

**Manuscript Title:** Costume behaving badly: Poverty, disease and disgust  
in early twentieth-century New York vaudeville

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# Costume behaving badly: Poverty, disease and disgust in early twentieth-century New York vaudeville

## **Abstract**

The early twentieth-century Broadway stages and US vaudeville circuits boasted numerous successful performers, costumiers, producers and directors who understood that their luxurious costumes were crucial to a production's success because they supported the show's narrative and the performer's personal brand (Schweitzer 2009; Barbieri 2017). Costumes were themselves "actors" that performed via an actress's body to reflect the social, cultural and economic landscapes they inhabited, spinning tales of notoriety, extravagance and celebrity that proved potent to audiences (Brayshaw 2014, 2019). In some cases, however, Broadway and vaudeville costumes were unruly, behaving in unintended ways and telling audiences stories that differed from a show's narrative and highlighting social anxieties that audiences had come to the theatre to escape. Drawing on theories of agency in costume (Barbieri 2017; Trimingham 2017) and textile semantics (Andrew 2008), this article analyses early twentieth-century accounts of costumes behaving badly to argue that those reviled as disgusting by theatre critics and audiences reflected classed fears of poverty and disease.

**Keywords:** fashion; costume; vaudeville; Broadway; agency; disgust

One of the main attractions of the vaudeville and Broadway stages during the early twentieth century was the display of the latest lavish fashions. This meant that critics writing for theatre publications like *Variety* wielded a great deal of influence in shaping the dress codes of the vaudeville circuit because their opinions about the performance costumes could make or break a show (Schweitzer 2009). Anna Marble (1881–1946), the press agent and author of a weekly fashion and gossip column in *Variety*, for example, was a “member of one of the oldest theatrical families in the United States ... [and as] press agent for Hammerstein’s *Victoria* ... [made it] one of the most-talked-of vaudeville theatres in the country” prior to her retirement in 1910 (Anon. 1946, 21). Harriett (Hattie) Silverman (1875–1975), who wrote under the pseudonym “The Skirt” and was married to *Variety*’s publisher Sime Silverman (1873–1933), took over from Marble in 1909 as the author of the column “The Woman in *Variety*.” Both women “offered detailed descriptions and critiques of the clothes worn by female vaudeville artists” in the column, which encouraged and promoted high standards of dress upon the stage (Schweitzer 2009, 113). Marble and “The Skirt” heaped lavish praise on performers who wore beautiful, expensive ensembles, while urging other performers to “change the colour of their costumes, invest more money in their wardrobes, or discard obsolete or inappropriate fashions” (Schweitzer 2009, 113). Marble and “The Skirt,” however, also poured scorn on performers who wore shabby, old, ill-fitting or soiled gowns, or ensembles that were in poor taste, as evident in the following review: “All the girls seem new in ‘The Country Club,’ and all their clothes seem old. The dresses were very much soiled, unpleasantly so” (‘The Skirt’ 1910a, 11). Reviews that panned a show’s costumes could, therefore, discourage audiences from attending a production, causing it to close.

Emotional, or visceral, audience responses to the look and feel of stage costumes have been described by Trimingham as “kinetic empathy” (2017, 192). Costumes carry the movement of the actor’s body and convey emotional and sensory intensity within the narrative frame of the story. The kinetic empathy that gives costume its agency is also grounded in cultural understandings of “textile semantics”: that is, the communicative qualities in textiles, including color, texture and social, historical and cultural significances, which inform the “generation and exchange of meaning between the textile practitioner and the viewer” (Andrew 2008, 1). This is part of what allows costumes to “touch a visceral nerve within us” (Trimingham 2017, 192). Velvet, for example, touches a visceral nerve of desire within us because its delicate, soft texture is pleasurable to touch and its nap can glitter and catch the eye, while velvet’s historical use in fashion and costuming communicates glamour, luxury and extravagance. Successful actresses of the early twentieth century, including Anna Held (1872–1918) and the so-called “Queen of Vaudeville,” Eva Tanguay (1878–1947), were aware of the agency of their costumes. They chose and purchased expensive, lavish costumes to wear on the stage and worked sympathetically with them, harnessing their costumes’ materiality, kinetic empathy and symbolism to propel themselves to stardom (Brayshaw 2014, 2019). The influences of vaudeville costumes extended like tendrils from the stage to the social, cultural and economic landscapes of early twentieth-century America via the audience and the mass media, and columns like “The Woman in Variety” highlighted performance costumes’ good and bad behavior, greatly influencing the costuming codes of the vaudeville circuit.

Many actresses in secondary or chorus parts, however, did not always have the freedom or capacity to choose and pay for their own costumes, even though it was standard practice for them to do so (Erdman 2012, 55). As such, they had to wear

costumes from the theatrical company's wardrobe, and tight production budgets frequently meant that these costumes had been reused or repurposed across multiple shows, often showing traces of the bodies that had previously worn them. *Variety* noted in 1909, for example, that the show *Mardi Gras Beauties* had been "lavishly costumed. Only one costume has the appearance of having been used before" ("The Skirt" 1909a, 18). In some cases, re-used and poorly designed costumes went completely rogue, behaving in unintended ways and communicating stories that differed from the show's, and the wearer's, intended narrative. This article suggests that *Variety*'s critiques of shabby, soiled gowns and poorly colored costumes were so vitriolic not just because they disappointed theatregoers who expected to see the latest fashions on stage, but because the costumes touched the wrong visceral nerve within audiences. Instead of exciting viewers' imaginations and eliciting feelings of pleasure, costumes like those in *The Country Club* elicited feelings of disgust in vaudeville audiences and critics alike because they communicated messages linked to widespread social anxieties and prejudices of the era that equated poverty with filth and highly contagious, deadly diseases.

### **Dressing for the big time**

American vaudeville was an entertainment format that rose in the nineteenth century from the dime museums, concert saloons, minstrelsies, American burlesque and circuses. A standard vaudeville show contained a variety of acts that typically appeared in all of these entertainment genres under the one billing, including classical musicians, animal acts, magicians, clowns, acrobats, male and female impersonators, ballet numbers, minstrel shows, and popular music and dance acts (Springhall 2008). By the late nineteenth century, there were three common levels of vaudeville theatre: the "small time," which involved frequent performances on lower-paying contracts in rough

theatres; the “medium time,” which paid moderate wages for two performances per day in purpose-built theatres; and the “big time,” which attracted stars like Tanguay, who harnessed the power of her often deliberately bizarre costumes and worked her way up from the “small time” to become history’s most highly paid vaudeville star, appearing regularly in urban theatres in front of middle- and upper-middle-class audiences (Erdman 2012). One of the key figures who shaped the future of American vaudeville was the performer and theatrical impresario Antonio (Tony) Pastor (1837–1908). Pastor was best known for “cleaning up” vaudeville by creating family-friendly entertainment for the middle and upper-middle classes and encouraging women to attend the theatre unchaperoned by holding matinee sessions. In 1881, Pastor took over the Tammany Hall on Union Street in the heart of New York’s theatre district, renaming it the 14th Street Theatre and renovating the interior. “There was a ladies’ lounge and an inviting lobby with posters of shows to come. Admission prices were reasonable and competitive: family circle was twenty-five cents; parquet thirty-five cents; orchestra fifty cents; and children’s tickets fifteen cents ... Tuesday and Friday matinees were retained to attract ladies and children” (Fields 2007, 101–2). Pastor pioneered another key feature of vaudeville within his 14th Street Theatre; despite having the funds to purchase a larger theatre, he chose a smaller seating venue to retain the intimate atmosphere needed to make popular theatre successful. This decision also had important implications for vaudeville costuming.

As Fields writes, “Audiences wanted to be close to performers, to see their every expression, hear their dialogue, and feel as a participant in the experiences” (2007, 100). Audiences – particularly the middle- and upper-middle-class women whom Pastor wanted to attract to the theatre – also wanted to see the latest fashions on the stage and in clear detail in order to take ideas to their dress makers, seek similar styles in

department stores, or copy the gowns themselves (Schweitzer 2009, 164). Indeed, a review of the show *Washington Society Girls* in *Variety* in 1910 lamented, “Another noticeable deficiency is the lack of women principals ... The missing women means absence of dress and display” (Anon. 1910, 16). This desire for proximity to performers in order to see their clothes was made clear in the *Variety* reviews, which described stage outfits in close detail. For example, the British vaudeville star Alice Lloyd (1873–1949) received a glowing, detailed review during 1909 her American tour from “The Skirt,” who could not

resist describing the gorgeous white gown Miss Lloyd usually opens her program with. Some stage gowns, though beautiful and costly, do not show their value across the footlights, but this gown of Miss Lloyd’s makes the women in the audience sit up. It is a Valenciennes lace, hand embroidered to form panels, narrow at the top and spreading to the white satin band around the bottom. The Empire waist is finished with a sash of wide Dresden satin ribbon which floats out gracefully as Miss Lloyd pirouettes about. With this gown Miss Lloyd wears a hat made in the Corday style of the same lace as the gown with a large bow of the Dresden ribbon at the back. (“The Skirt” 1909b, 11)

Lloyd had been brought to New York by the theatre owner and manager Percy Garnett Williams (1857–1923), who ran the Orpheum string of “big-time,” up-scale vaudeville theatres that actively sought to attract middle- and upper-middle-class women with displays of the latest fashions. Lloyd herself would also have likely been aware of these women’s desires to see the latest fashions, as the appetites of London’s female audiences to see actresses wearing the newest styles on stage was similarly voracious (Kaplan and Stowell 1995). The review demonstrates that the costumes’ textiles were just as important in communicating wealth and fashionability to audiences as the ensembles themselves. This is because a communicative textile, as Andrew writes, “contains imagery that creates a visual narrative; [...] contains colours, textures,

or patterns which evoke a mood or feeling in the viewer; communicates meaning through what it is made from – i.e. the actual fabric and/or its tactility; communicates meaning through its contextualization – i.e. what it is made into and how or where it is shown” (2008: 34–35). The kinetic empathy of the delicate, clean, white Valenciennes lace and silky, shimmering texture of the Dresden satin ribbon clearly resonated with “The Skirt.” The way that Lloyd’s ensemble moved when she danced and its presentation within the context of a respectable, upscale vaudeville theatre signaled the desirable qualities of being pretty, wealthy and fashionable. “The Skirt’s” review also meant that these qualities that the costume signaled were transmitted past the stage via the press to aspirational women who had been unable to attend Lloyd’s show, but who may still have wished to purchase or make a similarly fashionable gown. Not everyone, however, could afford such beautiful clothes or fabrics.

## **Poverty**

The New York vaudeville shows that sat at the intersection of theatrical entertainment and fashion displays occurred during the “Progressive Era,” a period between 1890 and 1920 that was “one of the most significant periods of investigation, reflection, and legislation regarding urban poverty in US history” (Westgate 2014, 4). This era transformed how America’s wealthy engaged with urban poverty as a problem to be tackled, and public discourse shifted from Victorian narratives that attributed poverty to individual moral corruption to theories that poverty was the result of social and environmental factors grounded in historical, geographical and philosophical developments. In the United States, these factors included the aggregation of the poor into separate districts, waves of migration of African Americans from the rural South seeking work in the industrial North of America, new immigration, and the economic depression of the 1890s (Westgate 2014, 5). New York City was at the center of these



new discourses about American class relations and inequality during the Progressive Era and the city's massive population boom from migration and immigration led to vast economic expansion and cultural development. It also meant, however, that thousands of "poor and working-class residents lived cheek by jowl with more than a quarter of the country's millionaires in 1892," leading to encounters that saw the streets of New York become "the stage for all the acrimony, conflict, and occasional flashes of understanding between [the] elite and working people" (Huyssen 2014, 7). One result of these encounters meant that many wealthier New Yorkers became engaged in philanthropic endeavors and visited the city's slums with the agenda of social reform, working stridently with individuals, charitable and labor organizations to improve housing, education and public health, and to end child labor. Other New Yorkers, however, saw the city's poor as a source of amusement.

The phenomenon of "slumming," in which wealthy Americans went to their cities' tenements for fun, also grew in popularity during the Progressive Era (Heap 2009). Wealthier New Yorkers, including the newly established urban middle and upper-middle classes, participated in tours led by enterprising guides who took groups to see the living conditions, oddities and vices of the slums, including pubs, people's homes, opium and gambling dens, "Black and Tan" dives and the brothels of the Tenderloin, a notorious red-light district. This "afforded [slum tourists] the opportunity to contrast themselves with the lower classes – so that they could differentiate themselves from immigrants and the working class *and* participate in the amusements from immigrant and working-class life" (Westgate 2014, 24). Those who were less brave could still view the slums through the pages of newspapers, magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* and the wildly popular book by the photojournalist and social reformer Jacob Riis (1849–1914), *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of*

*New York* (first published in 1890). Riis's sensational exposure of the urgent crisis in tenement conditions "helped to stimulate a public, political response" to improving life in the slums (Huysen 2014, 14). It also contained maps of the tenement districts, narrative descriptions of slum life and shocking black-and-white photographs of the filthy, crowded tenements and their impoverished inhabitants wearing shabby, soiled clothes. Many tenement inhabitants worked hard to keep their homes and clothes neat and clean but, as Gandal posits, Riis's photographs were a form of "spectacular entertainment" that shared "much with a cheap aesthetic that is regularly attributed to the lower classes" and which allowed the newly established urban middle classes to indulge in consuming lower-class vulgarity, against which they could define their middle-class identity (1997, 21). The popularity and widespread dissemination of Riis's photographs, along with the practice of "slumming" and daily encounters on the streets, meant that New Yorkers were not just aware of "how the other half lives," but of how they looked and dressed.

A key way in which wealthier women differentiated themselves from impoverished immigrants and the working classes was through the consumption of fashion. Entwistle uses the term "fashion" to mean a "system of dress found in society where social mobility is possible," and New York's newly established middle classes enjoyed participating in this system of dress as a form of leisure, social distinction and social mobility (2015, 93). Social prejudices against appearing poor were heightened in the burgeoning mass media, which featured regular articles and advertisements that encouraged the purchase of new clothes to avoid appearing "shabby." For example, in 1908 an article in the New York daily newspaper *The Sun* claimed, "Everything that is not perfectly fresh and shining and smart is now described as shabby and is not permissible even in the worst weather when women in other cities might save their

second best clothes to wear on rainy, muddy days” (Anon. 1908a, 18). The *Evening World Daily Magazine* discussed the challenges of appearing “well-dressed” for poorer women, noting that it was not easy to be always “gloved and well shod”: “To be well gloved one must have more than one pair, and ditto with shoes. Sometimes one can spare the change to buy gloves, by the time shoe money has been accumulated the gloves are worn; so while she had good gloves and shabby shoes, she now has good shoes and shabby gloves” (Quimby 1908, 6). With little or no disposable income, impoverished women were not able to participate in the system of fashion consumption that would allow them social mobility, and this extended to poorer vaudeville actresses who could not afford the latest fashions needed to secure them desirable roles (Schweitzer 2009, 106). This potentially trapped them in small-time vaudeville and in poverty with no way out.

Furthermore, a vaudeville actress’s proximity to her public while performing meant that shabby, soiled garments enabled audiences and reviewers alike to see past the illusion of character created by costume within the context of the stage and destroyed the effects that are “of great importance in the production of the various satisfactions that are derived from clothes” (Flügel 1940, 36). These effects depend on a psychological illusion called ‘confluence’ that was identified in the early-twentieth century. “In order for confluence to operate, the different parts of the whole (here, body and clothes) must, to some extent, mentally fuse into a unity. If the garment in question is liable to behave in a way that is not in accordance with the wishes of the wearer, it is apt to seem a troublesome foreign body rather than an agreeable extension of the self” (Flügel 1940, 37). If fashionable stage costumes represented an extension of the human body, then the filthy, soiled garments that behaved contra to the wishes of the wearer represented a magnification of the sick body, rather than of the desirable, healthy body

signalled by pristine, fashionable gowns that audiences had come to see. Shabby, soiled garments represented both a troublesome foreign body and a disagreeable extension of the self.

Ideas about what constituted undesirability also extended to displays of bad taste that manifested through poor fashion choices, inappropriate fabrics and colors, and ill-fitting, shabby, torn and/or soiled garments. For example, “The Skirt” wrote in April 1909, “Probably velvet is the Morrissey Sisters’ idea of elegance on the stage. They make three changes: first, brown velvet; second, green velvet, and last, black velvet [...]. The three costumes are shabby and ill-fitting” (“The Skirt” 1909c, 14). The Morrissey Sisters’ unintended semiotics of their shabby, ill-fitting velvet gowns exposed “human flaws by distorting the body,” which appeared in stark contrast with the deliberate semiotics of ill-fitting, shabby costumes worn by the era’s leading vaudeville slapstick “knock about” comedians (Barbieri 2017, 86). This included “tramp” costumes worn by the American comedy duo Joe Weber (Joseph Maurice Weber, 1867–1942) and Lew Fields (Moses Schoenfeld, 1867–1941) and later by the British vaudevillian and silent film star Charlie Chaplin (1889 – 1977), who pioneered his version of “The Tramp” in 1914.

The figure of the Tramp was established in American vaudeville in response to the economic depression of 1873, along with the era’s “transformations in mobility that offered variety theatre a way to appeal to their audience’s fears and fantasies that accompanied the rapid economic and social changes sweeping the country” (Granshaw 2019, 199). These fears reflected established, popular views that equated poverty with criminality and degeneracy. By the 1890s, the Tramp had become a “stock character in the music hall and vaudeville”, comic strips, pulp literature and newspapers (Musser 1988, 42). This was due in part to the American social reformer, John James McCook

(1843 – 1927), whose widely published studies of poverty included photographs and documented life stories of tramps. McCook's photographs often show these men dressed in shabby trappings of the late-Victorian gentility – bowler hats, vests and suits and posed “in the same manner as any other Victorian” gentleman (Bogardus and Szaz 1986, 158). The images were “stylized representations whose familiar elements diminished their power to disconcert. The codes mixed together in the pictures – realism, comedy, humanism, melodrama – ensured that audiences would find them exciting but finally not threatening” (Bogardus and Szaz 1986, 162). Like the impoverished figures photographed by Riis, McCook's tramps had become a form of spectacular entertainment.

The costumes of Weber, Fields and Chaplin, along with those of other tramp comedians of Progressive Era vaudeville were deliberately fit poorly and from shabby “ripped out and reassembled” garments in order to embody, and parody, the human vulnerabilities and frailties that are often the results of poverty (Barbieri 2017, 113). These tramp costumes echoed the preferred clothes of the 1890s tramps and were likely influenced by McCook's photographs as much as by encounters with tramps themselves. In addition, the actors cleverly incorporated many of the codes mixed in McCook's portraits into their performances, which further helped vaudeville audiences to ameliorate the horror of poverty through the scopophilic gaze, turning poverty into entertainment. Vaudeville audiences were, therefore, well-versed in the conventions of acts that intentionally used shabby costumes and what they represented. Tramp costumes arguably also intentionally transmitted a cultural knowledge of the centuries-old practices of the discarded clothing of the wealthy being worn on the stage, further signaling class hierarchies about access to wealth and fashion, as documented by Jones and Stallybrass (2000). “The Skirt's” review of the Morrissey Sisters demonstrated that

wearing shabby, ill-fitting gowns made from fabric that was supposed to communicate luxury and exclusivity was a faux pas within the context of vaudeville fashion displays. Instead of a providing a tasteful display of high fashion, or even the sophisticated blend of comedy and pathos seen in many tramp acts, the Morrissey Sisters' gowns simply transmitted messages linked to the era's widespread social anxieties around poverty, which potentially prevented them from making it to the vaudeville "big time."

### **Aestheticizing poverty**

The Morrissey Sisters were not the only actresses "The Skirt" criticized for wearing shabby costumes. In March 1910, for example, "The Skirt" wrote that the chorus in a show called *The London Belles* was very pretty, but it was "too bad that handsome costumes haven't been provided for them. The costumes worn are terribly shabby and very much soiled" ("The Skirt" 1910b, 14). In contrast to "The Skirt's" comments which revealed failings in vaudeville costuming, however, there was a popular genre of theatrical productions set in the slums that featured themes of fallen women, addiction, gambling and white slavery, which featured deliberately shabby, soiled costumes and props (Westgate 2014). The highly popular production of Eugene Walter's play *The Easiest Way* (1909), directed and staged by the American theatrical impresario and leading pioneer of scenographic theatrical realism David Belasco (1853–1931), was one such piece that contentiously aestheticized poverty. It starred Frances Starr (1886–1973) as Laura Murdock, a young actress who is the mistress of a wealthy, economically abusive man known as Brockton. When Murdock leaves Brockton in the hope of marrying another man for whom she must wait, Brockton cuts her off financially and blackballs her from the theatres. Act Two is set in a Tenderloin flophouse where Murdock, who is unable to find work, is living. Belasco went slumming in the Tenderloin to find objects to dress the set to make it as realistic as possible. He

describes how he located “the meanest theatrical lodging-house I could find [...] [and] bought the entire interior of one of its most dilapidated rooms” when creating the scenography (Belasco 1919, 77). Stage properties in Act Two also included ‘worn and shabby clothes’ hanging in the wardrobe (Westgate 2014, 152). At the end of Act Two, after almost starving in her dirty Tenderloin lodgings, Murdock makes the painful decision to return to being Brockton’s mistress in order to escape penury. Act Three of *The Easiest Way* opens with Murdock, who, having returned to Brockton, is wearing beautiful, fashionable gowns. The success of *The Easiest Way* highlighted the “distinct pleasures in viewing the lower class, especially its female members, in the new realism on stage” (Johnson 2006, 78). The melodramatic plot and aesthetics reflected ‘the reality of the gendered economic power and disparity during the Progressive Era, particularly in the world of the theatre, where young actresses often depended on the largesse of a wealthy benefactor’ (Westgate 2014, 154). But the play also drew criticism for deliberately aestheticizing poverty for amusement. The *Evening Post* on January 16, 1909, for example, wrote, “Evidently this tale may inculcate a sound moral by means of a wholesome veracity, but it is not difficult to see how any good effect might be neutralized by gross sensationalism offered in the guise of realism” (Anon. 1909a, 5).

The costumes in *The Easiest Way* played an important part in rendering poverty a spectacle, and showing the protagonist’s changes in fortune through costume offered audiences a voyeuristic pleasure that reinforced “the association between poverty and filth” and the corresponding “motivation to avoid poverty in order to ward off filth” (McGinn 2011, 126). The pleasure in viewing the poverty depicted in Act Two was underscored by the theatre itself, the displays of couture and the luxurious scenography of the other scenes. *The Easiest Way* was staged at the Styvesant Theatre, built for Belasco in 1907, the interior of which featured Tiffany windows, murals by the artist

Everett Shinn (1876–1953) and a ten-room penthouse where Belasco lived and worked. The *New York Times* said that *The Easiest Way* was “sumptuously staged” (Anon. 1909b: 11), and Starr’s ensembles in Act Three were by the New York designer Mollie O’Hara, whose studio, O’Hara Dressmakers, was situated at 11 E 48th St., with hats from the upmarket Fifth Avenue department store, Henri Bendel. Belasco and Starr understood that fashion and costume were a key means during the era to communicate social mobility, wealth and desirability, and Belasco’s desire for authenticity meant he willingly paid for “every detail of the wardrobe which actors wear on my stage” (Belasco 1919, 81). He also allowed his actresses agency in costuming, noting, “I try not to dictate too much in the matter of dresses for my actresses, except to preserve the color harmonies, but I insist that they must take heed of the temperament of the characters they are to represent and the stations in life to which the characters belong” (Belasco 1919, 61–62). Starr’s good taste, supported by Belasco’s big budget, meant that the fashions in *The Easiest Way* (1909) received glowing praise from “The Skirt,” who wrote, “Francis Starr is wearing some ravishing gowns. The morning gown in the third act is a dream. It is of white chiffon with a border of roses, over which is a military blue panne velvet loose coat” (“The Skirt” 1909d, 9). Starr’s gowns, the scenography of the play and the interior of the Styvesant Theatre seemed all the more luxurious when juxtaposed with the aesthetics of poverty and filth communicated in Act Two. It also showed how Starr used her costumes in *The Easiest Way* both to communicate Murdock’s character and story and to differentiate herself from Murdock. This was apparent from the “The Skirt’s” review, which described Starr as wearing the gown, not Murdock.

The success of slumming plays demonstrates that while wealthier New Yorkers were often sympathetic to the plight of women like Murdock, many nonetheless only



wanted to see poverty when it suited them and on their terms. The rest of the time, a ticket to vaudeville, perhaps combined with a little shopping at the department stores located near the theatres, provided middle- and upper-middle-class New York women with an escape from the constant presence of poverty in their city. As McGinn writes, “Modern consumerism [...] has roots in the human condition as a strenuous repressive flight from disgust. We surround ourselves with the anti-disgusting, the better to repress our consciousness of the disgusting” (2011, 123). Seeing a vaudeville actress wearing an unintentionally shabby, soiled costume on stage instead of a fashionable, new ensemble elicited a response of disgust in audiences as it pointed to the impoverished, grimy, morally and corporeally corrupt underbelly of New York. Actresses’ badly behaving costumes also revealed social anxieties about other dangers associated with poverty, including deadly diseases that could start in the slums and rapidly infect members from all social classes.

### **Disease and disgust**

During the Progressive Era, the tenement houses on New York’s Lower East Side experienced regular outbreaks of deadly diseases, including tuberculosis, dysentery and measles, which “constituted an ongoing threat to public health” (Huysen 2014, 16). The *Sun* reported on January 1, 1909, for example, that the number of deaths in New York City in 1908 from measles and scarlet fever had increased from 1907 (Anon. 1909c, 1). In January 1908, one doctor used the language of fashion, shopping and the theatre to assure wealthier readers that potentially deadly diseases could be treated by his acquiring an “an extra stock of measles remedies” early in the measles season:

Just as merchants have at certain seasons runs on certain articles – overcoats in the winter, bathing suits in summer [...] – so we doctors know just what diseases each

month will bring forth. [...] [Scarlet fever and typhoid] have a long run in autumn.  
(Anon 1908b, 4)

Measles remains one of the world's most contagious diseases (WHO 2019) and is particularly deadly for malnourished children under the age of five. In 1894, the Tenement House Committee called rear tenements "'infant slaughter-houses,' where as many as one in five babies died" (Library of Congress n.d., n.p.). Social anxieties around seasonal measles and scarlet fever epidemics and related infant mortality likely caused "The Skirt" in February 1909 to snipe

I wonder no one has discovered that champagne colored tights are nearer the flesh tint than any pink yet worn. If one's skin was the color of some of the pink on stage, we would be rushed to the doctor's for fear we had scarlet fever or the measles. You girls who dress as "kiddies" [...], try the champagne color above and notice the effect. (1909e, 11)

Like the Morrissey Sisters' costumes, the pink tights exposed "human flaws by distorting the body," in this case by making bodies look disgustingly diseased (Barbieri 2017, 86). By functioning as a second, seemingly diseased skin, the measles-pink fabric repelled audiences, distracting them from the show and acting as an extension of the troublesome body. The touch of the fabric is here suggestive of the touch of disease, where the offending costume is felt as an assault upon the body. As McGinn writes, "Touch is the strongest form of intimacy, and we don't want to get intimate with what we find disgusting ... The natural response to a disgusting object is thus to put it beyond the scope of the sense of touch" (McGinn 2011, 35). Theatre can make disgust palatable through parodic, satirical or comedic exaggeration, as in the tradition of the grotesque, where costume participates visually in the exposure of anxieties and the "surfacing of fears that may otherwise have remained sealed in the state of unconsciousness" (Barbieri 2017, 89). The badly behaving costumes of vaudeville, however, caused

audiences to confront social anxieties about poverty and disease *without* the catharsis of laughter – as was typical in tramp comedies like Chaplin or Weber and Fields – or without the displays of luxury such those seen in slumming plays like *The Easiest Way*, which reassured audiences of their own social standing. The costumes failed because disgust was not a usual feature of vaudeville fashion shows, which were generally expected to provide a pleasant spectacle for the senses. For the fashion critics of the day, audience attention was better directed “towards beautiful objects that carry no hint of the gross” so that viewers may not dwell long “on the noxious objects and process that confront us in our very nature” (McGinn 2011, 132). The spectacle of seemingly diseased flesh seen on the stage during measles season and the corresponding lack of catharsis caused “The Skirt” to seek her own release: her visceral reaction against the pink tights that was so strong that she wished to cleanse her aesthetic palate with metaphorical champagne.

### **Cleaning up the tenements**

One important, likely reason for the disgust that soiled costumes generated in audiences was that by 1909 there seemed to be little excuse for them to appear on the stage. In 1901, New York passed the *Tenement House Act*, which aimed to improve sanitation and living conditions in the tenements, as the connections between dirt and disease had been well-known for some time. In 1901, for example, there were “more than 9,000 ‘school sinks’ or privy vaults, located in tenement house yards. These ‘school sinks’ were practically open privies for the common use of all the inmates of the houses to which they were appurtenant, flushed occasionally into the sewers with water” (de Forest 1914, 15). These privies were gradually removed and replaced by modern sanitation, and by 1914 only 375 “school sinks” existed in New York City (de Forest 1914, 15). It was amid this climate of sanitation reform that, in 1908, Marble offered the

following advice to the manager of a production number called *The Love Waltz*: “It’s time to send some of those velvet court robes to the cleansers” (Marble 1908, 9).

Although Marble did not elaborate on the source of the dirt, the stage lights probably illuminated patches of dirt, grease and stale sweat that would have appeared matted, dull and flat compared with the direction of the nap on the rest of the gown. A major source of disgust is the secretions of the body, including “skin grease” and “stale sweat,” while dirt that clings to the skin evokes “repulsion and a desire to erase it” (McGinn 2011, 27–28), which, as Marble’s review indicates, must not be seen to tarnish the clothing, even under the hot, bright lights of the stage.

But skin grease and stale sweat on clothing are not only caused by hard work such as dancing; they can also be caused by fevers from sickness. In the early twentieth century, hygiene – the eradication of dirt and disease – was a significant social concern and accommodated the rise of the commercial fabric and textile cleaning industry. In 1909, for example, the *Sun* reported that

[s]o many crusades against dirt as a breeder of disease have been going on in the big cities in the last few years that the public is at least awakened to the necessity of having everything about them cleaned in sanitary and safe places, and it is being borne up on them that the small laundries with their last century disregard for cleanliness and care in handling articles which are to be worn next to the body are unfit to handle laundry. (Anon. 1909d, 58)

The article discussed the role of modern steam laundries as preservers of public health in New York and described the rigorous health and cleaning precautions taken at the laundries in comparison to the washing methods of the home laundress in the tenements, who was unable to wash clothes in a sanitary way:

The odors from the adjoining apartments saturate the clothes ... Often the children in the laundress’s house are suffering from measles or something just as bad and

when the clothes are returned to their owner the germs are lodged in the clothes and spread to members of the family. (Anon. 1909d, 58)

The article was also surrounded by advertisements for steam laundries that had branches across New York City, the Bronx and Brooklyn, including an advertisement for the Puritan Steam Laundry that offered “high class laundry work of all descriptions” (Anon. 1909e, 58).

Clothing, and its appearance, plays a critical role in the social production of disgust, with the “cleanest, least smelly, ... most smartly dressed person ... [gaining] the competitive edge. That requires money and time, and an occupation that doesn’t involve dirt and sweat” (McGinn 2011, 125). Singing, acting and dancing are occupations that involve dirt and sweat; yet, as McGinn argues, we nevertheless have a cultural tendency to elevate performers whom we transform “in imagination to pristine beings, devoid of disgusting undersides” (McGinn 2011, 123). The same was arguably true of vaudeville actresses, some of whom were among the first super stars of the modern era and who were expected, by audiences, to be meticulously dressed on the stage (Schweitzer 2009, 96). Badly behaving costumes therefore shattered the illusions of perfection and celebrity that actresses hoped to project, spoiling the glamour of the stage. Instead, shabby, soiled costumes took on lives of their own, their qualities and textiles acting up and dominating performances, humiliating actresses and revealing the anxieties, frailties and failings of humanity.

## **Conclusion and considerations**

This article has examined how theatrical reviews of women’s vaudeville costumes revealed agency in costume by centring them as the focus of detailed critiques, rather than their wearers’ performances. The expectation that women would wear pretty, fashionable ensembles on the stage, unless playing a comedic role or using deliberately

bizarre costumes as part of their act, like Tanguay, was widely held and there was therefore no excuse in the eyes of audiences and reviewers alike for badly behaved costumes. Gowns that should have gone to the cleansers, like those in *The Country Club*, *London Belles* and *The Love Waltz*, measles-pink tights on actresses playing children, or the Morrissey Sisters' shabby, ill-fitting gowns reminded middle- and upper-middle-class vaudeville audiences of the dire conditions of the tenements and the constant threat of disease that such grinding filth and poverty posed to all New Yorkers; subjects they did not want to consider when seeing a vaudeville fashion show.

Wealthier New Yorkers who wanted to see dirt and poverty for amusement attended slumming plays, read Riis's and McCook's books or articles about the tenements, or went slumming themselves. Vaudeville costumes that behaved badly failed in the eyes of audiences and theatre critics because they elicited visceral reactions of disgust, drawing the viewers' attention to human frailties associated with the poverty, filth and disease of the tenements, but without the catharses of laughter or a display of luxury.

This article has focused predominantly on the agency of women's vaudeville costumes around the turn of the twentieth century and how they misbehaved to repulse audiences and reviewers alike. There may be opportunities for scholars to consider the agency of other badly behaving costumes and the social anxieties that their behavior reveals. Theatrical reviews from the vaudeville era also contained numerous accounts of men's failed costumes, which may be considered in the light of costumes such as those worn by Chaplin, Weber and Fields, and other tramp acts. In addition, this article was researched and written in 2020–2021 during the global COVID-19 pandemic. It is clear within this article how both an audience's attempts to flee from disgust and the critic's capacity to reveal the cognitive relevance of this reaction may provide scholars with the scope to consider how audiences and critics alike respond to bad behavior by

contemporary performance costumes that unintentionally point to social anxieties around issues including climate change, disease, racial tensions and economic inequality. In an era in which the consumption of fashion enabled social mobility, and in which wealthier New Yorkers were aware of how the other half lived and dressed, to appear like an impoverished immigrant or member of the working class on the stage when that was not the intention signaled the costume's agency and the wearer's lack thereof. For those actresses, many of whom were often working hard to escape grinding poverty themselves, wearing costumes that used the conventions of grotesque on the stage exposed them to public ridicule, which, without the catharsis of luxurious surroundings and or deliberately constructed humor, was no laughing matter.

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Figure 1. Alice Lloyd in 1909 wearing a gown with Valenciennes lace panels. Courtesy History and Art Collection/Alamy Stock Photo.