

TRACES OF GENDER TRANSGRESSION IN THE WEST END

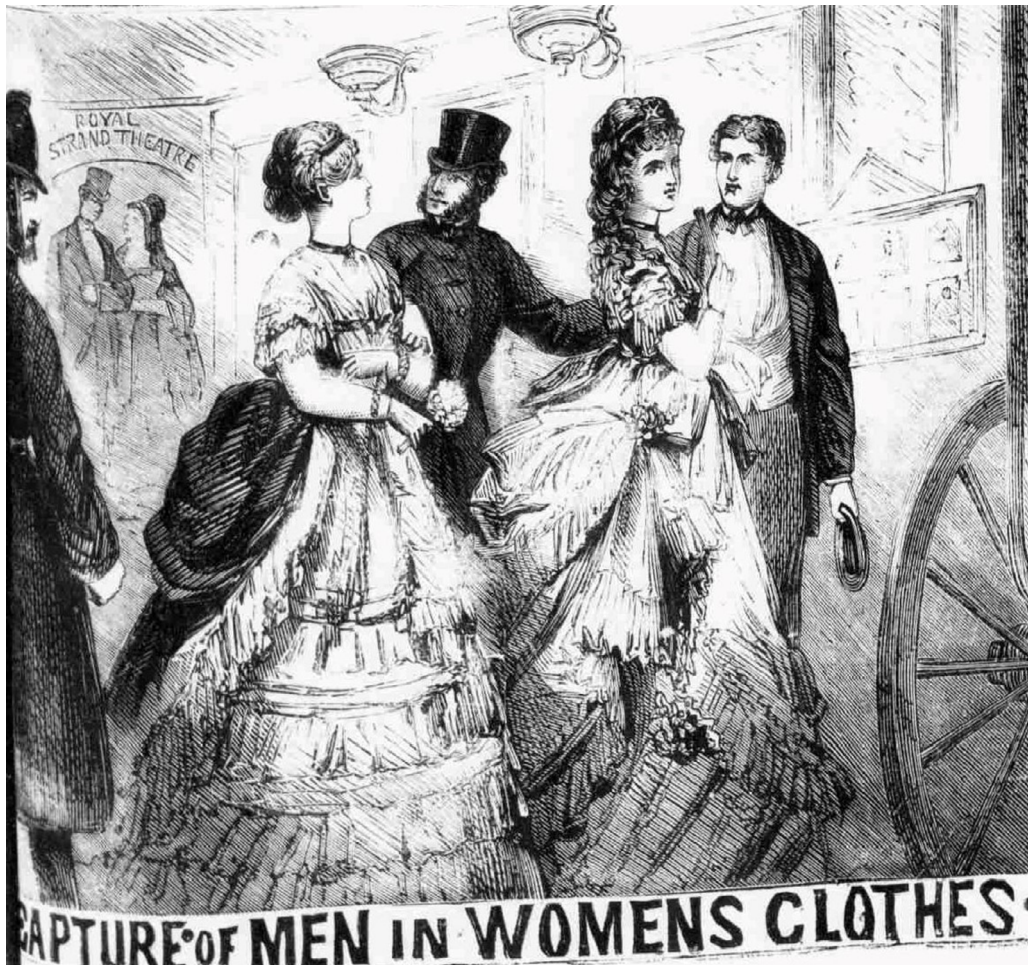
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To stand at the convergence of Strand and Aldwych, facing west towards Trafalgar Square, is to gaze upon one of the busiest stretches of London's theatreland. Once the site of many aristocratic residences—most notably Somerset House, named for the Duke of Somerset—the area flourished as a theatre district during the nineteenth century, with several large theatres constructed on either side of the thoroughfare: the Adelphi (1819), Gaiety (1864), Vaudeville (1870), Savoy (1881), Terry's (1887), and Tivoli Music Hall (1890).

It was nearby at the Royal Strand Theatre, on the night of 28 April 1870, that an incident occurred that shocked the Victorian press and public alike. After the evening's show, two individuals were arrested by the Metropolitan Police. The pair, known to their friends as "Fanny and Stella", were taken to the Bow Street police station, where their identities were revealed to be, in fact, Thomas Boulton and Frederick Park. They were kept overnight at the station before being escorted to the Magistrates' Court the next morning, still made up and dressed in their evening gowns. A crowd of onlookers and reporters had gathered to witness the scene, as the two men were led inside and charged with "outraging public decency", buggery, and conspiring to incite others to their unnatural crimes (McKenna 2013).

While awaiting trial, Fanny and Stella were held with male inmates at Coldbath Fields Prison in Clerkenwell for two months. Both were subjected to invasive examinations, firstly to determine their sex, and subsequently to ascertain whether or not they had engaged in anal intercourse. The results of these were presented by the prosecution as evidence, along with findings from an extensive police investigation that pre-dated the arrest itself by more than a year (Kaplan 2002). This included correspondences between Boulton and Park and a number of



“The arrest of Boulton and Park, aka Fanny and Stella”, unknown author, public domain, The Illustrated Police News, Saturday 7 May 1870, 1: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

their acquaintances, as well as photographs of “Fanny and Stella”, and reports from surveillance officers who had been posted to stake out their shared lodgings on Wakefield Street.

In the end, the prosecution was unable to prove that Boulton and Park had committed the “unnatural crimes” of which they were accused. The pair were acquitted of all charges by a jury, and so were the other men who had been implicated in their alleged crimes while presenting as ladies. The case of Fanny and Stella foreshadowed the notorious trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895. The prosecution’s failure is widely understood to have influenced the passage of the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, which made “gross indecency” between men a criminal offence, punishable with up to two years’ imprisonment with or without hard labour.

The Royal Strand Theatre was demolished in 1905, and in its place was built the Aldwych Tube Station, now disused.

While at the Aldwych ...

... wander up Wellington Street into Covent Garden to visit the Bow Street Police Museum, housed within the former courthouse where the trial of Fanny and Stella famously took place (now inside the NoMad Hotel).

About the author

Laurie Bashford is a writer and PhD candidate in Theatre and Performance at Columbia University in New York City. Through ongoing ethnographic research in London and the United Kingdom, they learn from trans artists and activists, focusing on the constitution of contemporary trans experience through encounters with built infrastructures, public space, and the urban sensorium. Their work has been featured by the American Society for Theatre Research, Performance Studies International, the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), and the International Quarterly of Asian Studies.

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References

- Mckenna, Neil. *Fanny and Stella: The Young Men who Shocked Victorian England*. London: Faber & Faber 2013.
- Kaplan, Morris B. "Men in Petticoats': Border Crossings in the Queer Case of Mr Boulton and Mr Park." In *Imagined Londons*, edited by Pamela K Gilbert, 45-68. Albany NY: State University of New York Press 2002.

Legislation, Regulations and Rules

Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, section 11 (Labouchere Amendment)