ladies' clubs and smokers when she was around ten or eleven years old. Her mother would make her costumes and play the piano. When she was a few years older, LeCoque recalled running into a woman backstage at some of these performances named Rose, who had two daughters June and Louise. LeCoque says they were much more sophisticated than she was, but that didn't stop Mama Rose from telling LeCoque that she "ought to be a stripper." LeCoque's response was

²⁰Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) was an American modern dance pioneer.

²¹Fanchon and Marco produced prologues for the major movie houses, performing before and between the features with lavish traveling shows.

“huh?” (LeCoque *Oral interview 8/4/2013*). LeCoque wanted to be an actress and attended the University of Washington on an Evergreen drama scholarship. There were two theatres there: one was a theatre-in-the-round called the Penthouse Theatre and the other was a legitimate theatre called the Showboat. According to the book *Changing The Game: Women At Work in Las Vegas, 1940-1990*, LeCoque said it was great training as it was really like a job (Goodwin 1682). She also said that she was asked to give the football team ballet lessons to improve their coordination. This must have been good training for her years later, when she was asked to put people in the shows that didn’t have a great amount of training.

Although a lot of people at that time dreamed about being a movie-star, LeCoque never thought too much about being in the movies. She said that the stage was where she felt most at home and she wanted to go to New York to be on the stage, rather than being in the movies. LeCoque left college before she graduated with a small company called the Embassy Company. The company was formed by a husband and wife who had performed in vaudeville and was comprised of young actors and actresses. They performed plays that didn’t require royalties to perform such as Joseph Kesselring’s *Arsenic and Old Lace*. They got to New York in the middle of winter and worked in a theater on Skid Row, next to a whorehouse. The owners of the company skipped town and left the young performers high and dry with no money (Goodwin 1703). LeCoque wound up calling her dad, who sent her the money to return home, where she continued her studies and performing at the University of Washington. After graduation, LeCoque decided to go to California. Although LeCoque always thought she would perform on stage, she went to Hollywood to become an actress in the movies. “I was convinced Hollywood needed me as an actress...but they didn’t” (Callback).

In Hollywood in the 1940s, LeCoque made a couple of movie shorts, but never really did an acting part. In a 2000 interview, LeCoque said that for her, movies were a cold medium. She felt it was frightening because the camera reads your thoughts. She explained that “being on the stage, you can elaborate, you can act the part, you can feel the part, etc. But with a camera, it reads every single thought and unless you’re used to that closed in feeling, that concentration, it’s difficult.” In those days, the studios were very concerned with being photogenic and having a good camera angle for your face and profile. 1940s famous Hollywood film star Claudette Colbert was notorious for only allowing one side of her face to be filmed, as she had a bump on one side of her nose. According to LeCoque, the women in those days were painted and they were really photogenic. Being on stage you meant you didn’t have to worry if your profile was exactly right or if your three-quarter view is right on the camera. LeCoque was an extremely beautiful and photogenic woman, so it is incredible to think that the movie studios did not snap her up.

In Hollywood, LeCoque said that one of her first professional jobs as a dancer was at the famous *Florentine Gardens* nightclub.²² The format of the nightclub revues opened with a production of a line of girls, a Master of Ceremonies who was similar to a stand-up comic, an act, the star of the show: a famous singer or act, then a closing production number. The shows would change every one to two weeks. The *Florentine Gardens* was owned by Slapsie Maxie Rosenblum, a famous heavyweight prize fighter.²³ During her 2000 oral interview, LeCoque related a story from her time at the *Florentine Gardens* that illustrated a typical type of humor that was featured in nightclub entertainment. The headliner for that particular week was Slapsie

²²The Florentine Gardens was a nightclub that attracted a famous crowd of movies stars, agents, athletes, etc.

²³Max Everitt Rosenblum, aka Slapsie Maxie (1907-1976) was the 1932 Light Heavyweight World Champion, turned actor and nightclub owner.

Max Rosenbloom and Max Baer.²⁴ LeCoque recalled that Slapsie had cauliflower ears and acted slightly punchy all the time and Max Baer was very tall, dark and handsome. They were totally opposite from each other and were good foils for each other for their act. LeCoque said that one day Slapsie asked her to do a bit in their act and she agreed. She said she was twenty-six years old, “flaming red hair, curvy body and luscious, or so I was told.” Slapsie told LeCoque to just walk through the audience and when she heard the word “verandah”, she was to say “Hi, Slapsie!”. The act started and after a few minutes, Max Baer started telling Slapsie about this wonderful party he went to: that was LeCoque’s cue to start walking through the audience. Here is how LeCoque described the act: “Max Baer said to Slapsie, ‘So, what did you do last night?’ Slapsie replied, ‘Oh nothing, I just stayed home and laid out on my verandah.’ This was my cue and I said, ‘Hi Slapsie!’ and Slapsie says, ‘Oh, hi Verandah!’” LeCoque said that the audience roared with laughter, especially since she had no idea what the punch line was going to be! At this time, most of the clubs that LeCoque worked for were owned by the mob. The nightclubs came out of the speakeasy area and after prohibition; they opened up all types of clubs. Although some states or counties didn’t allow gambling, most of the clubs had behind-closed-door gambling areas.

LeCoque first worked in Las Vegas in 1947 at the Last Frontier Hotel for six weeks, appearing as a singer with Chuck Gould’s Orchestra. In Goodwin’s book, LeCoque said that she didn’t really consider herself a singer, but she looked good playing the maracas and she was dating the orchestra leader. (1704) At that time, the contracts were quite short in comparison to the longer contracts offered by the later showgirl spectacles. This was because the cost involved in the production of the showgirl shows was so much higher than the costs associated

²⁴Max Baer (1909-1959) was the 1934 Heavyweight World Champion, turned actor. His son Max Baer Jr. is best known for playing Jethro on the television series *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

with the floor shows for the 1940s nightclubs. In order to continue to work, dancers would travel back and forth on the nightclub circuit. LeCoque went back to Hollywood before returning for a show at the Thunderbird Hotel. While at the Thunderbird Hotel, LeCoque participated in the age-old Las Vegas publicity machine of photographing pretty girls to promote a product or place. LeCoque was crowned Miss Thunderbird and was the first girl photographed wearing a bikini in Las Vegas. (Fig. 10) LeCoque later commented that the photographer wanted her to dive into the pool, but she declined, saying it was a terry-cloth bikini and “you know what happens to terry cloth when it gets wet!” (LeCoque *Oral interview* 4/20/2000). In 1951 LeCoque received an offer to go to Paris from Jerome Medrano who owned the *Cirque Medrano* in Paris, a famous circus that also produced spectacular entertainments.²⁵ (Sewers “Fluff LeCoque”) The name of the show was *Hollywood Extravaganza* and for a year, LeCoque performed in Paris as the star of the *Cirque Medrano* show. Part of her duties for that show involved auditioning and hiring the dancers from Hollywood and arranging their transportation and accommodations in Paris.

LeCoque said in her 2000 oral interview that when she returned from Europe in 1953, she had \$20 in her pocket and needed to look for a job. She had gone to the *Copacabana* nightclub in New York City, but they didn’t have a job for another ten days and she couldn’t wait that long. She went to the Arden-Fletcher offices in New York City and was quickly hired to perform at the *Lookout House* nightclub in Cincinnati (Goodwin 1747). LeCoque was there for about six months before Arden hired her for a new show he was doing at the Desert Inn hotel in Las Vegas. That was the beginning of LeCoque’s working relationship with Arden. It was at the

²⁵ Cirque Medrano began in 1873 as Cirque Fernando in Pigalle, Paris before being bought by one of the clowns Boum-Boum (Geromino Medrano), a former acrobat and trapeze artist. Famous impressionist painters such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Seurat and Renoir often painted the clowns, equestrians and artists of the Cirque Medrano. On Geromino’s death, the Cirque was left to his five year old son, Jerome Medrano (1907-1998). Jerome Medrano took over as director from 1928-1963 and presented all the great stars of the circus and theatrical world in his Cirque Medrano. The Cirque Medrano was bought out by a rival circus, Cirque d’Hiver in 1963 and was demolished in 1972.

Desert Inn hotel that LeCoque worked with stars such as Andy Williams (to whom she taught a tap routine), Jerry Lewis and Carmen Miranda (Sewers “Fluff LeCoque”). LeCoque was asked by Arden to return to California to open a new show at Frank Sennes’ *Moulin Rouge Hollywood*. The Moulin Rouge Hollywood was going to be a big spectacular and Arden wanted LeCoque to be part of the show.

Frank Sennes (1903-1993) was the entertainment director of the Desert Inn hotel when it first opened and also had an agency that booked entertainment all over the country (Goodwin 1782). Sennes began his career in Warren, Ohio booking bands such as Guy Lombardo and Rudy Vallee for the local teen-age dances. After that, Sennes booked acts for vaudeville before coming to Hollywood in 1930. He was put in charge of the well-known *Hollywood Gardens* nightclub and hired Betty Grable as a dancer for that club, before she became the famous movie-star. Sennes purchased the former Earl Carroll Theatre ²⁶ in Hollywood in 1953 and renamed it *Frank Sennes’ Moulin Rouge Hollywood*. LeCoque was hired to be principal dancer, company captain and production manager for the shows at the *Moulin Rouge Hollywood*. LeCoque performed in and ran the shows for ten years. During that time, Arden produced six new and different French-themed *Moulin Rouge Hollywood* shows: *Voici Paris, Ca, C’est Paris* (1954), *Paris Toujours, C’est La Vie* (1957), *Pariscopes* and *Wonderful World* (1959). It is worth noting that the price of admission in 1958 included dinner, dancing and the show for \$6.85 (Sewers “Fluff LeCoque”). LeCoque returned to Las Vegas to stay in 1963 when Arden asked her to be part of his newest show at the Desert Inn hotel. Las Vegas had fully embraced the showgirl spectacle by 1963, with the *Lido de Paris*, *Folies Bergère* and *Casino de Paris* shows. The

²⁶ Earl Carroll Theatre was the second of two theatres built by the Broadway producer, Earl Carroll. The first was in New York City and the second was on Sunset Blvd. in Hollywood, CA. Carroll was a contemporary of Ziegfeld and he had inscribed over the entrance to his theatres: “Through these portals pass the most beautiful girls in the world”.

simple line of chorus dancers behind a star had been replaced by a demand for the extravagant costumes, amazing sets and effects and the large casts. The shows at the Desert Inn were just as magnificent as the French-themed shows, but were presented with a distinctly Hollywood theme, as was reflected in the programs. The program for *Pzazz 68* lists the following act and scene titles: *Hollywood High Camp*, *Pzazz Hollywood*, *Astaire Time*, *To Bing, Bob and Dorothy "With Love"*, *The Road to Morocco* and *A Salute to Beau Geste*.

LeCoque performed onstage until she was in her forties at the Desert Inn shows, performing her dual roles as company manager and performer. When asked what had caused her to make to full transition from performer to company manager, she said that "I was pretty well up there in age and then I was graduated down to being the lead in three numbers, to being the lead in two numbers, to one number. And I was still teaching and I said that's enough of this" (LeCoque *Oral interview 4/20/2000*). When the show *Pzazz 70* closed at the Desert Inn, LeCoque retired completely from show business

During an oral interview in 2000, LeCoque recalled how she was hired as the company manager for the 1974 spectacular *Hallelujah Hollywood* at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas. LeCoque was in retirement when Arden contacted her yet again in 1973. She received a call from Arden who had been hired by the MGM Grand hotel to produce and direct a new show. Arden asked if LeCoque wanted to go back to work but he also told her "that there were other people who were up for the job" and that they'd have to discuss it further. A week later, Arden called LeCoque and said that Al Benedict and Bernie Rothkopt, who were in charge of the MGM Grand hotel, would like to see her. LeCoque met with them for lunch and they told her they wanted her to be the company manager for the new show. She said fine and they asked what she was asking for her salary. Before she gave them a number, she told them that she realized she

had been out of contact for a few years and she knew it was a new venture and that she would essentially be on trial. But she said that the “size of this cast is twice as many as I ever handled before and to have that many people, that much talent onstage, you are going to need somebody that knows the business from the ground up and who has done it before and who is able to show them what to do.” After LeCoque gave them her asking price, they told her that they had a lesser amount in mind. LeCoque replied, “Sorry gentlemen, that’s my price and it’s under what I should be getting!” According to LeCoque, after a few minutes of silence, one of them looked at the other and said, “Give it to her” (LeCoque *Oral interview 4/20/2000*). Once again this showed that if you knew what you were doing and could do the job, you gained the respect of the men who ran the casinos.

When *Hallelujah Hollywood* closed in 1980, LeCoque was fifty-seven years old and already hard at work on Arden’s next new show, *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. LeCoque finally retired in 2012 at the age of eighty-eight. LeCoque had been the company manager for Arden’s shows at the MGM Grand, now Bally’s hotel, for an amazing thirty-nine years. LeCoque passed away December 10, 2015 and the closing announcement of *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* was posted two days later on December 12th. There will never be another individual so unique, so talented or loved in the Las Vegas entertainment community. Bill Sewers summed up her spirit very eloquently in a 2001 article on LeCoque, “Elegant, gracious, knowledgeable, disciplined and highly respected, Fluff LeCoque personifies all of the qualities she expounds and continues to transport them to glorious life on the stage through her work with *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* The nightly reflection of her essence is brilliant and breathtaking” (Fig. 11)

Conclusion

With the import of the *Lido de Paris* show to Las Vegas in 1958, other hotels soon

followed suit with their own showgirl spectaculars. The number of dancers, singers and showgirls employed to perform in those shows was huge, with upward of eighty to one hundred and thirty performers per show. Once a showgirl spectacle was opened, the creative team did not stay and run the shows. The work of managing those huge showgirl spectaculars and the cast mainly fell to the company manager. This chapter on the company manager proved how vital that position was to the structure of the Las Vegas showgirl spectaculars by discussing the role of the company manager and how those duties and functions differed from a stage manager. In this chapter I was able to detail how legendary company manager Ffolliott “Fluff” LeCoque was able to run and maintain the artistic integrity of *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* stage spectacular for over thirty years by looking at her background as a performer and company manager. This chapter proved that it would be impossible to maintain and run the showgirl spectaculars without a knowledgeable and experienced company manager. In order to show how the company manager was influential in the development of the showgirl and the showgirl spectacles, this chapter examined the role of the company manager at great length. First I discussed the duties of the company manager followed by the functions of the company manager. In order to do so, I used oral interviews and ephemera from the company manager of *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* showgirl spectacular. I followed this with a detailed background examination of the well-known Las Vegas company manager Ffolliott “Fluff” LeCoque, who has inspired many a performer through her long career.

CHAPTER 3: HOW LARGE IS THAT SHIP? IT'S ENORMOUS!

The elaborate Las Vegas stages created the perfect setting for the showgirl. Unlike the New York Broadway and the London West End theatres, the Las Vegas stages were large and built specifically for the stage spectacles that featured the showgirls. As the stage shows in Las Vegas evolved from the nightclubs and floor shows, the demands for larger sets and scenic elements grew. From the very beginning of the showgirl shows in Las Vegas in 1958, the combination of beautiful girls and elaborate sets and effects was a knock-out. Ralph Pearl wrote in the *Las Vegas Sun*, after the debut of the imported French showgirl spectacular, the *Lido de Paris* at the Stardust Hotel, “Now the stage came alive. A lot of naked chests, attached to pretty gals, came down on elevators from the ceiling! Other naked chests, attached to other pretty girls, made up the backdrop. They came up from sunken stages and off the wings. In a couple of minutes a curtain went up revealing a huge swimming pool and some more naked mermaids. Shades of Cecil B. DeMille! What next?” (Rinella 84). It is of note that Pearl gave equal mention to the elaborate scenic effects of the show, as well as the “naked chests,” which demonstrates how much of an impact the stage elements had on an audience.

In this chapter, I intend to show how the physical elements of the Las Vegas showgirl productions contributed to the larger-than-life image of the showgirl by discussing the stage and scenic elements of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, which were designed by Ray Klausen. First, I will examine the role of the scenic designer by looking at the background and methodology of Ray Klausen. Next, I will take a closer look at the production elements found in a Las Vegas production show by discussing the stage and the scenic effects used in *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. The last segment will examine how the sets were manufactured for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* and how the crew produced the elaborate scenic elements, which could only be found in a Las Vegas

showgirl spectacular. All of the information on Klausen and his methodology of design was gathered from his 2015 oral interview.

The Role of the Scenic Designer

In order to be presented properly in a Las Vegas production show, the showgirl needed to be displayed within a magnificent setting, which usually culminated in giant staircases and crystal chandeliers. Grand staircases allowed the showgirls to parade “up-and-over” the staircase in order to display themselves and their elaborate costumes to their best advantage, as seen in various editions of the *Ziegfeld Follies* in New York City and the *Folies Bergère*, *Casino de Paris* and *Lido de Paris* shows in Paris. In addition to the beautiful staircases and chandeliers, Arden’s shows also featured elaborate scenery and effects centered around a theme of cataclysmic destruction. In the book, *The First 100 Portraits of the Men and Women Who Shaped Las Vegas*, Arden was referred to as “The Master of Disaster” and “the don of destruction” for his larger-than-life production numbers, which “pitted beauty against special-effects beasts” (Hopkins and Evans 255). Arden’s onstage depictions of historic disasters such as the San Francisco 1906 earthquake and fire, the burning of the Hindenburg and the destruction of Atlantis challenged his scenic designers to produce the massive sets and effects that would deliver what was referred to as the Donn Arden touch.

***Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* Scenic Designer: Ray Klausen**

Ray Klausen is an award-winning production designer, artistic director and set designer who designed the sets for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* at the MGM Grand hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. According to his biography, Klausen graduated from Yale Drama School in 1967 and accumulated a long list of theater and television credits, plus three Emmy awards for set designs and another twelve nominations (Ray Klausen). During his 2015 oral interview, Klausen

remembers his parents introduced him to live theater when they took him to *Radio City Music Hall* when he was six years old. Rather than being impressed with the dancing Rockettes, Klausen recalled being wowed by the curtain, which certainly was a foreshadowing of his future career as a set designer. As an adolescent, he would save his money and take the train from Long Island into Manhattan, to see Broadway shows. Klausen wanted to work in the theatre designing scenery, but initially took a more practical job teaching junior high school while also pursuing a Master's degree at New York University. With encouragement from his scenic design professor Patton Campbell, who told him he must "go to Yale", Klausen applied and was accepted at Yale and studied under scenic designer Donald Oenslager. Klausen credited Yale with providing him with the ability "to present your designs and deliver workable sets." He also noted that "making it through (Yale) made one very strong" as the design department at that time would only graduate 25% of its students. In addition to his training, Yale also contributed to his financial support and in gratitude, Klausen set up The *Ray Klausen Design Scholarship*, for second- and third-year Design students at Yale.

Upon graduation in 1967, Klausen initially found it difficult to break into the New York theater design scene and chose to go to California to look for design work in television. Within two years, Klausen had become one of the most sought-after television designers in Hollywood, eventually designing over four hundred shows. Klausen designed sets for television shows and specials for many performers including Cher, Perry Como, Bing Crosby, Andy Williams, Paul Anka, the Smothers Brothers, Alan King, Dorothy Hamill, John Davidson, John Denver to list a few. Klausen was also the production designer and art director for five Academy Awards shows, three SAG Awards shows, seven American Music Awards shows, two Tony Awards shows and

two Emmy Awards shows.²⁷ In addition to television, Klausen designed sets for productions at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and the St. Louis Rep, as well as the large Donn Arden showgirl spectacles *Hello, Hollywood Hello* (1978) in Reno, Nevada and *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* (1981) in Las Vegas. After working in Hollywood for many years, Klausen returned to New York City to continue to work in theater. Klausen has designed nine Broadway shows and several off-Broadway and regional productions since his return²⁸ ("Ray Klausen").

Ray Klausen: Methodology

When I asked him during his oral interview about his methodology of design, Klausen related how fortunate he was to be able to go to Yale for three years to learn how to design. That training allowed him to observe details and take chances in his designs. As one example of the training process at Yale, Klausen said that the instructor would "do things like pass a box of seashells around to the class and let you take one. And they'd say, 'Okay, look at that seashell, study it and then design a set for *Ring Around the Moon*.'" This forced him to learn to really take a look at details. Klausen also would store things in the back of his mind, which he could later incorporate into his designs. Klausen says that he's been known to talk to a producer's wife, who has on a phenomenal pin and say, "See that pin, you're going to see it on the next American Music Awards Show" because he would be able to incorporate what he saw in the pin and give it his own spin and make it special. For *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, Klausen designed a set that was silver and triangular, with spikes for *Act 1, scene 8: The Hollywood "Show Biz" Panorama*. Klausen says that this design came from seeing costume designer Pete Menefee's costume

²⁷ Klausen designed sets for the Academy Awards in 1996, 1991, 1982, 1980, 1977, the SAG Awards in 2003, 2001, 1999, the American Music Awards in 1997, 1991, 1990, 1989, 1985, 1984, 1974, the Tony Awards in 1986, 1985 and the Emmy awards in 1986 and 1985..

²⁸ Klausen's Broadway set design credits included *Burn the Floor* (2009), *Liza's at the Palace* (2008), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (2008), *On Golden Pond* (2004), *Brooklyn* (2004), *Big River* (2003), *Bea Arthur on Broadway* (2002), *Big River* (1985).

sketches, because he had just loved what Menefee had done in his costume sketch for that number. Klausen said he was able to look at Menefee's design and then twist it around and incorporate the spikes of the costume design into his set design for *Act I: Scene VIII*. For Klausen, "Sometimes the set comes out of the costuming, sometimes the costumes come out of the set, it just varies"(Klausen *Oral interview*).

When I asked about his usual methodology in approaching a design project, Klausen said that it depended on the type of job, as he works on such a range of shows. For television, there is usually very little time, but because Klausen can design very, very fast, he can sit down and do two or three sets for the *American Music Awards* in two hours. This ability to design fast came directly from his work in television, where he started by designing Cher's television series in 1975 and would have to come up with six or seven new sets a week. Over time, the process became easier because he had many more experiences and a wealth of knowledge to draw from that he didn't have when he first started designing. According to Klausen, the challenge for a designer comes from trying to make each design new and different. Klausen in his interview said that a designer never wants to copy themselves or other people. For Klausen, "It's much more fun to be innovative, to come up with really wonderful ideas" (Klausen *Oral interview*).

Donn Arden's Jubilee! Scenic Design

For *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, Klausen spent two years working on the show, while also doing a lot of other shows at the same time. MGM rented a house for Klausen in West Hollywood in order for him to work on the set designs for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* He said he had an incredible support system, with twelve assistants at one point. They were drafting in every room of the house: the dining room, the two bedrooms and the hallway. The challenge was to keep all of those assistants busy getting something ready. When Klausen and his team had

something for Donn Arden to see, they would contact Arden to have him come over and view a model they had constructed. According to Klausen, he didn't have hard deadlines, such as "you have to have something to me by Tuesday" (Klausen *Oral interview*). Because Arden was very particular, Klausen said that it was easy to work for him. Arden would have ideas about the sets but if Klausen came up with something that was really terrific, Arden would acquiesce to Klausen's design. This was because Arden was all about getting the best show possible. Klausen was also constantly checking in with wardrobe, making sure that Bob Mackie and Pete Menefee, the costume designers were in agreement with the direction that the designs for the show were going. For example, if the color of the costume in the *Red Fans* number had changed to lime green, Klausen would need to know as his set design was built around a red color palate and vice versa. If Klausen designed the opening of a set-piece to be a certain height, then Menefee would have to make sure his costume designs would be able to fit through that sized opening.

Klausen said that as part of his design process, he begins by researching the subject of the number or production. If for example, a number is based on jewel looks such as diamonds and pearls, then he starts doing a lot of jewel research. If the number is more of a vaudeville look, then he researches that history. Once Klausen has done his research, he focuses in on what he feels is appropriate for the number and fine tunes it from there. While Klausen was designing the *Titanic* production number for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, he would go to the picture library at the New York Public Library, to get his research. He also has an extensive research library of his own and uses it as well. According to Klausen, it would have been so much easier and probably more authentic to do research on the Titanic today because of the internet. Most of the research available in 1978 was in black and white, so there were few color images to work from. An example of this, according to Klausen was that, "while the railings in the Grand Salon were

authentic, the coloring was not necessarily.”

Klausen discussed how he also had to factor into his designs the durability of materials as well as safety issues and budget. In the *Titanic Grand Salon* set, there was a velvet pouf that the cast would sit on during the number. The challenge for Klausen as a designer was to find a velvet fabric that would not be ruined, as velvet is easily rubbed and looks terrible quickly when worn. Klausen found a velvet fabric that was guaranteed to hold up to 50,000 rubs and commented that the material still looked wonderful, when he saw the piece in 2015. Klausen said that he knew that the poufs were the original fabric which meant that those set pieces had been part of the show for thirty-four years. An important concern to Klausen while designing the sets was safety. Klausen said that due to the enormous stage and the size of the scenic elements, he was very aware of making the set safe for the performers. Klausen felt it was a big responsibility and did not want to be responsible for anyone getting hurt due to his designs. When I asked about his design budget for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, Klausen remarked that he never had a budget: “I just designed what I wanted and what Donn agreed to, that was it.” Money seemed to be no object, except for one time: Klausen designed a rhinestone curtain and Bill DeAngelis, the Entertainment Director for the MGM Grand hotel during the 1970s and 1980s, balked. To cut costs, Klausen found the original source for the rhinestones in a little town in Czechoslovakia sent one of his assistants to Czechoslovakia to negotiate the costs of the rhinestones. With the reduced costs, Klausen was able to have his rhinestone curtain for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*.

Production Elements

When an audience came to see a Las Vegas production show, they were also treated to awe-inspiring tableaux and stages that featured the latest advances in technology. For the opening of Donn Arden’s show, *Hallelujah Hollywood* in 1974, one writer wrote, “*Hallelujah Hollywood*

makes everything before it look like high school plays. The show is the biggest, splashiest, most lavish and impressive production I have ever seen” (“Hallelujah”). *Las Vegas Review Journal* writer Forrest Duke especially commented on the “Complicated, sophisticated mechanism complete with the latest computer systems make it possible for *Hallelujah Hollywood* to emerge in its incredible explosion of glory” (qtd. in Duke). One characteristic of a Donn Arden production was the use of a spectacular set piece. For his shows at the *Lido de Paris*, Arden’s scenic designers were challenged with “The Sinking of the Galleon” and “The Eruption of Mount Fujiyama” (Rinella 87). The following sections will discuss the stage and scenic elements of *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* to show how unique these elements were to the Las Vegas production shows that presented the traditional showgirl.

The Jubilee Stage

The Jubilee stage was originally built for Donn Arden’s previous extravaganza *Hallelujah Hollywood*, in the Ziegfeld Theatre at the MGM Grand Hotel, now Bally’s hotel.²⁹ The MGM Grand Hotel was designed by the noted Las Vegas architect, Martin Stern Jr.³⁰ According to the UNLV University Libraries Digital Collections information on Stern; Stern designed the MGM Grand Hotel to include “the enormous showrooms and theaters that the Las Vegas headliners and Donn Arden’s famous sequin-dripping, showgirl-plumed, Titanic-sinking extravaganzas now required.” Stern designed the theatre to the specific needs of a Donn Arden show, which included such varied production elements as lifts, revolves, living curtains, passarellas,³¹ water tanks and platforms that lowered from the ceiling. Arden had utilized many

²⁹*Hallelujah Hollywood* opened on April 26, 1974 and ran for 6 years, closing September 1980. Bally’s bought the MGM Grand Hotel from owner Kirk Kerkorian in 1985.

³⁰Martin Stern Jr. was one of the major resort hotel architects in the U.S. transforming the architectural landscape of Las Vegas. He’s noted for designing the MGM Grand Hotel, the International, the Stardust, Sands, Flamingo, Eldorado, Landmark, Aladdin, Harrah’s Hilton International, Mint, Thunderbird, Sahara and Circus, Circus hotels, plus other venues.

³¹ Passarella translates as runway in Italian.

of these effects for his previous Las Vegas shows at the Stardust and Desert Inn hotels, as well as at the *Lido de Paris* in Paris and the *Moulin Rouge* in Hollywood. But, the stage at the MGM Grand Hotel was designed on a much larger scale than his previous productions. *Hallelujah Hollywood* was designed to be the biggest production show in Las Vegas. In order to demonstrate the immense size of the stages for the Las Vegas production shows, I will now go into specific details regarding the dimensions of the Jubilee! stage. All of the information relating to specific measurements was taken from the Jubilee! technical packet.

The Jubilee stage is a typical box theatre arrangement with a permanent proscenium arch and semi-thrust stage and was the largest stage in Las Vegas, when it was built in 1973. The proscenium arch of the Jubilee stage is seventy- two feet across by thirty-five feet high and the stage has a depth of seventy-two feet to the back wall of the theatre. Broadway theatres are much smaller in contrast, even the bigger New York theatres according to the Shubert Organization website.³² In addition to the massive stage area, the Jubilee stage has considerable side wings on either side of the stage. The stage left off-stage wing area measures seventy feet by eighty-five feet by forty feet and the stage right off-stage wing area measures fifteen feet by eighty-five feet by eight feet. The total backstage width of the Jubilee stage is one hundred and ninety feet, from wall-to-wall. (Fig. 12)

The total height of the Jubilee stage from the basement to the top of the theatre is one hundred and fifty feet which is the equivalent in height, to a fifteen-story building. The basement of the stage is twenty feet below the stage. This is where the dressing rooms, the wardrobe department and the scenic and prop shops are situated. The orchestra was also located in the

³² The Lyceum Theatre has a proscenium opening of thirty-three feet and a height of thirty-one point eight inches. The Music Box Theatre has a larger proscenium opening of forty feet and a height of twenty-six feet while the Winter Garden Theatre has a proscenium opening of forty-four feet, ten inches and a height of twenty-four feet, four inches.

basement for Arden's production of *Hallelujah Hollywood* and for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*.³³

Located thirty feet below the basement level is the sub-basement of the theatre and below the sub-basement is a fifty-foot pit that contains the hydraulic elevator casings. The total area including the basement, sub-basement and pit is 100 feet from the stage.

Directly above the stage is the fly loft, which goes up to a height of one hundred feet from the stage. Traditionally, the height of the fly loft in theatres is at least "two-and-a-half times the height of the proscenium arch, to allow the scenery to be raised out of sight" (Gillette 55). The Jubilee stage is ninety-seven feet high from the stage deck to the loft block. The fly loft has a seventy-three line capacity with a gridiron or rigging area located ninety feet above the stage. Some of the overhead drops and scenic elements are raised and lowered manually by the stagehands using a counterweight system while other elements are motorized. *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* head carpenter Pat Bash said that the heaviest non-motorized drop was incorporated into the show in 1995, as part of a revamped *Finale* (Jubilee Backstage Tour Script 3) section. That drop originally weighed 8,200 pounds and required three separate counter-weighted arbors in order to balance and hang properly. When the drop was first installed in 1995, it contained 5,760 light bulbs, each requiring 2.8 watts at 24 volts and seven miles of wire to connect the bulbs to the transformers. The drop was converted to fiber optics in 1997, to improve the look and flexibility of effects. A by-product of the conversion was that it removed some of the weight of the drop. This non-motorized drop now weighs 7,639 pounds.

The *Jubilee!* Elevators

Hydraulic stage elevators were first introduced to American theatres on February 3, 1869, at Booth's Theatre in New York City. Edwin Booth designed the theatre to his specifications,

³³Las Vegas musicians went on strike in 1989, after which there was no longer a live orchestra for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* show, as well as almost every other showroom in Las Vegas.

which allowed him to incorporate several innovative stage elements, including the usage of hydraulic elevators to move scenery. The hydraulic stage elevators that were incorporated into the showgirl spectacles were used in much the same way: for onstage scenic effects and for moving the heavy and large set pieces from the basement to the stage.

The Jubilee stage incorporated three main hydraulic elevators, each measuring thirty-six feet in length by ten feet in width. These elevators each have an individual lift capacity of approximately one hundred thousand pounds. The three main elevators can be operated individually or can be operated together as one large elevator, which would measure thirty-six feet across by thirty feet deep. The downstage “A” elevator is a single deck elevator, while the middle “B” elevator and upstage “C” elevator are double-deck elevators, built with two floors. For *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, two permanent sets were built onto the “B” and “C” elevator lower stage: the Boiler Room set from the *Titanic* scene and the Dungeon set from the *Samson and Delilah* scene. All of the three main elevators can descend twenty feet below the stage deck, while the “A” elevator can rise eight feet above the stage deck level. The “B” and “C” elevators were designed to be able to lift up to twenty-five feet above the stage deck level. The elevators can travel from the basement to the stage as quickly as forty feet per minute or as slow as eight feet per minute.

In addition to the hydraulic elevators, there are also a series of mechanized steel bridges, wagons and screw jacks that are utilized to cover the main stage. The three bridges move upstage and downstage from their storage positions under the downstage apron and upstage deck area, once the main elevators are lowered to the basement. The downstage “A” bridge takes sixteen seconds to move into position while the upstage “B” and “C” bridges take thirty seconds. The bridges are used as support for the onstage wagons and the wagons take approximately fourteen

seconds to travel to meet center stage. There are a total of six wagons, with three wagons on either side of the main elevators. Underneath the six wagons are six screw jacks, which lift up to fill the onstage hole left by the wagons. Each wagon and screw jack measures ten feet by eighteen feet. The wagons and bridges move horizontally, while the main elevators and screw jacks move vertically. The screw jacks can move at approximately 2.5 seconds per foot with a range of minus one foot to plus three feet. All of the elevators, bridges, wagons and screw jacks can be sequenced individually or can be utilized together. This can be seen in the opening sequence of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, when the female dancers are lifted from the basement in pink and orange feathered headdresses and backpacks, performing their choreographed routine.

Revolving stages were a useful stage element that nightclub stages used to change scenes, move the orchestra, or introduce the next act. *Frank Sennes' Moulin Rouge* nightclub in Hollywood³⁴ had a sixty-foot wide, double revolving stage according to LeCoque. In addition to the main stage automations, the Jubilee stage also has two circular motorized platforms or revolves, downstage right and left of the stage. The Jubilee stage revolves are sixteen feet in diameter and can rotate three hundred and sixty degrees clockwise or counterclockwise direction. These revolves take twenty-seven seconds to lower twenty feet from the stage to the basement and take thirty-one seconds to lift from the basement to the stage.

***Jubilee!* Scenic Platforms**

In addition to the stage elements, overhead platforms lowered over the audience's heads, were another traditional scenic element in the Las Vegas spectaculars. Platforms that dropped out of the ceiling were used in the *Lido de Paris* shows in Las Vegas and Paris and were designed to support live performers. Positioning showgirls on overhead platforms added a unique element for

³⁴Built in 1938 as the Earl Carroll Theatre, it reopened in 1953 as *Frank Sennes' Moulin Rouge* nightclub and was used as a television studio in the 1950s. It was also known as the Hullabaloo Theatre, the Longhorn Theatre, and the Chevy Chase Theater. The theatre has been used by Nickelodeon since 1997.

the Las Vegas audiences. The opening night of the *Lido de Paris* show in Las Vegas in 1958 generated this comment in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*: “From the ceiling descend platforms, each with a bare-bosomed beauty, standing cool as you please [...] the girls are whisked upward into the rafters” (qtd. in Rinella 83). Arden designed the Ziegfeld theatre to include multiple platforms that could descend over the audience. For *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, there were a total of six platforms containing performers, lowered from the ceiling at various times in the production: three circular discs, two ovals and a large chandelier. The circular platforms were five feet in diameter with a two-foot wide platform situated on top so the performer could turn while standing on the platform. The two oval platforms each had a large gold chaise permanently installed, which was used during the *Samson and Delilah* number. A giant crystal chandelier was lowered in the *Finale*, with a showgirl balanced on top of a diamond shaped base.

Another scenic element that was often used in Las Vegas showrooms was the passarella or runway. As seen in the Las Vegas productions of the *Lido de Paris* and *Casino de Paris*, the passarella, would extend from the stage, into the showroom. The passarella would bring the performers closer to the audience, which was exciting. The passarella for the *Casino de Paris* showgirl spectacular at the Dunes hotel was in an “L” shape, while the *Lido de Paris* utilized a semi-circular, curved passarella. This allowed the audience to feel a connection to the spectacular, with showgirls walking right past their tables.

Arden combined two classic scenic elements in the Ziegfeld Theatre: the passarella and the overhead platform. The Ziegfeld Theatre included a ninety-foot passarella that was lowered from the ceiling, suspended over the audience’s head. (Fig. 13) Ziegfeld utilized a similar scenic element in his first *Midnight Frolics*, presented on the roof of the New Amsterdam Theatre in New York City, in 1915. Ziegfeld asked his scenic designer, the renowned Joseph Urban, to

improve the rooftop supper club. Urban designed a “glass runway that enabled Ziegfeld’s showgirls to strut their stuff directly above the first row of tables as they performed” (Henderson). In the *Finale* of *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, Arden surrounded the audience with a stunning panorama of spectacle through his use of the scenic elements.

A living curtain is another traditional scenic element found in a production show. This platform is classified as a drop, as it is flown in from the overhead scenic loft and usually extends from the length and width of the theatre proscenium. This mechanized unit is lowered from the ceiling, populated with actual showgirls, which is why it is called a living curtain. Because of the design of the living curtain for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, it was not possible to pre-set living showgirls on the curtain prior to its descent to the stage, as seen in previous Arden productions of *Hallelujah Hollywood* in Las Vegas and *Hello Hollywood Hello* in Reno. In *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* the living curtain was used during Act III Scene III: *Delilah’s Desert Hideaway: The Living Curtain*. According to *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* head carpenter Pat Bash, the Jubilee living curtain was the heaviest scenic piece in the show, weighing between fifteen thousand to eighteen thousand pounds. This piece had to be lowered by a motor, as it was too heavy to be lowered manually by the seven fly men on the rail.

Scenic Manufacturing

Many of the members of the stage crew who worked on Las Vegas production shows were also tasked with building the intricate sets for the shows. In order to show the process involved in building the scenic elements, I will examine the manufacturing of the sets used in *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* and explain how the stage crew produced the elaborate scenic elements. For *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, Arden chose two iconic events, the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and Cecil B. DeMille’s 1949 film *Samson and Delilah*. Arden featured *Samson and Delilah* and

the sinking of the Titanic, as the two central numbers of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* as they contained the necessary drama and spectacle he was noted for.

All of the scenic elements for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* were built in a 30,000 square foot warehouse that was rented and equipped by the MGM Grand hotel off-property, specifically to manufacture the sets (Jubilee tour script 5). Between 1979 and 1980, there were a total of eighty carpenters, welders, electricians, fiberglass specialists and scenic artists employed by the MGM Grand hotel specifically for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. According to Pat Bash, the drawings and models provided by the designers had no structural, mechanical, hydraulic or electrical workings for any of the scenery. The crew made all of the decisions how to execute the designs while they were building the scenery. The shop was in existence for almost two years, the time it took to build the show, after which, the shop was closed.

Titanic in Donn Arden's Jubilee!

The last segment will examine the manufacturing of the sets of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* and how the crew produced the elaborate scenic elements. The information is from the script of the Jubilee backstage tour script that I wrote after speaking to the people involved with manufacturing the show. Act 5, scene 4: of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, *The Boiler Room*, featured a water element. The engine room set for this scene was permanently built onto the lower level of the middle "B" main elevator. During this climatic scene, the Titanic hits the iceberg, causing the engine room set to fill with water. In order to achieve this flooding effect onstage, the water came from a holding pool located at the bottom of the engine room set. This pool held twenty-eight hundred gallons of water and had sixteen pumps to circulate the water. Above the engine room set were eight overhead flood tanks that were filled before each show. At the start of the flooding effect, the overhead tanks were dumped, which forced the water to run through a series

of PVC pipes and trap doors located throughout the engine room set. As the scene continues, the elevator would descend to the sub-basement, while two performers traveled up a series of stairs and platforms on the set and then through a trap door on the top of “B” elevator.

The next large scenic piece was in Act 5 scene six: *The Sinking of the Titanic*. This set was a replica of the Titanic ship. This piece was constructed with a steel frame, covered with fiberglass and was built onto a moving thirty-foot steel frame, with a self-contained hydraulic system. To maintain the illusion of the sinking ship, the Titanic ship set-piece was contracted at a sixty degree tilt, controlled by a stage operator who sat on a seat mounted behind the unit. The sinking effect seen by the audience was achieved by a combination of the ship and stage moving at the same time, which created a singular illusion. The set continued to tilt as the elevator continued to descend to the basement level, traveling on three axis simultaneously. (Fig. 14)

Donn Arden’s Jubilee! Samson and Delilah

Cecil B. DeMille was famous for his big-budget films, his large sets, extravagant costuming and masses of extras. DeMille’s 1949 film *Samson and Delilah* was a perfect fit for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. As in the climactic end of the DeMille film, Donn Arden’s impressive finale of the Samson and Delilah production number included Samson captured and chained to the columns of a large temple. Once Samson regained his strength, he destroyed the temple and everyone onstage with columns collapsing and pyrotechnic effects. In order to achieve this cataclysmic effect onstage, the columns that were part of the permanent set built on the “C” main elevator, began to crack and break apart. This was achieved through the use of hydraulics built into the columns. At the same time, the “C” elevator was lowered from its preset, twenty feet above the stage. As the elevator descended, a large set piece in the shape of a bull was revealed, positioned on top of the elevator. (Fig. 15)

According to Bash, the Samson bull set-piece was the heaviest single piece of scenery in *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, weighing three tons or six thousand pounds. It sat on a platform, thirty feet in length. The Samson bull set piece was constructed of fiberglass over a steel frame and the destruction sequence was powered by a self-contained hydraulic system. There were seven hydraulic actions that allowed for a sequential collapse of the bull, controlled by an operator who was positioned behind the set piece. As the "C" elevator continued its descent to the lower basement, the front of the bull would turn counterclockwise, simultaneously with the timed destruction sequence. The Samson bull then cracked and broke apart, amidst fire and pyrotechnic explosions. The Samson bull was twenty-seven feet tall when fully upright and collapsed down to a height of thirteen feet by the end of the destruction sequence.

Conclusion

This chapter has established that the scenic elements were an integral part of the Las Vegas showgirl productions by presenting technology that would excite the audience in addition to enhancing the image of the showgirl. I began by detailing the role and methodology of the scenic designer through an oral interview with the well-known set designer, Ray Klausen. In order to demonstrate the scale and size of the sets used in the Las Vegas stage spectacles, I examined the scenic designs for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* as well as providing specific details into the traditional stage elements found in a Las Vegas showgirl extravaganza. Finally, this chapter concluded with a detailed discussion of two epic scenic effects, which were featured in *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*.

When the audience saw what appeared to be hundreds of girls cascading over a staircase, celestial bodies lowered from the ceiling on enormous chandeliers or the grand-scale destruction of a pagan temple, they created an impact that could not be repeated anywhere else, but in the

Las Vegas showgirl spectacles.

CHAPTER 4: BAUBLES, BANGLES AND BEADS

From the first introduction of showgirls to Las Vegas, with the imported *Lido de Paris* French stage spectacular on July 2, 1958 at the Stardust Hotel, the costumes have been one of the most important factors in creating the mythic allure of the Las Vegas showgirl. This chapter will demonstrate how the costumes for the Las Vegas production shows contributed to the mystic of the showgirl by looking at the lavish and extravagant costumes of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. Arden was well-known for not doing cheap shows and he always demanded the best designers, the best materials and the best talent. As he put it: "An Arden show, as everyone knows, is expensive" (Rinella 111). In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the extravagant and lavish costumes of the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles have contributed to the overall iconic nature of the showgirl. First, I will examine the role of the costume designer for the Las Vegas showgirl stage spectacles. The next section will take a closer look at the costume designers Bob Mackie and Pete Menefee for the 1981 stage spectacular *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. The following sections will look at the methodology and design process of the costumes, sourcing and materials, variations of costuming and an analysis of costs. In conclusion, I will argue that the type of luxurious costuming that has historically adorned and defined the Las Vegas showgirl has become cost prohibitive and impossible to achieve due to increasing expenditures, sourcing problems of materials and reduced budgets.

The Role of the Costume Designer

Not all costume designers are able to design costumes for the extravagant Las Vegas stage spectacles, as it takes a truly unique designer with a wealth of experience and knowledge. Costume designer Bob Mackie says that "designing for a leggy Las Vegas chorus is a unique challenge far removed from designing for other types of theater...A showgirl costume...is like

making a sculpture or embellishing a statue. It just happens to be breathing and walking” (DeCaro 95). Correct construction is especially important when designing the frames and backpacks. Even though the costumes worn by the Las Vegas showgirls were stupendous and were larger than life, they were all very manageable and were balanced perfectly, so as not to fall off or injure the performers. The performers in the Las Vegas production shows performed thirteen shows or more a week, and were required to climb thousands of stairs each show while wearing three-inch dance heels and three-foot-high headdresses.

The most successful Las Vegas costume designers have a flair for extravagant designs and their costume sketches are today considered works of art. All of the costume designers discussed in this chapter studied art and attended school to learn their craft. Plus they trained under and were mentored by other celebrated designers. Jerry Jackson, who was the creative director of the *Folies Bergère* at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas from 1975 to 2009, majored in art at UCLA, in California. For his first *Folies Bergère* show in 1975, Jackson hired Hollywood costume designer Nolan Miller.³⁵ During a presentation at UNLV in 2015, Jackson explained how he stepped into the role of the costume designer. When Miller was unable to do the costumes for the new edition of the *Folies* in 1982, as he was under exclusive contract to Aaron Spelling at that time, Miller said to Jackson, “Jerry, why don’t you do your own costumes? You know what you’re doing” (French Connection). After that, Jackson added costume designer to his list of roles, along with creative director, choreographer, set designer, lyricist and composer of the *Folies Bergère*.

Costume designers with a background as a performer had an advantage when designing the costumes for the Las Vegas production shows. They were often able to put on a headdress

³⁵Nolan Miller was a famous Hollywood costume designer, best known for his work on the television shows *Dynasty*, *Charlie’s Angels*, *The Colby’s* and other Aaron Spelling television shows in the 1970s and 1980s.

and see how it moved and balanced from a dancer's perspective. The role of the costume designer was to enhance the beauty and talent of the performers and to be someone who the performers could go with their concerns. If a showgirl was having difficulties with a costume, she could discuss this with the costume designer, so they could determine what was not working. Costume designer Diana Eden related how the dancers in the shows could discuss their concerns about their shoes for example and what they needed in order to be safe while performing (Costume!).

Preparation for a traditional Las Vegas showgirl spectacular usually began at least a year, sometimes more, in advance of the opening of a new show. The creative design and manufacture of the sets and costumes took a long time, due to the large scale and scope of the productions. A Las Vegas production show typically required the production of hundreds and thousands of sketches and costumes. Fittings, adjustments and rehearsals in costumes also have to be factored into the pre-production schedule. The costume designers for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, had one-and-a-half years to sketch and design before the scheduled December 1980 opening of the spectacular, according to costume designer Pete Menefee (Menefee *Oral interview*).

Donn Arden's Jubilee! Costume Designers Bob Mackie and Pete Menefee

Donn Arden hired two renowned and respected costume designers, Pete Menefee and Bob Mackie, to design over one thousand costumes for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* cast of one hundred and twenty-eight performers. This segment will look at the background and training of Bob Mackie and Pete Menefee in order to illustrate how their training and experiences contributed to their successful careers as designers for the large, extravagant showgirl shows.

Costume designer Bob Mackie has become "synonymous with glamour," according to Frank DeCaro, author of the book, *Unmistakably Mackie: The Fashion and Fantasy of Bob*

Mackie (8). This is due in large part to his gorgeous designs for a vast array of female stars, such as Carol Burnett, Ann-Margret, Mitzi Gaynor and Cher. Mackie is most closely associated with Cher for her over-the top use of wild and fantastic costumes which were featured on her television shows and concert tours. One of his most iconic designs worn by Cher was a black feathered Mohawk headdress, which Cher wore as a presenter to the Academy Awards in 1986. This design is often described as a “showgirl worthy” look, (InStyle) which isn’t surprising considering he designed a similar showgirl costume for the *Finale* of the 1981 *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. (Fig.16 and 17) This demonstrated how only a very theatrical, glamorous celebrity such as Cher could wear a showgirl-inspired gown in the real world. Showgirl costumes are meant to be presented onstage, in their own milieu, as they are too fantastic to be part of the ordinary world.

Mackie, who was born March 24, 1950 in Monterey Park, California, was influenced as a young child by the Technicolor movie musicals of the 1940s and 1950s and their glamorous leading ladies. Mackie said “something stuck in there” from those musicals, which influenced his designs (“QVC’s Lisa Robertson interviews Bob Mackie...”). After graduating from high school, Mackie received a scholarship to the Chouinard Art Institute, a professional art school in Los Angeles, where one of his early class assignments was to design a showgirl costume. This could be seen as a foreshadowing of his work in Las Vegas. Mackie worked at Paramount Studios as a sketch artist for costume designer Frank Thompson and later for Edith Head and Jean Louis.³⁶ In addition to his work in Hollywood on numerous television shows and variety specials in the 1960s and 1970s, Mackie also designed costumes for Las Vegas nightclub acts featuring many glamorous female entertainers such as Mitzi Gaynor, Ann-Margret and Tina

³⁶Louis designed one of the most famous celebrity dresses, the sheer, crystal, form-fitted dress that Marilyn Monroe wore when she sang “Happy Birthday” to President John F. Kennedy in 1962.

Turner. Mackie was hired to design the costumes for Donn Arden's *Hallelujah Hollywood*, which opened on April 23, 1974 at the MGM Grand hotel in Las Vegas. With an enormous cast of over one hundred and twenty performers, Mackie recalls "it being the hugest job you could ever imagine. You just keep designing and designing and designing. Then, you never finish fitting it. There was so much. I didn't think it would ever be done" (DeCaro 95). For *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, the new Las Vegas stage spectacular, which opened in 1981 at the MGM Grand hotel, Arden hired two costume designers: Mackie to design the costumes for the *Finale* and Pete Menefee to design the costumes for the *Opening, Samson and Delilah* and the *Titanic* production numbers. After completing the costumes for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, Mackie continued to work and design costumes for television, movies, concerts, tours and variety specials. Mackie branched out from costume design to retail with his own line of ready-to-wear collection in 1982, before adding a fragrance collection and collectable Mackie Barbie dolls. He has received three Academy Award nominations for costume design and thirty-one Emmy Award nominations and nine Emmy Awards for costume design and was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame in 2002. ("Bob Mackie")

Pete Menefee has had a long and successful career as a costume designer, beginning with *The Hollywood Palace* television series in 1964. Menefee has designed costumes for many television series and specials for performers such as Barry Manilow, Perry Como, Olivia Newton-John, Shirley MacLaine, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Mary Tyler Moore, Tommy Tune, Ben Vereen, Cyd Charisse and Ann-Margret. He designed the costumes for stage shows in Las Vegas, Reno and Paris as well as the *New York City Rockettes* beginning in 1982, *Miss Universe*, *Miss Teen USA* and *Miss USA pageants*, the *Ice Capades*, *Ice Follies* and *Champions on Ice*, the rock group KISS, the Summer Olympics in Barcelona (1992) and Los Angeles (1984), and the

Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City (2002). Menefee has designed for the *People's Choice Awards*, the *Academy Awards* six times and the *Emmy Awards* nine times and has received three Emmy's for Outstanding Costume Design in 1987, 1988 and 2002 ("Pete Menefee").

Menefee was a professional dancer in Hollywood from the age of fourteen, prior to his career as a costume designer. This dance background aided Menefee immensely in his career as a costume designer, as it provided the experience to know exactly what a performer needs when designing costumes for dancers and celebrities. When designing for a dancer, Menefee knew how to arrange a costume to enhance, rather than hinder the movement of the performer. During his oral interview, Menefee recalled a fitting with the MGM movie star Cyd Charisse, who was noted for her dancing and her fabulous legs. As a dancer, Menefee knew to ask Charisse which leg she favored for kicks and turns, as every dancer always has one leg that is preferred over the other. When he designed her costume, Menefee knew to put the slit on the correct side for Charisse, so she could kick and turn to her best advantage.

When asked about his early training as a dancer, Menefee related in his oral interview that he began studying tap dance in San Diego, California at the age of ten and then got his union equity card doing summer stock, at the age of fourteen. Menefee says that when he was sixteen years old, he was seen by some casting people who sent him to Los Angeles, California to audition for the part of Baby John for the 1961 film of *West Side Story*. He auditioned for director and choreographer Jerry Robbins and producer and director Robert Wise and, although he wasn't cast in the film, six months later, he was called to replace Elliot Feld, who played the role of Baby John, in the Broadway cast. Menefee had to pass on this opportunity because his parents said he had to wait until he was eighteen and finished school. But, when he got another call from the production of *West Side Story*, he went into the National Tour of *West Side Story* as

Baby John. Menefee tested with Ann--Margret for the 1963 movie of *Bye-Bye Birdie*, and was cast as Harvey Johnson. Over the next few years, Menefee danced in several other movies including *Mary Poppins*, (1964) and *The One and Only, Genuine Original Family Band* (1968) with Leslie Ann Warren and Goldie Hawn. He also danced on many television variety shows and specials and performed in Ann-Margret's Las Vegas nightclub act during the 1960s. (Menefee *Oral interview*) His experiences as a professional dancer, performing a variety of dance styles and in all mediums, gave him a very extensive knowledge of performance and theatre, which he was able to apply later to his career as a costume designer.

Menefee said that he began to make the transition into sketching and costume design from dancing because his dance career was predicated on looking like a teenager and he was getting older. Menefee was recommended as a sketch artist by Tony Urbano,³⁷ who had seen some sketches Menefee had done. Because Menefee could only sketch at this point, not do any construction, Urbano urged Menefee to go to Chouinard Art Institute to learn the mechanics of design.³⁸ Menefee says that Urbano also taught him about the importance of the color palate to design, including how to work with different colors. While studying at Chouinard, Menefee continued to dance professionally in television on the *Jonathan Winters Show* for two years from 1964-1965. Menefee mentioned that he turned down a lot of movie work during this time, such as the 1969 film *Hello Dolly!* as it would have interfered with his schooling. His final job as a dancer was in 1968 for the television special *Here's Peggy Fleming*. After having to tumble on the ice and being soaked with water from a sixteen hour day, Menefee said that he would never

³⁷Urbano is a famous puppeteer in Hollywood who designed and built over 300 marionettes for *Les Poupées de Paris* (*The Dolls of Paris*), a musical puppet cabaret show created by Sid and Marty Krofft in 1961. Urbano has also designed and operated the puppets for the films *Men in Black* (1997), *Men in Black II* (2002), *The Blues Brothers II* (1998), *Short Circuit* (1986), *The Abyss* (1989) and *Team America: World Police* (2004).

³⁸ Urbano had attended Chouinard Art Institute in 1961 and had also sent his previous sketch artist Bob Mackie to Chouinard for further training.

do that again for a living (Menefee *Oral interview*). He knew he had to make the transition from dancing, as it can be a short career due to the physical demands. Menefee was hired by NBC to be their staff sketch artist and then was hired by Nick Vanoff³⁹ to design the ninth season of the *Hollywood Palace* in 1968. After that point, Menefee never stopped working as a costume designer. He believes that his success as a designer has a lot to do with his dance background.

Methodology and the Designer Process

Although Las Vegas showgirls are often publicized as wearing “Hundreds and Thousands of Rhinestones Covering Practically Nothing!,” the historical costumes for the Las Vegas stage spectacles are often designed with meticulous research into specific periods. Jerry Jackson, the creative director of the *Folies Bergère*, discussed his methodology in designing the historical costumes for the *Folies Bergère* during a panel discussion at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas in 2015. Jackson stated that first; he needs to know the sociological history of the times, as that affects how he designs his costumes. His next step would be to go to museums, talk to fabricators and discover what the construction was and how the costume moved in that context (French Connection).

In discussing his methodology, costume designer Pete Menefee says that he draws every day, even when not working on a specific project. He said that he will often just open a book if it's a period he doesn't know or thinks is interesting and just draw. The process continues to evolve as he begins to internalize what he has drawn through rough sketches. As he puts it, in looking at the “stuff I've drawn earlier in the rough, it always goes someplace else, very interesting...And then you remember patterns and you remember what stuff looked like.”

³⁹Vanoff (1929-1991) was a Tony and Emmy Award winning producer who produced over 10 hours of weekly television in the 1960s, co-owner of the Sunset-Gower Studios in Hollywood (former Columbia Studios). He began his career as a dancer, appearing with the Charles Weidman Dance Theater, principal dancer with the New York City Opera, *Kiss Me Kate* on Broadway and on television and nightclubs.

During his oral interview, Menefee provided specific details regarding his methodology by discussing some of the costumes for the *Samson and Delilah* production number in *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. Menefee said that when the designers were ready to begin work on the *Samson and Delilah* number, the first thing they did was to sit down at MGM Studios in Hollywood with Donn Arden and watch the 1949 movie, *Samson and Delilah*. Menefee said that afterwards, he knew that he did not want his designs to “look anything like the movie, ‘cause the movie looks like an old 50’s biblical thing, which is what it was.” Arden would pin all the sketches for a specific scene up on the wall and “you would walk into a room and it would be all *Samson and Delilah*, for example. Donn would either keep their designs if he liked them or dump it.”

As he has a tremendous interest in archeology, Menefee researched into Egyptian and Mesopotamian art and architecture to use as inspiration for his costume designs for *Samson and Delilah*. An inspiration for the female singers’ court costumes were found in a set of famous miniature statues in draped clothing, found in Roman ruins in an area called Tanagra.⁴⁰ Menefee was also inspired in the creation of headdresses by a unique bust he saw in the Canary Islands of a queen or priestess. Menefee knew there was going to be a whole parade of princesses used for the number and he needed to design sixteen individual princess headdresses for the group. Menefee decided to use that bust as a basis for one of the headdresses. Another princess headdress was designed to look like a giant Egyptian wig. Menefee drew on many sources for his designs because the women were supposed to come from all over the Mediterranean. (Fig 18)

Menefee was also influenced by other sources, as seen in the men’s capes worn at the beginning of the *Samson and Delilah* production number. Menefee noted that the patterns on the capes he designed to look more art nouveau, “a Beardsley version of Mesopotamia,” rather than

⁴⁰These statues were part of a collection of statues found in Canosa di Puglia, Italy and are believed to date from c. 250 B.C.

absolutely authentic. He went on to explain that an authentic Mesopotamian garment was a heavy, flat robe which had very heavy fringe on the side of it. Menefee feared that “Everyone’s going to look like they’re done up in curtains.” While at the Louvre Museum in Paris, Menefee went to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian wing. In the Egyptian wing, he saw some funerary bowls with lids on them. The heads on the bowls were gods, some Egyptian, like the ibis, and some not, like the lion. Menefee designed the large gold animal masks worn by some of the male dancers at the end of the number based on those funerary bowls at the Louvre. (Menefee *Oral interview*)

When asked to describe his work with Donn Arden and *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, Menefee said that it was one of his best design experiences ever, due to the unusually long period he had to design a show. Menefee had a year and a half to design the costumes for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. This extensive time allowance permitted Menefee to do his research, as well as produce well-thought-out sketches. As part of the process of designing for *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, Menefee would have many, long production meetings with Arden. Arden would begin by telling his designers what his concepts were of the production numbers and would often tell his them what color range he wanted for a particular number. The color palate for each scene of *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* was reflected in both the costume and scenic design, which is why the designers checked with each other during the design process. Menefee also noted that Arden was very sophisticated with his colors and color range and knew exactly what effect he wanted to achieve. For example, if there are two subsequent numbers that are predominately red, the audience will feel like they have seen it before, even if the numbers are completely different.

Sourcing and Materials

The ability to use and source the best materials from all over the world was another

advantage of working on the Las Vegas production shows, as money was often no object. The Las Vegas showgirl shows utilized many of the same sources, materials and techniques, used in Paris. This proves that this expertise and attention to detail and quality of materials contributed to the legacy and iconic stature of the showgirl.

For *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, the feathers were sourced from Maison Février⁴¹ in Paris because they had the most experience and highest quality in constructing feathered costumes. Menefee recalled: "Everything was just the best money could buy" (Menefee *Oral interview*). A typical showgirl feather costume would use a variety of feather types. For *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, Menefee used ostrich, pheasant, goose, rhea and coq feathers. Ostrich feathers are harvested from male birds that are between the ages of five to thirty-five years of age, as male ostriches have the best quality feathers. The feathers used in *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* originated in South Africa and South America and were hand-selected for each costume design. The feathers were also dyed according to each designer's specifications. The feathers did not come assembled, but after being dyed, the feathers had to be sorted, trimmed and wired individually in Paris or New York City. The wired individual feathers were then sewn onto a steel framework, which is called a branch, to make a specific feather pattern for each costume. This branch was then sewn onto the steel frame of the costume. This can be a headdress, backpack or other costume piece.⁴² Menefee said he learned a great deal regarding feather work and construction from working with the ladies at Maison Février and was able to teach the American feather manufacturers certain techniques in assembling feathers. He was able to show them how to twist

⁴¹Maison Février, founded in 1929 has done all the feather-work for the Parisian productions shows of the *Moulin Rouge*, the *Folies Bergère*, the *Lido de Paris* and the *Casino de Paris* shows plus international stars Josephine Baker and Mistinguette.

⁴²Menefee said that it is quite a sight in Paris, when the ladies who do the costumes for the *Lido de Paris*, cover the backpacks with fabric and then get on the Metro with these huge feathered backpacks and go to the Lido to fit the girls and then get back on the Metro with the backpacks.

feathers and how to do the finishes on the ends of the boas. For the large ostrich feather fans, the tips are curved on the edge in a process called French curling, which is done with a type of knife and steam to get the correct finish.

The jewelry was another traditional element for the showgirl productions that were designed by the costume designers. For *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, all of the rhinestones used in the production were imported Austrian Swarovski crystal built by Jacques Ryckewaert and Henri Vicaire in Paris.⁴³ The rhinestones were silver plated crystal and were the highest quality rhinestones in the world. They were cut on a multi-faceted wheel cut, which is the same cut used on diamonds. The rhinestones were lead crystal with a mirror back to reflect the color and were of varying sizes and colors (London *Oral interview*). (Fig. 19 and Fig. 20) For *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, the rhinestone jewelry consisted of bracelets, necklaces, collars and long body chains. The rhinestones were welded to the steel frames of the bras and underwires and headdresses. They were sewn onto the costumes on the vests, jackets, g-strings, drapes and also the backpacks and headdresses. A world-wide rhinestone shortage was created when *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* showgirl spectacular was being designed. According to Menefee, the production had sourced and obtained all the available rhinestones produced by Swarovski for the costumes and sets.

In addition to the rhinestones, many of the costumes were constructed with solid sequins which required a special technique and a specialized sewing machine, known as a Cornely Universal Motion System.⁴⁴ This machine allows the operator to sew strings of sequins on fabrics, ribbons, braids and cords in various sizes. The technology involved in the design of those machines was developed almost one hundred years ago and not many people are trained in the

⁴³Ryckewaert was a Dutch family that came to Paris at the turn of the century. The family has done all of the jewelry for the all of the Parisian music halls since the early 1910's.

⁴⁴The Cornely machine is a lockstitch sewing machine that utilizes a crank located under the machine, which turns the material in the direction needed to make the embroidered pattern.

operation of this machine. The Jubilee costume shop at Bally's hotel has a machine that was built in the 1940s, which they utilized when rebuilding the sequined costumes (London).

Variations of Costuming

In order to give an example of the enormous range and variety of costume design that was involved in a Las Vegas production show, I will breakdown Act 1 of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* in order to demonstrate the sheer number and variations of costumes that were designed in 1980 by costume designer Pete Menefee. This information was obtained by looking at the *Jubilee!* costume bible and using my own knowledge of the number of people in each number. According to the 1981 *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* program, Act 1 consisted of eight scenes: scene 1: The "Jubilee Strut", scene 2: "Minstrel Days" and "You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet Folks!", scene 3: "Personalities", scene 4: "A Love Story-It Takes Two", scene 5: "Elvis Hullabaloo" and "He Had a Voice-He Had a Sound", scene 6: "Flickers-A String of 'Perils'" and the Villain Still Pursued Her!, scene 7: "The Kaleidoscope", and scene 8: The Hollywood "Show Biz" Panorama.

For scenes 1, 2 and 3, Menefee designed thirteen different costume designs for eighty onstage performers, plus an additional thirty-six swing and understudy costumes, to produce a total of one hundred and sixteen costumes. The color palette for scenes 1, 2 and 3 was predominantly white with silver rhinestone crystal and accents of red, yellow and orange.

Scene 4 had a color palate of soft lavenders, pinks, and purples. Menefee designed a total of twelve hand-beaded, full-length individual evening gowns, plus the costumes for the male singers and adagio dance couple for a total of eighteen onstage performers plus approximately another ten understudy and swing costumes for a total of twenty-eight costumes for scene 4.

Scene 5 included forty-four onstage dancers plus another sixteen understudies and swings for a total of sixty costumes. The color palate used in the costumes for scene 5 was white, hot

pink and neon green with six different costume designs.

Scene 6 was a Las Vegas interpretation on the silent movie serials of the 1920s. Menefee designed all of the costumes for scene VI in black and white to invoke the early days of the black and white silent movies. The lead showgirl “Pauline” went through five different costume changes onstage during the course of this three-minute number. The other characters in this scene were archetypes of the Hollywood studio system and characters found in the serials of the 1920s. This included designs for a director, cameraman, make-up girl, script girl, clapboard operator, wardrobe lady and maid, plus various natives, mad scientists and railroad coolies.

For scenes 7 and 8, Menefee designed twenty-three different costume sketches for seventy-two onstage performers and another thirty-one costumes for the understudies and swing dancers. Overall, a total of one hundred and three costumes were built, with sixteen individual and unique showgirl costumes designed and constructed. Menefee designed his costumes for these two scenes with yellow, white and black feathers against a silver and black set. (Fig. 21)

Scenic designer Klausen mentioned in his oral interview, that he had designed the set for scenes 7 and 8 after seeing Menefee’s costume sketches, with their silver and crystal, spiked designs. This synchronicity of design shows how the designers worked together in order to deliver what would be the best presentation of both costume and sets.

Analysts of Costs

When describing traditional Las Vegas showgirl costumes, words such as luxurious, elegant, sumptuous, extravagant and magnificent are often used. In order to achieve those superlatives, the materials used in those costumes come at an expensive price. LeCoque described the costumes as “so glamorous...so many feathers and real fur, a lot of fox. You couldn’t do that now” (qtd. in Rinella 92). Mackie designed a series of costumes for the *Finale*

of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* for the *Gold Diggers* number using real fox fur, which was dyed orange. Over time, the fur was replaced by orange ostrich feathers as it became cost prohibitive to get replacement fox furs for the costumes. The original total cost for sixteen female chorus dancer costumes for the *Gold Diggers* number was \$40,037.29 in 1980 ⁴⁵. The individual cost per costume was \$2,502.33 each. In contrast, the eight showgirl costumes used in the same number cost twice as much on average, costing \$4,102.33 each to produce. This is due to economies of scale and size, as the female dancers costumes were duplicates of the same design and were not as complicated or as lavish as the individual and unique showgirl versions. When Jackson was asked to return to the *Folies Bergère* in 1997 to redo the show, he asked what his budget was and was told, "You don't have one." Jackson said that the Lido's feather and rhinestone budget was \$1.5 million and how could he compete with that?" Eventually Jackson said he had to repeat himself because there was no budget for costumes, and he would just recycle costumes from the warehouse (French Connection).

As is typical for the Las Vegas production shows, the costumes for the female dancers always cost more than those of the male dancers because of the large usage of feathers and rhinestones and the intricacies of design. But, the costs for the male costumes can also be quite high. In 1995, a new number was introduced in *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. This number was a Fred Astaire number and the performers wore tuxedos that were designed by Menefee. Each had an initial cost of \$2,100 apiece as they were individually hand-cut and tailored to fit by a master European tailor, Tony Zoite of Cotroneo Costumes in Los Angeles. The total cost in 1995 for fifty-eight tuxedos was \$121,800 according to *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* wardrobe manager Donna London.

⁴⁵ Using data provided by www.measuringworth.com/us, \$40,037 in 2016 would cost between \$99,000 and \$251,000.

In order to illustrate the costume costs, I have broken down the costs of the costumes used in the Act 1, scene 8: *The Hollywood "Show Biz" Panorama* production number of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*, which were included in the original Jubilee costume bible. The chart below shows the number of performers in each group, including swings and the total costume cost per each group of performers.

Table 1. Costume costs for Donn Arden's Jubilee! Act 1, scene 8

Number of Performers	Group Name	Total Cost Per Group
32	Female Dancers	\$117,437.00
16	Dancing Nudes	\$63,286.95
16	Showgirls	\$117,801.47
8	Female Dancers Line 4	\$34,134.96
3	Principal Female Showgirls	\$8,124.45
16	Male Dancers Lines 1 & 2	\$24,254.05
8	Male Dancers Line 3	\$10,136.16
2	Principal Male Dancers	\$3,720.16

The entire cost for the costumes used in that one scene in 1980, was \$378,895.04. The equivalent cost in 2016, based on an annual inflation rate of 3.18%, would be \$1.1 million.⁴⁶ This is of course if you could obtain the materials. These figures show the enormous costs involved in the

⁴⁶ Using data provided by www.measuringworth.com/us, \$378,000 in 1980 would cost between \$937,000 and \$2.3 million dollars in 2016.

costumes for the Las Vegas production shows. This also demonstrates how important the costumes were to the Las Vegas showgirl productions and how cost prohibitive it would be to duplicate those costumes today.

For many of the traditional Las Vegas showgirl productions, there was another cost that was unique to Las Vegas, which was discussed during the “French Connection” panel. When the first Las Vegas showgirl spectacular the *Lido de Paris* was imported from Paris to Las Vegas in 1958, the costumes had to be brought over on a million dollar bond. The shows would run for maybe a year and a half or so, before closing to re-open with an entirely new edition. When the show closed, all the costumes had to be sent back to Europe in order to recoup the money for the bond. As it was too expensive to send the costumes back to Europe by freight, the only way to get around the expense was to destroy the costumes in Las Vegas under the auspices of the U.S. Customs. Fluff LeCoque “remembers that at the end of each edition, all those gorgeous costumes made in Europe were ‘taken out into the desert and burned,’ under the watchful eyes of federal officials instead of paying the tariffs to send them back to France” (Rinella 92). However, this cost was not a factor for the Las Vegas shows that fabricated their costumes in the United States. According to Jackson, the costumes for the *Folies Bergère* at the Tropicana hotel were fabricated in Paris up until 1975. But, for his 1983 edition of the *Folies Bergère*, he had costumes constructed in-house at the Tropicana hotel in Las Vegas, as well as in Nolan Miller’s workshop in Los Angeles and with Heddy Jo Starr in Green Bay, Wisconsin (French Connection).

Conclusion

This chapter has gone into great detail in order to show how the costume designer was integral to creating the iconic look of the Las Vegas showgirl. I began by discussing the role of the costume designer for the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles and how they enhanced the beauty

and talent of the showgirl through their flair for extravagant designs. Secondly, I examined the background and careers of costume designers Bob Mackie and Pete Menefee, who are world-famous for designing costumes for the Las Vegas and Paris stage extravaganzas, many celebrities, television shows and movies. The next segment followed up with a discussion of the methodology and design process involved in designing the costumes for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* showgirl spectacular, followed by an examination of sourcing and materials. Costume designer Pete Menefee provided a rare insight into this process with detailed information on his work on *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. The final sections discussed the variations of costumes and analysis of costs of the costumes for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* This chapter has demonstrated how costly and labor intensive it is to produce the costumes for the Las Vegas spectacles and has proven that the costumes are a vital part of the iconic status of the Las Vegas showgirl. It has also shown that the requirements for the costumes are so specific, that it takes costume designers and technicians with unique and specific talents, backgrounds and experience.

CHAPTER 5: END OF AN ERA

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Las Vegas showgirls and the showgirl spectaculars were a dying breed. For the past twenty years or longer, the demise of the Las Vegas showgirl has been discussed in newspaper and magazine articles such as the *New York Times* “The Era of the Showgirl is Leaving Las Vegas” in 2001. The announcement that the last showgirl spectacular *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* was scheduled to close in 2016 set off another series of articles about the end of an era in Las Vegas entertainment.⁴⁷ As Las Vegas has always been closely aligned with the showgirl throughout its modern history, this was perceived as the definitive end of an era. While people continued to revere the showgirl as an icon of Las Vegas there are no longer any shows left for her to perform in. This chapter will examine the causes of this shift in Las Vegas entertainment by first looking at the role of the casino and Las Vegas entertainment. Next, I will consider other forms of entertainment that replaced the showgirl spectaculars. The final section will view the societal forces that caused the Las Vegas showgirl to become a mere shadow of her former glorious self.

The Role of the Casinos in Las Vegas Entertainment

Although Las Vegas has been proud of its legacy of the showgirl, changing times and economics doomed the Las Vegas spectacular that proudly displayed the showgirl. When the showgirl was in her prime in Las Vegas during the 1960s and 1970s, the hotels and casinos were mostly owned by members of organized crime. Jeff German wrote in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* that “Las Vegas was regarded as an ‘open city’ for more than two dozen Mafia families

⁴⁷ *The Strip: Endangered Species* (Las Vegas Review Journal 2000), *The Era of the Showgirl is Leaving Las Vegas* (New York Times 2001), *Last Legs* (Las Vegas Sun 2002), *On the Gradual Disappearance of the Statuesque Icons, Symbols of Vegas* (Las Vegas Sun 2006), *Twilight of the Ostrich-Plumed, Rhinestone-Brassiere Las Vegas Showgirl* (New York Times 2006), *Step, kick, step, kick, twirl into history* (Los Angeles Times 2008), *To Honor Las Vegas, respect the Showgirl* (Las Vegas Review Journal 2013), *The Last Classic Showgirls in Las Vegas* (Vegas Magazine 2014), *The end is near, but Jubilee still shines* (Las Vegas Sun 2015)

across the country.” In the same article, German listed the hotels that had at one time had a mob presence, which included all the major hotels at that time: the Flamingo, Thunderbird, Desert Inn, Sahara, Sands, Dunes, Riviera, Tropicana and Stardust. In an effort to exercise some control over organized crime in Las Vegas, in 1960 a list was made in of people who were to be banned from the casinos due to their mob connections. This list was commonly referred to as the *Black Book*.

Howard Hughes’ purchase of the Desert Inn in 1967 was considered the beginning of the shift from organized crime to corporate control of the casinos in Las Vegas. The Nevada legislature passed the Corporate Gaming Act in 1967, which allowed corporations to own casinos. Other corporations soon followed suit. Kirk Kerkorian led the way when he sold off the Flamingo and International hotels to the Hilton Hotel Corporation in order to get the money to build the MGM Grand hotel in 1973. Corporations had the ability to provide the immense amount of monies needed in order to build the casinos while organized crime did not (“American Experience Las Vegas”). By the 1980s, corporations had replaced organized crime in Las Vegas as the owners of the hotels. Along with the corporations came a restructuring of the Las Vegas casinos; this also affected the Las Vegas showrooms and entertainment.

During the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the showrooms and restaurants were seen as a means to bring customers to the casinos to gamble. At that time, gaming was how the casinos made the majority of their money. Food, drink and shows were incidental to their profits. After the corporations began to have a stronger presence in the 1980s, the corporations viewed the showrooms and restaurants as a means to increase revenue for the hotels, in addition to the gaming revenues. The result was that if the shows were no longer profitable, there was no incentive to keep them. The huge costs needed to produce a new showgirl spectacular were

deemed prohibitive. Arden said that he wanted to revamp the *Lido de Paris* show at the Stardust in 1983 and 1987, but was told by the Stardust hotel that they couldn't afford the expense. The Boyd Group, who was in charge of the Stardust in 1987, only offered Arden five million dollars to do a new edition of the *Lido de Paris*, but Arden passed (DeCouderaux). In 1981, he had created *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* for ten million dollars. It was a certainty that the cost would have been higher, not lower to produce a new show. By 1987, the final edition of the *Lido de Paris* show, *Allez Lido* had been running for ten years. Arden originally designed the *Lido de Paris* shows to only run for a year and a half to two years. If a show continued to run without funds from the casino to keep the show looking fresh, the costumes and sets would begin to diminish, showing visible signs of wear and tear and discoloration. For example, white feathers would look grey and dingy due to the smoke in the casinos. For a showgirl spectacular, grey and dingy was not a good look.

Showrooms

Other changes affected the showrooms as well. The seating in the showrooms in the 1950s, 60s and 70s were not structured as traditional audience theatrical seating with rows of seats and aisles. In the 1950s, the showrooms' seating areas were structured like nightclubs, with a combination of booths and tables. When the showgirl spectacles were introduced, the stages were rebuilt, but the structure of the showroom remained more or less the same. The Ziegfeld Showroom at the MGM Grand, now Bally's hotel, was an example of this structure, when it opened in 1974 with Arden's production of *Hallelujah Hollywood*. The main entrance to the showroom was at the back. The showroom was divided into four levels, with steps leading down to each level. The front of each section had a series of long, rectangular tables, perpendicular to the stage. There was a row of booths horizontally situated behind the tables. Each row of booths

was given a name, beginning with the row of booths closest to the stage: King's Row, Queen's Row and Jack's Row. The King's Row booths were the most expensive seats in the house as they were the considered prime location. Jack's Row booths were located furthest from the stage, which was not as desirable. Even so, the booths were roomier and more comfortable than the tables. The audience members sitting at the tables were situated close to each other and often had to turn their heads to watch the shows.

Many hotel showrooms built in the 1990s and after, however, adapted and changed the traditional showroom seating arrangements. When *Siegfried & Roy at the Mirage* opened in 1990 at the newly built Mirage hotel, the showroom had booths and chairs instead of tables. They retained the rows of booths but replaced the long tables with theatrical audience seating. In 1997, the former Ziegfeld Theatre showroom, home of *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* was remodeled from their original combination of booths and tables. The new showroom kept the first row of booths and the long tables in the front section of the showroom, but replaced the remaining rows of booths and tables with theatre seating, complete with aisles. This change in seating had an effect on how the shows were presented. No longer did cocktail waitresses and waiters bring the drinks to the tables, but audiences were expected to get their beverages from a bar located outside the showroom and bring it to their seats themselves. The other change was the introduction of box offices instead of a reservation system for ticketing.

The Las Vegas showrooms were not run like a theatre where you would buy a ticket and go to your seat. As in the nightclubs, if a person wanted to see a Las Vegas show, whether it was a headliner or showgirl spectacular, they would make a reservation. This was usually done by phone or through someone in the hotel such as a host . Like a nightclub, the showrooms were run by a maître d' who organized the seating before each show on large charts, based on that night's

reservations. When a guest arrived through the main entrance they would give their name to the maître d', who would then consult his seating chart. He would indicate to a showroom captain which table or booth to escort the guests. The maître d' and captain would usually receive a tip as a matter of course. If the guest wanted a better seat or special treatment, they would usually give a larger tip. The reservation system of maître d's and showroom captains were a mainstay in Las Vegas showrooms until 1989. Steve Wynn was the first to go to a reserved showroom seating ticketing system for *Siegfried & Roy's At the Mirage* show at the Mirage hotel. As more Las Vegas casinos adopted this style of ticketing, the maître d' system was eventually phased out of the showrooms in Las Vegas by the mid-1990's.

Today, the majority of ticketing is online, with guests picking out their seats and getting their tickets before they even arrive in Las Vegas. This resulted in more convenience for the guests as well as lowered costs for the casino. This change coincided with a more relaxed, casual Las Vegas visitor and the tuxedoed maître d's were seen as a relic of the past. Previously when you went to see a headliner or showgirl spectacular, it was viewed as a special event. That experience began at the door when you were greeted by the maître d' and welcomed to the showroom. Nowadays, that experience has been lost.

While in Paris in 2015 for research, I attended the *Moulin Rouge*. I can't help but contrast my experience seeing that show to the experiences in seeing the shows in Las Vegas. There was a crowd lined up outside the *Moulin Rouge* when I arrived but my name was on a list held by a tuxedo-clad showroom captain. As I entered the showroom, I was greeted by the maître d, also wearing a tuxedo, who introduced me to another showroom captain. This man escorted me to my table. A waiter came to ask for my order and within two minutes a bottle of champagne arrived and the waiter deftly corked the bottle open with a "pop." All around me, I could hear

champagne corks popping like firecrackers. The lights dimmed and the show started. This was a thrilling experience. Now when you see a Las Vegas show, the experience is as mundane as going to the movies. You pick up your ticket at the box office, an usher tears your ticket as you enter. You line up at a bar situated in the lobby to get a drink in a plastic cup or popcorn or a box of candy. You find your seat and sit down in your movie-style seat, complete with plastic cup-holder.

From hotel owned shows to independent producers

Another shift in Las Vegas entertainment that affected the showgirl spectacles was the change from hotel owned shows to independent productions. Originally, the showgirl spectacles were commissioned, bought and paid for by the hotels. Everything and everyone was paid for by the hotels including the producer, creative director, designers, choreographers, orchestrations, costumes, stage and wardrobe crew, musicians and the performers. The hotels owned the shows, the producers did not own the shows. The performers, crew and wardrobe were hired by the hotel and became hotel employees. The performers received benefits through the hotel, including health insurance. The large-scale showgirl productions in Las Vegas of the *Folies Bergère*, *Casino de Paris*, *Lido de Paris*, *Hallelujah Hollywood* and *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* were all owned by the hotels that commissioned them: the Tropicana, Dunes, Stardust and MGM Grand, now Bally's, respectively.⁴⁸ As it became increasingly expensive to financially cover the expenses associated with the showgirl spectacles, the hotels began to book independent productions. This is commonly referred to as a "four-wall" deal. In a four-wall deal, the independent producer or entertainer has to cover all the costs and expenses relating to the

⁴⁸ All casino workers have to be registered, fingerprinted and investigated in order to obtain a sheriff's card, which allows them to work in a Las Vegas casino. As employees of the casinos, the performers in the showrooms were also required to obtain a sheriff's card. Eventually the performers were exempt from this requirement as they did not have contact with the customers or handle the money in the casino.

show while the casino pays almost nothing. Sometimes the independent producer also has to pay to rent the showroom. Las Vegas headliner Robert Goulet had a four-wall deal at the Venetian in 2001, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. He called it “the stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my life” (Verhovek “Playing Out of Pocket”). Goulet said expenses, which included a \$15,000 cost per show for the stage, were higher than the revenue. He had to cover the costs of the orchestra, stagehands, ticket takers, ushers and the advertising. The advertising and publicity is often the responsibility of the independent producer and they are responsible for selling the tickets.

Goulet was forced to close his show in the middle of his eight-week run, as he wasn’t able to cover all of the expenses that normally would have been covered by the casino. Four-walling began to become more prevalent in Las Vegas around 1995, according to producer Breck Wall. He said that “With all the business the hotels do, they wanted to back away from entertainment...and save lot of headaches” (“Pay to Play”). Some hotels have a modified version of the four-wall, known as a two-wall or a three-wall. In those cases, the hotels will cover some of the expenses with the independent producer. However, there is more stress on the independent producer under the four-wall system since they are now responsible for everything that the hotel used to cover. By utilizing independent producers, the hotels no longer had to pay the expenses of the productions and the associated salary and benefit costs for the performers. These associated costs certainly factored into the decisions by the hotels to no longer produce the showgirl spectacles. *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* showgirl spectacular was the last show to be fully owned by a hotel when it closed in 2016.

Other Las Vegas Entertainment

In addition to the showgirl spectacles, Las Vegas has been known for offering a variety of entertainment including headliners and lounge shows. Las Vegas often billed itself as “The

Live Entertainment Capital of the World” and in looking inside the annual souvenir edition of Las Vegas Entertainment (1968), one can see why. The cover has a beautiful showgirl depicted because once again, the showgirl is what made Las Vegas unique. Inside are photos of all the Las Vegas headliners of 1968 such as Liberace, Donald O’Conner, Connie Francis, Don Rickles, Debbie Reynolds, Cyd Charisse, Tony Bennett, Dinah Shore, Eddie Fisher, Pearl Bailey, Louis Armstrong, Jack Benny, Judy Garland, Andy Williams, Danny Kaye and of course Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., plus numerous other headliners. Photos of the many lounge performers and comedians also make up this publication along with many pages devoted to the Las Vegas showgirls and the spectacles that featured them.

The showgirl spectacles of the *Folies Bergère*, *Lido de Paris*, *Casino de Paris* and the newly opened *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*, continued through the 1980s. In addition to those showgirl spectacles, there were other large production shows in Las Vegas including *Beyond Belief* at the Frontier, *Bravo Vegas* at the Imperial Palace, *City Lites* at the Flamingo Hilton and *Siegfried and Roy at the Mirage* in 1989. These shows were a mixture of the spectacle and other elements such as ice shows, specialty acts and magicians, some with topless showgirls and some that had their dancers totally covered.

Family-Friendly, Broadway and Cirque

The legalization of gaming in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1978 created competition for the Las Vegas casinos and by the 1990s, Las Vegas was feeling a slowdown. In an effort to attract more visitors, Las Vegas began to promote itself as a place that was suitable for the whole family. Sin City was being transformed into a family-friendly diverse destination that had something for everyone, not just gambling, drinking and topless showgirls. In a *Time* magazine article from 1995, Richard Corliss called Las Vegas the Disney World of the 21st century,

writing that Las Vegas had all the attributes of a family resort destination, including theme and water parks. The MGM hotel opened a theme park behind the casino on thirty-three acres in 1993 in an effort to increase revenues and attract families to the resort. The theme park closed in 2002 as Las Vegas shifted away from the family-destination theme.⁴⁹ However, entertainment in Las Vegas followed this family-friendly trend in the 1990s with shows such as the *Radio City Music Hall Rockettes* at the Flamingo, *Starlight Express* at the Hilton and the \$67 million dollar *EFX* stage spectacular starring Michael Crawford at the MGM hotel. All of these shows were spectacular, large productions with large casts and no nudity. University of Nevada at Las Vegas history professor Hal Rothman was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, “There is no shortage of showgirls, actually, only a shortage of places for them to work” (Bragg).

Broadway musicals were another type of entertainment that received a revival in Las Vegas at the beginning of the millennium. A successful version of the Broadway musical *Chicago* at the Mandalay Bay hotel in 1999 paved the way for other Broadway musicals to find a home in the Las Vegas showrooms. Broadway musicals that had a Las Vegas residency after 1999 included *Hairspray* (2006) at the Luxor hotel, *Avenue Q* (2005) and later *Spamalot* (2008) at the Wynn hotel, *Phantom of the Opera* (2006), at the Venetian hotel, *Mamma Mia* (2003) and *The Lion King* (2009) at Mandalay Bay hotel and *the Producers* (2007) at the Paris hotel. Although Broadway musicals had played Las Vegas for limited runs previously, these new waves of musicals were looking to establish Las Vegas longevity.

Entertainment in Las Vegas also took an opportunity during this time to develop original musical theater productions that could transfer to Broadway. When the Paris hotel opened in Las Vegas in 2000, their showroom presented the American premiere of *The Hunchback of Notre*

⁴⁹2003 saw the debut of the marketing campaign “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas”, which heralded Las Vegas’ return to a more adult-themed destination.

Dame. Paul Pusitari, the president of Paris hotel at that time, said he had searched for two and a half years to find the right show (Thompson). In a review of the production, titled “Schlock opera,” writer Anthony Del Valle speculated that Las Vegas was looking to achieve some credibility with original musical theater productions that would move to Broadway. Among his many criticisms, he wrote that “It’s a production that feels put on by a roomful of MBAs”. Although it would appear that the Paris hotel was trying to connect the entertainment to the venue with a themed show, it was not a success and closed seven months after it debuted. However, it was the introduction of Cirque du Soleil to Las Vegas in 1992 that would have the biggest effect on Las Vegas entertainment.

Cirque du Soleil began in Quebec, Canada with a group of twenty street performers in 1984. According to their website they have as of 2016, approximately 4,000 employees, including 1,300 performers and have produced shows all around the world. Cirque du Soleil first performed in Las Vegas in a permanent tent, built in the parking lot behind the Mirage hotel. *Mystere* opened the following year in a custom-built theatre at the Treasure Island hotel. At that time, Steve Wynn owned both hotels. Due to their success, Cirque du Soleil very quickly opened several more productions: *O*, (Bellagio 1998), *Zumanity* (New York, New York 2003), *KA* (MGM 2004), *Love* (Mirage 2006), *Chris Angel-Believe* (Luxor 2008), *Viva Elvis* (Aria 2010-closed 2012), *Zarkana* (Aria 2012- closed 2016), *Michael Jackson: One* (Mandalay Bay 2013). Every hotel seemed to want a Cirque du Soleil show or a cirque-type of show, rather than the traditional showgirl shows. There were the cirque-type productions of *Le Reve* at the Wynn and *Absinthe* in front of Caesars Palace and Celine Dion incorporated cirque elements into her show *Celine Dion: A New Day* at Caesars Palace. By the mid-2000s, there seemed to be a feeling that perhaps there was a little too much cirque-type of production shows in Las Vegas. When

discussing the overall entertainment scene in Las Vegas, several people were hoping for a return of the showgirl spectacles. During the height of the economic slump that started in 2008, one writer expressed a desire for more showgirls and less Cirque du Soleil claiming that Las Vegas “enjoyed a lot of success when showgirls were in abundance. Perhaps the best way to kick one foot forward is to kick one high-heeled foot back” (Padget “Fresh Decade”).

Societal Changes

When the *Lido de Paris* appeared in 1958 at the Stardust Hotel, audiences marveled at the costumes, the sets, the special effects. But, what really attracted attention nation-wide was the lack of tops on the showgirls. Today, in view of what is available online and in films, being topless doesn’t seem so shocking. This section will look at the changes in society that influenced the perception of the showgirl and how she has gone from being viewed as something shocking to being regarded as somewhat old-fashioned.

Time magazine wrote in 1958 how Las Vegas showgirls incurred the wrath of the Catholic Church by gliding “about with their breast feathers completely plucked”. The Catholic Church had said that the onstage nudity was contrary to “moral and divine law” (“Show Business: What the Public Wants?”). The showgirls themselves, who were imported from Europe, didn’t see what the fuss was about. But to American audiences, this was a big deal calling for damnation from pulpits around the country. When the showgirl spectacles debuted in 1958, there was a clear division within the production between the female dancers and the showgirls. The showgirls were initially referred to as mannequins in the Parisian style, before they became known in Las Vegas as showgirls. While both wore glittery g-strings, feathers and rhinestones, the showgirls were usually employed to parade through the production numbers, tall and beautiful. Although they may have had dance training, that wasn’t as necessary as having the

right stature and physicality. It didn't hurt to be absolutely stunning as well. Jerry Jackson, director of the Las Vegas *Folies Bergère* said "The girls had to be pretty first, very glamorous...But the showgirls of yesteryear are gone: now they have to be great dancers" (Padget "The Strip: Endangered Species").

By the 1970s the showgirl and the female dancer had merged into a third category of dancer which was a modern, hybrid version of the showgirl: the dancing nude. A dancing nude was expected to have all the legitimate dance training of a female dancer and be able to dance topless, like the showgirl. Contrary to the title of dancing nude, they did not work or perform nude in the show, only topless. All of the female dancers in the Arden shows had a height requirement of 5'8" in bare feet. Once the dancers were hired and sorted as to who was a dancer and who was a dancing nude, then they were sorted again based on their heights. Traditionally the shorter girls of 5'8", 5'9" or even 5'10" were identified as "short". This was because the tall female dancers and dancing nudes were as tall as 6'2" in height. Many of the showgirl spectacles included a line of female dancers, a line of dancing nudes and a line of showgirls. In *Hallelujah Hollywood* at the MGM Grand Hotel in 1974, there were several lines of female dancers, showgirls and dancing nudes. When *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* opened in 1981, its one hundred and twenty-eight cast included singers, male dancers, principal singers and dancers, female dancers and dancing nudes. Although the dancing nudes would be employed as traditional showgirls in some numbers, most notably in the big Ziegfeld finale number, showgirls as beautiful, walking mannequins were no longer included as a separate group for *Donn Arden's Jubilee!*. In a 1980 interview, LeCoque commented: "why hire a girl who can only walk when you can hire a tall, beautiful dancer who can do everything?" (Clark "Showgirls Getting Their Walking Papers"). Previously the showgirls were taller than the dancers, but as the dancers got

taller it changed the structure of the showgirl spectacles, allowing for a new type or breed of showgirl, the dancing nude.

Showgirls as Portrayed in Film and Television

In a modern, twenty-first century Las Vegas the showgirl seems to be everywhere. As soon as you arrive at the new Terminal 3 at McCarran International Airport, you are greeted by a fifty-foot mural of showgirls painted by artist Terry Ritter. But, the showgirl's image has often been distorted from her iconic stature in the media by movies, advertising and strip clubs. Films such as *Showgirls* (United Artists 1995), rolling billboards driven through the Las Vegas Strip, advertising "Showgirls Direct to Your Rooms!" and a Las Vegas strip club titled *Déjà Vu Showgirls* are some examples. Rather than being found inside the casinos performing onstage in elaborate Las Vegas spectacles, which were a mainstay of Las Vegas casinos from the 1960's through the mid-2000s, the showgirl is most often seen now on the sidewalks in front of the casinos. You can see her daily, dressed in home-made showgirl costumes, posing for photos with tourists for small change or passing out brochures for the latest time-share opportunity.

The result of these portrayals is that the attributes and traditions of the legitimate Las Vegas showgirl have become blurred in the new Las Vegas entertainment scene. Some of this blurring was due to the effects of popular culture regarding showgirls and their environments. This could be seen in movies and television programs such as the infamous 1995 film *Showgirls*, directed by Paul Verhoeven and written by Joe Eszterhaus. Unfortunately, much of the movie was predicated on misconceptions and urban legends that had been told and retold by people who at most, had a peripheral contact with authentic showgirls and their milieu. In contrast to the highly trained and disciplined dancers and showgirls of the Las Vegas production shows, Verhoeven's showgirls don't have any formal dance training and no basic knowledge of how to

behave in a theatre or otherwise. His film makes no distinctions between a showgirl and a stripper in the gentlemen's clubs. The choreographer of the movie *Showgirls* mentioned that while doing research for the movie, she researched more in the strip clubs than the showgirl spectacles (Adams "From 'Austin Powers' to Gap ads"). This lack of authentic research into the world of the Las Vegas showgirl was obvious in the over-the-top film depiction of the showgirl in that film.

"Behind-the-scenes" and "reality" television series are another form of popular entertainment that offers viewers a purported, realistic view into people's lives and events. In 2003, E! television network produced a second season of a reality series that focused on showgirls called *Vegas Showgirls: Nearly Famous*. This program was a loosely scripted "behind-the-scenes" goings on at *Skintight*, a small Las Vegas topless revue. *Skintight* producer Greg Thompson permitted the television cameras full access to the dressing rooms and backstage areas. This television series focused more on the backstage goings-on and relationships rather than the show itself. It should be noted that *Skintight* was not an iconic Las Vegas showgirl production show and the dancers were not showgirls in the classic tradition of tall, statuesque figures wearing extravagant costumes, gliding across a huge stage complete with amazing scenic spectacle.

Strip Clubs, Burlesque and Casino Clubs

By today's standards, the showgirl is considered tame in contrast to some of the entertainment on display in Las Vegas. Historically there have always been exotic dancers who perform at the strip clubs, located just off the Las Vegas Strip. The 1995 film *Showgirls* is an example of the environment found in a strip club. Dancers in those clubs will perform individual lap-dances and acrobatic pole-dancing rather than chorus-line production numbers of the

showgirl spectacles. In contrast to the extravagant topless costumes of the showgirl, the dancers of the strip clubs will not leave a whole lot to the imagination in their attire. The Las Vegas strip club Déjà Vu Showgirls was a totally nude exotic dancer club before getting a liquor license.⁵⁰ The audition process for dancers and showgirls for the Las Vegas showgirl spectacles is extensive and lengthy with dancers being asked to demonstrate their technique in ballet, jazz and other forms of technical dance. In an article about exotic dancers in the Strip clubs, exotic dancer Daisy said she didn't even have to dance or interview to get her job at Sapphire Gentleman's Club. She just showed up (DeLaCruz "What's it like to be a stripper..."). It is sometimes difficult for people within the entertainment business to understand the differences between the dancers of the strip clubs and the topless showgirls of the large spectacles. The exotic dancers in the strip clubs were nothing new to Las Vegas but the movie *Showgirls* did make that world a little more mainstream to the average person. Nowadays the clubs advertise with marketing targeted not only the men, but also to their wives and girlfriends. This availability and acceptance of this type of entertainment has made the traditional showgirl seem boring in contrast.

Another societal change happened when the casinos began to see the potential revenues in bringing a form of the strip club entertainment into their hotels and casinos. By 2010, *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* was the only Las Vegas showgirl spectacular remaining in Las Vegas. The *Folies Bergère* had closed in 2009 after years the hotel refusing the funds to invest in new costumes and new numbers. Smaller, more intimate shows, with reduced budgets and casts started to appear in the casino showrooms and lounges with titles such as *X Burlesque*, *Striptease* and *Midnight Fantasy*. These shows were promoted as being a more upscale version of the strip

⁵⁰It is illegal to operate a totally nude club that provides alcohol in Clark County. In order to serve alcohol, the dancers must cover their genitals.

club entertainments while being a sexier version to the traditional showgirl shows. The famous *Crazy Horse* show was imported to Las Vegas from Paris in 2001 and the *Pussy Cat Dolls* burlesque troupe started performing in 2005 in the Las Vegas casinos. The *Pussy Cat Dolls* proved so popular that they had their own venue built inside Caesars Palace, complete with stripper poles and platforms for the dancers to twirl. The next societal trend was to move the dancers from inside the venues out on to the casino floor.

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote about this trend in 2010, saying: “scantly clad showgirls and strippers are nothing new in Las Vegas. What is new is that they have moved from the showrooms and lounge to platforms above the blackjack tables” (Goldstein “Vegas Bets on Sexy Dancers”). Within the casino itself, it wasn’t uncommon to see half-naked dancers standing on platforms as they danced to a recorded song. Rather than charging an admission, this type of entertainment was free for the casino guest. It was part of the casino experience as the guest walked through the casino floor. These performers were sometimes asked to do double-duty. In addition to performing they also had to pick up a tray after their set and get and deliver cocktails to the patrons that had moments before, watched them on their platforms. These performers were known as “bevertainers” because they were a combination of an entertainer and a beverage (cocktail) server. Many of the dancers and showgirls performing in the production shows would pick up extra work as a bevertainer after the showgirl spectacles ended for the night. Some performers would dance in two shows before showing up for their 2 a.m., ten or twelve hour shift as a bevertainer. As part of this trend of casino floor entertainment, the casinos also began to promote party-pits where the mostly young and attractive dealers and dancers were dressed provocatively. These women would interact with the customer with the concept of providing a fun atmosphere in contrast to the more stoic casino dealers.

Casino clubs were also seeing a big increase in Las Vegas in the twenty-first century. In the 1970s and 1980s, the entertainment in the hotel lounges were not as appealing as the clubs and discos situated outside the hotels to the younger clientele. The lounges would have performers who were more likely to appeal to an older demographic and the younger crowd would look outside the casinos for their entertainment. One of the most popular off-property venues was Paul Anka's *Jubilation* disco/nightclub. In an effort to bring the customer back to the casino, clubs soon began to open inside the casinos, where they generated large amounts of revenue. In 2004, *Time* magazine noted that the majority of revenue growth in Las Vegas was generated by people under thirty (Stein "The Strip is Back!"). In contrast to previous generations, this group was seen as being better educated and having more disposable income. This younger demographic would spend most of their time in the clubs of Las Vegas, which the writer says "have sprung up in the desert like stripper poles. Every hotel has at least one disco and an ultra-lounge" (Stein "The Strip is Back!"). Celebrity appearances soon followed at the casino clubs where the celebrities were paid a fee not to perform, but just to show up. According to an article in the Huffington Post, Kim Kardashian was reported to get \$300,000 to show up for a few hours at the nightclub 1 Oak, inside the Mirage hotel on New Year's Eve 2012 ("Kim Kardahsian New Year's Eve Appearance"). Not only did the clubs operate at night, they also began to operate entertainment venues during the daylight to keep the parties going. The hotels began to open up the pools to parties that would continue until the nightclubs reopened in the evening and start the cycle all over again the following day. Soon most of the hotels began to offer these day-clubs with music, celebrity DJs, lots of alcohol and even topless pools. The result of all of these new forms of entertainment was to make the traditional showgirl spectacles seem no longer relevant.

The showgirl spectaculars and the showgirls who inhabited them are now gone in Las Vegas. But, you most likely will see one or two of them outside the casinos handing out pamphlets. Chances are they once were employed by the showgirl spectaculars before they disappeared. Or, you may be enticed to take a picture with the street performers dressed as their interpretation of a showgirl on Fremont Street in Downtown Las Vegas. Former Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman was never seen without his showgirls, which were paid by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor's Association. Both Goodman and his showgirls were considered a brand of Las Vegas ("Oscar Goodman answers questions...") and Goodman was quoted as saying that "without the showgirls, the booze, no one would be listening to me" ("Quotes of the Day"). In spite of Las Vegas no longer having authentic showgirls, they are still a viable commodity in spectacular shows around the world. The *Moulin Rouge* in Paris, the *FriedrichstadtPalast* in Berlin and the *Tropicana Club* in Havana all have extravagant spectacles featuring showgirls. A *New York Times* article on the demise of the showgirl claimed that "the Jubilee! dancers are the last of their kind: the youngest, freshest and most beautiful dinosaurs on the planet (Kinetz "The Twilight of the Ostrich-Plumed..."). Part of the mystic of the showgirl was that she was an idealized version of the perfect woman. Las Vegas producer Blair Farrington remarked that when people came to Las Vegas and saw these beautiful showgirls, they thought that's "what the ultimate female should look like in an over-the-top way" (Padgett "The Strip: Endangered Species").

Conclusion

Although showgirls are still revered as an iconic symbol of Las Vegas, the stage spectaculars that celebrated the showgirl in all her glory are no more. In this chapter I was able to prove that the end of the traditional Las Vegas showgirl spectaculars was due to changes in the

casino structure, other entertainments and societal changes. I showed how the change from mob controlled to corporate controlled casinos affected how entertainment operated in the casinos. This included a discussion on showrooms, ticketing systems and the increase from casino-owned productions to independent four-wall productions. I was also able to prove that the influx of other family-friendly entertainment offerings such as Broadway musicals and Cirque du Soleil impacted the traditional Las Vegas showgirl spectacles. Finally I showed how societal changes damaged the traditional showgirl by making the traditional Las Vegas showgirl spectacles appear less risqué in light of modern strip clubs, exotic dancers, burlesque and club entertainments provided by the casinos.

CONCLUSION

Las Vegas has constantly reinvented itself practically ever since it was first developed as a destination in the desert. Beginning with the first single story hotels that were Western-themed dude ranches to the rise of the mega-resorts of today, Las Vegas has always maintained an “out with the old and in with the new” philosophy. The final scene of Martin Scorsese’s film *Casino* (1995, Universal), is a montage of older hotels being blown up to make way for new venues. In this scene, Scorsese used actual footage of the implosion of the Dunes hotel.

Just as in the demolition of the Dunes, Sands and other hotels signaled the end of a historic period in Las Vegas, the Las Vegas showgirl and the showgirl spectacles have disappeared from the Las Vegas entertainment scene. With the closing of the last showgirl extravaganza *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* on February 11, 2016, it truly is the end of an amazing, spectacular, beautiful era.

This thesis is the history of Las Vegas as seen through the eyes of the showgirl and the productions that shaped her. It is important as a documentation of the history, the creative process, the organization, the designers, the costumes, and the scenic elements which went into the spectacular which was *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!*. With a thorough examination of the Las Vegas showgirl spectacular, *Donn Arden’s Jubilee!* I have provided sorely needed documentation about the history and evolution of the showgirl, through interviews with key creative people to document the processes they used to create the showgirl spectacles.

I have proved in this thesis that due to the high costs involved in the construction of the costumes and the scenery, the changes from casino fully owned and produced Las Vegas stage spectacles to the independent producer “four-wall” model and societal changes that have altered our perceptions of what is considered provocative, that the traditional Las Vegas showgirl

and the production shows that shaped her are no longer a viable form of entertainment in today's Las Vegas.

Although the traditional stage spectaculars that featured her are no longer being produced, I believe that the showgirl will continue to be utilized as a symbol of Las Vegas. She is identified with Las Vegas, much as the can-can dancers of the *Moulin Rouge* and the *Radio City Rockettes* are identified with Paris and New York City respectively. Currently she is employed by various independent contractors to provide atmosphere at corporate events, conventions or trade shows. Many of the girls who now work for those companies were once employed in the large Las Vegas spectaculars, so they know how to stand and project the correct attitude as they meet and greet the clients. At some point, I believe someone will introduce a new showgirl show to Las Vegas because as I mentioned previously, entertainment in Las Vegas tends to go in cycles. However, due to the high costs and time needed to physically produce these shows, a new showgirl show would most likely have minimal physical scenic effects, less spectacular costumes and utilize a smaller cast of performers than the traditional Las Vegas stage spectaculars.

Donn Arden's Jubilee! was the last of the traditional Las Vegas stage spectaculars. While some people commented that *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* was dated and a relic of the past, it still provided an enjoyable and impressive form of entertainment for society today. The show spoke to an audience that wanted to see the glamour and style of a Las Vegas showgirl spectacular that couldn't be seen anywhere else. Comments I regularly heard as the audience was leaving the showroom were "I had no idea it was so spectacular...so beautiful...so wonderful...so incredible...so amazing". And it was.

APPENDIX

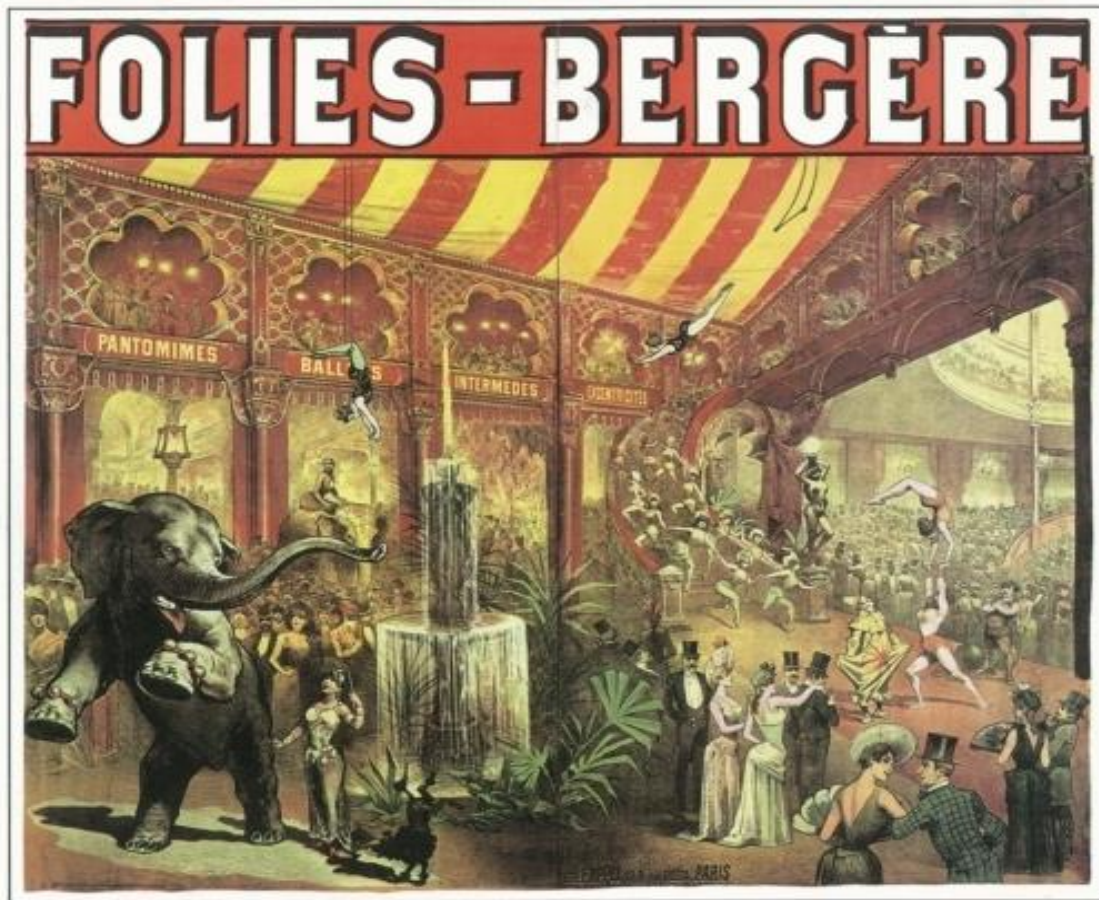


Fig. 1. *Folies Bergère* 1890. www.foliesbergere.com/fr



Fig. 2. *Quadrille au Moulin-Rouge* c 1890 www.moulinrouge.fr

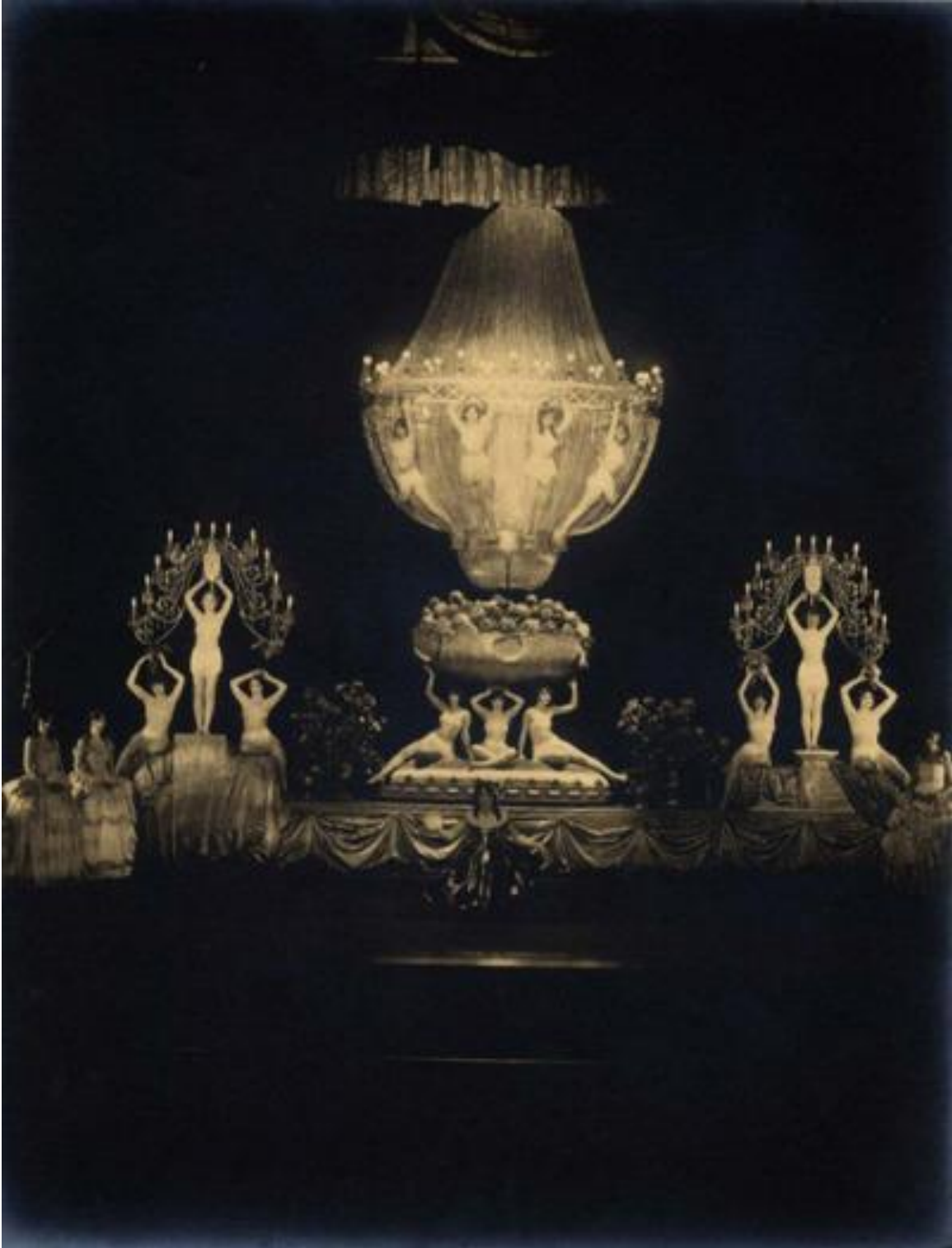


Fig. 3. Ziegfeld Follies c. 1920s Ben Ali Haggin Tableau www.Ziegfeld-follies.tumblr.com

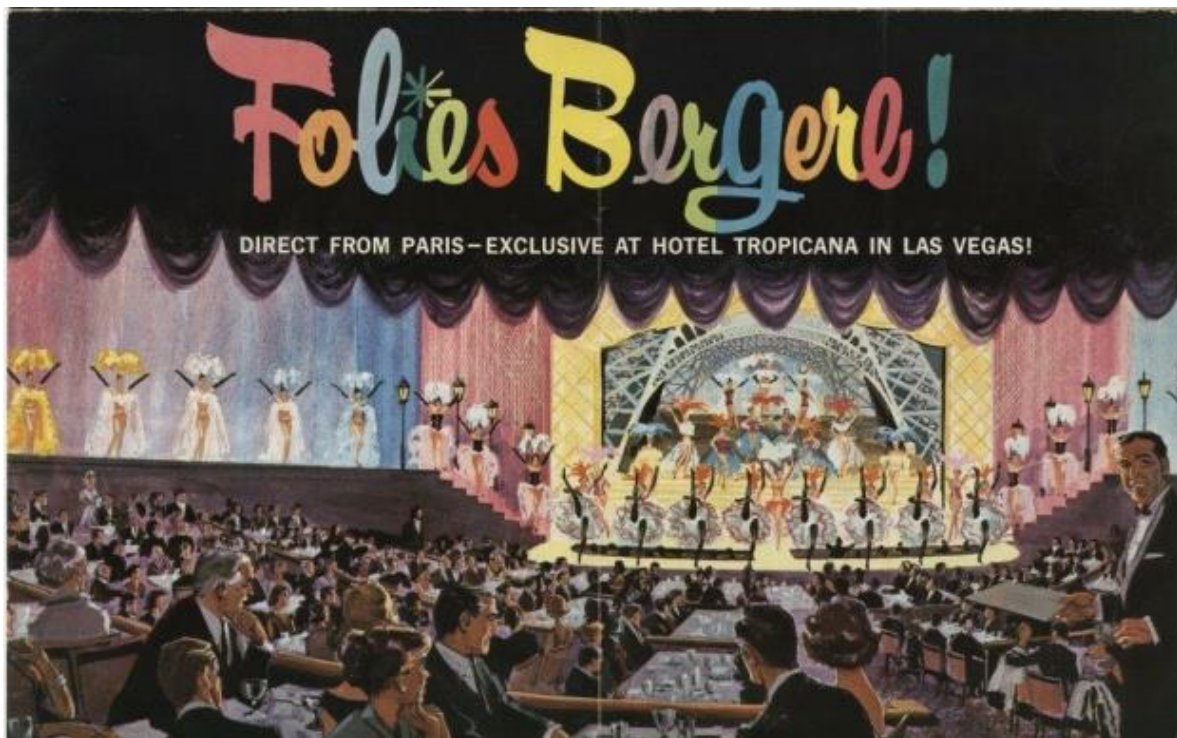


Fig. 4. Folies Bergère program 1962. Digital Library Special Collections UNLV

STARDUST
presents the fourth titanic edition direct from
LE LIDO DE PARIS
an astonishing all new revue
"VOILA!"
conceived and produced by **PIERRE LOUIS-GUERIN** and **RENE FRADAY**
staged and directed by **DONN ARDEN**

1. RENDEZVOUS DE PARIS
Les boulevardiers **ARTHUR MAXWELL**
JOHN JULIANO
L'importation de Paris **ETHEL ROJO**
Les demoiselles de Paris **LES BLUEBELL GIRLS**
Les Parisiens **ARDEN BOY DANCERS**
Les femmes chic **LES BELLES DU LIDO**
L'élégante **NICKY GORSKA**

2. VOILA LE LIDO
Les Miss Lido **MIREILLE & DAGMAR**
Les présentateurs **ARTHUR MAXWELL**
JOHN JULIANO
ARDEN BOY DANCERS

3. HARMONIE AQUATIQUE **FLORENCE RAE**
THE DANCING WATERS
THE GREAT ICE STAGE

4. FEMMES ET DIAMANTS
a) Rue de la Paix: **ARDEN BOY DANCERS**
Les Chevaliers **ARTHUR MAXWELL**
Maurice **LES BELLES DU LIDO**
Les femmes aux diamants **LES BELLES DU LIDO**
b) Le joyau magique: **LES BLUEBELL GIRLS**
Le joyau **MAC RONAY**

5. SURPRISES **MAC RONAY**

6. FANTAISIE D'ARABIE
a) Le marche: **ARTHUR MAXWELL**
L'homme riche **LES BELLES DU LIDO**
Les marchands **ARDEN BOY DANCERS**
L'homme de la rue **JOHN JULIANO**
Les danseuses **LES BLUEBELL GIRLS**
Les danseurs au sabre **ARDEN BOY DANCERS**

Les esclaves **LES BLUEBELL GIRLS**
L'esclave **ETHEL ROJO**
b) Les jarres mystérieuses: **ED. SEIFERT AND CO.**
c) Le harem du sultan:
Le sultan **ARTHUR MAXWELL**
La princesse **NICKY GORSKA**
Les favorites **LES BELLES DU LIDO**
d) Parade orientale: **LES BLUEBELL GIRLS**
La garde du sultan **ARDEN BOY DANCERS**

7. DEXTERITE **ERICH BRENN**

8. LA VALLEE EN PERIL
a) The control room: **ARTHUR MAXWELL**
Francois **JOHN JULIANO**
Pierre **JOHN JULIANO**
b) La tragedie:
AMAZING FLOOD EFFECT

9. ILLUSIONS **GERD MARON**

10. L'OPERA DE PARIS
a) Le grand staircase: **ARTHUR MAXWELL**
Les opera goers **JOHN JULIANO**
Aida **Kathy**
Faust **Mireille**
La Boheme **NICKY GORSKA**
La Traviata **Pierrette**
La Walkyrie **FLORENCE RAE**
Le Chevalier a la rose **Sylvia**
Les contes d'Hoffman **Antoinette**
Carmen **ETHEL ROJO**
b) Moment symphonique **LES NITWITS**
c) Bal de Gala:
THE FIREWORKS
Grand finale **TOUTE LA COMPAGNIE**

Show supervision **FRANK SENNIS** / Costumes created by **FOLCO**
Sets designed by Harvey Warren and Font / Art direction Harvey Warren
Original Music by Landreau, Brienne, Betti & Delvincourt
All costumes made in Paris by Korinska, Turpin, Marinette-Aumont
Vicaire, Lebrun & Falt. Men's formals by Faivret.
★ Assistants to Donn Arden: Phyllott Chorlton & Wisa D'Orso
★ Captain for girls: Tony Hunsline — for boys: Rod Bieber
★ Interglobe of Cafe Continental created and designed by Jac Lessman
Company Manager, Bill De Angelis

EDDIE O'NEIL
and his orchestra

SHOW TIMES
8:15 and 12 Midnight / 2:15 a.m. Saturday

Fig. 5. Lido de Paris Voila! 1963 Program. Personal collection



Fig. 6. Donn Arden posing with chorus girls c. 1940s. Digital Library Special Collections UNLV



Fig. 7. Moulin Rouge Hollywood c. 1955. Personal collection



Fig. 8. Donn Arden, Sylvia Stevenson, Belinda Smith. Las Vegas Aug. 1981. Personal collection



Fig. 9. Fluff Chorlton (LeCoque) c. 1950s. Personal collection



Fig. 10.Fluff Miss Thunderbird. Personal collection



Fig. 11. Fluff LeCoque Company Manager 2005. Personal collection

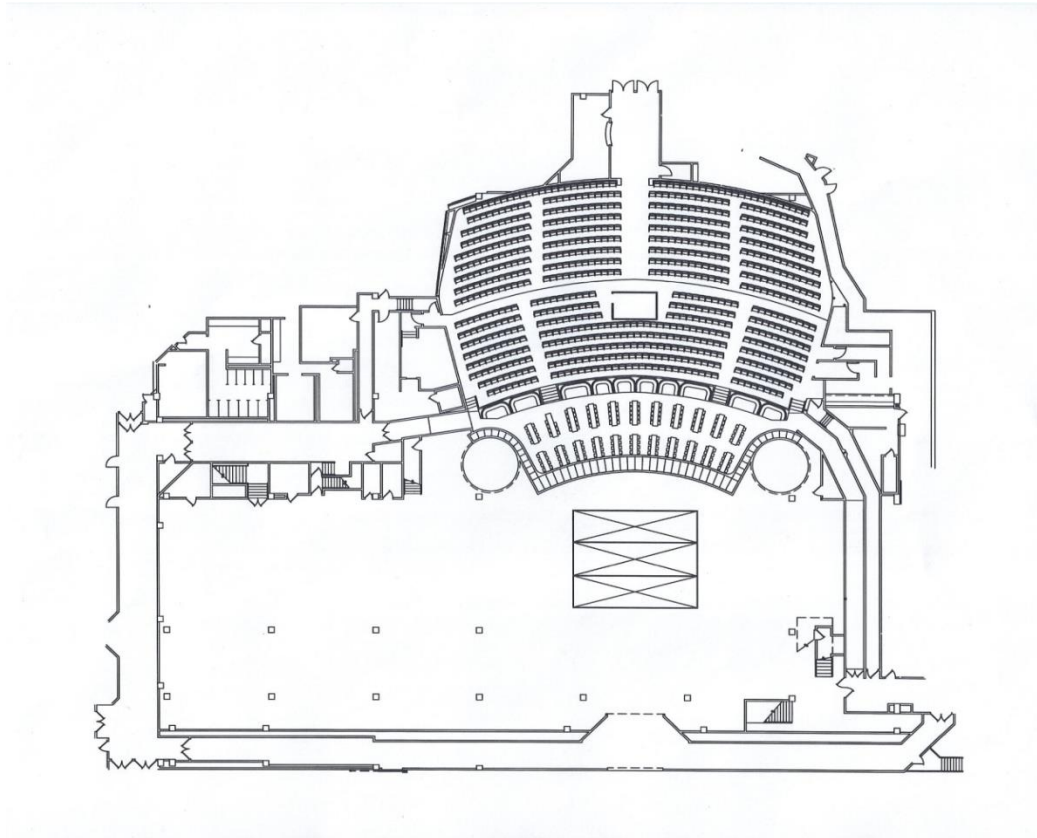


Fig. 12. Jubilee stage. Ground level plan. Personal collection



Fig. 13. Jubilee Passarella. Undated photo. Personal collection



Fig. 14.Donn Arden's Jubilee!Titanic. Las Vegas Review Journal



Fig. 15.Donn Arden's Jubilee!Samson and Delilah Destruction.

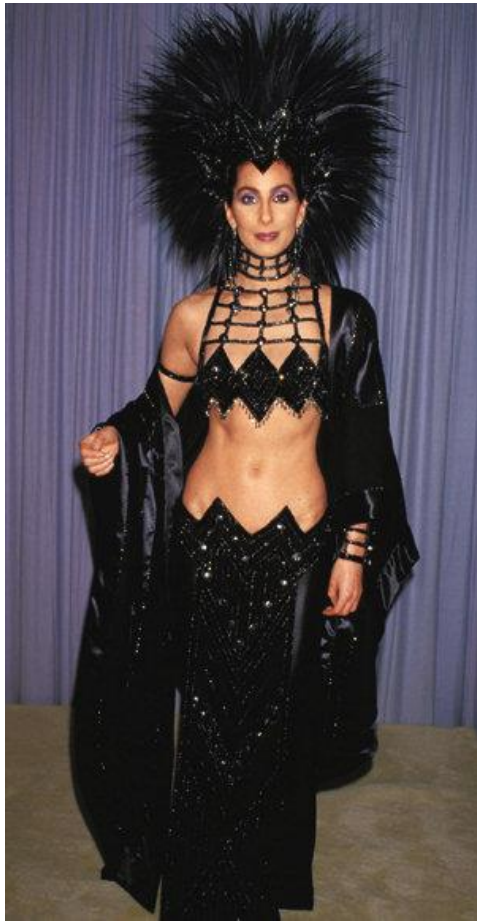


Fig. 16. Cher 1986 Oscars. Bob Mackie. Instyle.com



Fig. 17. Jubilee!Blue Finale sketch. Bob Mackie 1980

JUBILEE #7

S+D COURT
PRINCESS



Fig. 18. Jubilee! Samson and Delilah. Pete Menefee sketch. Court Princess #7.

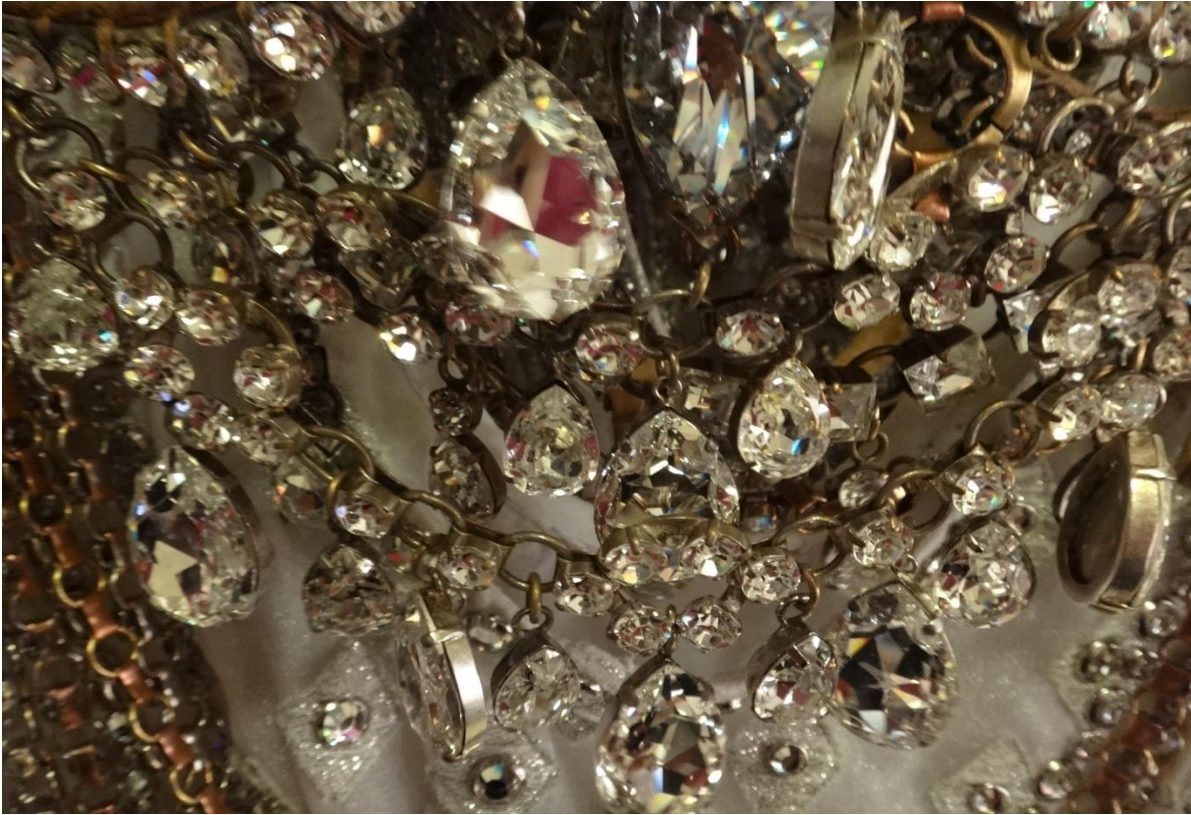


Fig. 19. Rhinestone crown Donn Arden's Jubilee! 2016. Personal collection



Fig. 19. Rhinestone close-up. Donn Arden's Jubilee. 2016 Personal collection

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Company Manager *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* 2012-2016

Assistant Company Manager *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* 1995-2012

Dance Captain *Donn Arden's Jubilee!* 1980-1995

Dancer *Hallelujah Hollywood* 1979-1980

Dancer *Casino de Paris* 1980-1981

Swing Dancer *Lido de Paris* 1978-1979

Experience: Choreographer

Rod Stewart

CeeLo Green

J. Lo

The Killers

Matt Goss

American Country Music Awards