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GAY DECEIVER

WRITTEN BY **BROOKS PETERS**

IN THE 1910S AND 1920S, CROSS-DRESSER JULIAN ELTINGE WAS ONE OF THE BIGGEST STARS OF THE DAY, THE TOAST OF BROADWAY AND THE VAUDEVILLE CIRCUIT, AND A SILENT FILM STAR WHO APPEARED ON SCREEN WITH RUDOLPH VALENTINO. TODAY, HE IS ALL BUT FORGOTTEN. WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE "QUEEREST WOMAN IN THE WORLD"?

On a quiet Sunday morning last March in New York City, Broadway's elegant but somewhat forlorn Empire Theatre, weighing 7.4 million pounds, was floated on tracks from its location on 42nd Street near Seventh Avenue to its new home, closer to Eighth. The beaux arts landmark, designed by architect Thomas A. Lamb in 1912, will be the centerpiece of the new AMC Movie Complex, to be completed by 2000, part of the much ballyhooed redevelopment of Times Square. (In fact, only the lobby and entrance were relocated; the auditorium was razed.) The Empire's peculiar migration, a unique attempt to preserve the theater district's heritage while accommodating today's audiences, gave the media occasion to wax nostalgic for the bygone glory days of the Great White Way.

Nearly ignored amid the hype was the fact that the Empire had originally been named the Eltinge, after Julian Eltinge, the legendary female impersonator who reigned over Broadway in the 1910s and '20s. Given the widespread celebration of Disney's new family-friendly Times Square, it was an ironic oversight, for the Eltinge is a vestige of 42nd Street's risqué roots—in 1942, when it was a burlesque house, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia shut down the Eltinge on morals charges—and a symbol of what one gifted actor, rather than a phalanx of corporations, could achieve. "It's amazing that one of the only theaters still standing on 42nd Street was built by a drag queen," says Charles Busch, of all of today's gender illusionists the likeliest heir to Julian Eltinge's legacy.

Not since Edward Kynaston charmed Elizabethan audiences playing Shakespearean heroines had a man in feminine finery created such a sensation. Jerome Kern composed tunes for Eltinge. Erté designed his sets. King Edward VII of England, after inviting the star for a command performance at Windsor Castle, presented him with a white pit bull as a gift. On the silver screen, too, Eltinge scored in comic silent hits, introducing the joys of cross-dressing to the masses.

In his day, Eltinge was an enormously popular star with a profound impact on show business for decades to come. Long before the Tony Award–winning shows *Torch Song Trilogy* and *La Cage aux Folles* set tongues wagging, Eltinge revolutionized the theater

THE DAINTIEST OF SOUBRETTES: Out of costume, Julian Eltinge (above) was a solidly built man weighing in at 180 pounds and measuring 5 feet 8 inches. Onstage, however, the star used makeup and corsets to striking effect (left). "He came from the Lillian Russell school of voluptuous beauty," says Charles Busch.

with *The Fascinating Widow* and *The Crinoline Girl*, the first musical farces to bring "glamour drag" onto the legitimate stage. Eltinge's more flamboyant vaudeville skits, where he literally let his hair down, had folks from coast to coast rolling in the aisles. Draped in silk from bejeweled head to painted toe, Eltinge spoofed dancer Ruth St. Denis in his exotic "Goddess of Incense" skit. Dashing across the stage, he would transform himself with lightning speed into a busty jungle queen, a rapturous nun, a spicy Creole, a nimble suffragette, or a brazen Salome. His sinuous "cobra" dance left gentlemen gasping. But Eltinge's most popular send-up spoofed the venerable Gibson girl, flooring fashionable ladies with the star's exquisite refinement and poise.

Not content merely to promenade in lady's attire, Eltinge also sang and danced, penning lyrics to novelty songs with coy titles such as "Two Heads Are Better Than One" or "Don't Trust Those Big Gray Eyes." Sometimes he was even known to play a blushing young girl in a revealing bathing suit, warbling "Mother, May I Go Out to Swim?" (an act considered too racy for some venues). But whether he was flouncing about in marabou feathers, surrounded by a flock of his scantily dressed chorus girls—the Vampettes—or standing in a spotlight at the proscenium's edge, blanketed in lace as a bride, it was nearly impossible to tell that Julian Eltinge was a man.

And what a man he was: At 5 feet 8 inches and 180 pounds, Eltinge was far from dainty. But the star's small hands and feet made the illusion work. So did the lethal corsets that his Japanese dresser, Shima, would help him shimmy into, reducing a 40-inch waist to a 25. Eltinge also knew how to use makeup to his advantage, softening his chin and tapering his robust neck. At the end of each show, lest the audience be taken in by his masquerade, he would doff his wig to remove any lingering doubt.

Extremely popular with female audiences, who in the 1910s were for the first time venturing out to the theater on their own, Eltinge published his own magazine of beauty and fashion tips, *Julian Eltinge Magazine*. Inside, the genteel modiste posed in full wig, makeup, and gowns for ads selling everything from wardrobe trunks and cold cream to cough drops and girdles. Apparently women of the day found nothing bizarre in taking their cues from a transvestite. "Eltinge represented the perfect girl's guide of how to behave," says Leonard Finger, a New York–based casting director and collector of theatrical ephemera. "Onstage, he moved like a dream, his lily white arms covered in rice powder. He was the girl next door, the kind you'd want to bring home to mother. But he was also a gay man's wish of what a feminine role model would be." Indeed, some of his tips to male fans can be read as veiled asides to men confused about their sexuality. "When you're accused of being peculiar, don't consider it in the light of a slap," Eltinge advised, oozing subtext. "It's really the peculiar man—the different man—who wins out."

Who was this "Gay Deceiver," as *The New York Times* dubbed him early on? It's hard to say, for much of Eltinge's life is shrouded in mystery. Eltinge's managers generated reams of copy filled with fanciful half truths about him, and like many dissemblers, Eltinge himself spun stories whenever they suited his needs. By most accounts, he was born William Julian Dalton to Irish-American parents in Newtonville, Massachusetts. But several other sources list his hometown as Butte, Montana (hence his signature stage tune, "The Cute Little Beaut from Butte"). He adopted the name Julian Eltinge when he debuted in drag, according to one source, so as not to offend his family. (Scholars don't even agree on the pronunciation of the name. Does it rhyme with *fling* or *fringe*?) Dates of his birth vary as well, although 1883 is the most accepted. At the outset of his career, Eltinge claimed to be a Harvard graduate who'd first made his mark in the famous Hasty Pudding show. This helped lend legitimacy to his act and painted him as a boy from a good family, doing drag as a lark. In another tall tale, he claimed to have inherited a million dollars from an elderly Englishman who'd made a fortune in cutlery. The truth was a bit less grandiose since his father, Joseph Dalton, was a mining engineer, excessively fond of a drink, who roamed the country, unable to hold down a steady job. Eltinge moved with his parents, be-

QUICK CHANGES: From top, Eltinge with actor Jack Duffy in the 1925 silent comedy *Madame Behave*; a regular Florence Nightingale in his vaudeville act; testifying in a 1940 police hearing about being barred from performing at a Los Angeles gay club; the star's sister act.

fore finally settling in Boston, where, at age 14, he landed a job as a clerk in a dry-goods store. At night, he hung out with a troupe of theatrical young bankers. Gregor Benko, a music archivist and collector of gay memorabilia, sees these loosely organized turn-of-the-century clubs as forerunners of modern gay associations. "While not overtly homosexual, these groups would attract men who were ambivalent about their sexuality," Benko says. "It was a safe place to be themselves."

They also put on variety shows that lured Broadway scouts. To perfect his craft, Eltinge took dancing and singing lessons. As Eltinge told it, after a ballet class he began aping one of the heavy-set girls. The matronly drama teacher, Mrs. Wyman, caught him in his impromptu parody and exclaimed, "There is not a girl in the class who knows how to use her arms as well as you!" She suggested he make cross-dressing his career. Soon he began starring in a series of revues staged by the Boston Cadets, a group known for its inspired gender bending.

While the kind of performances we now call "drag" were not out of the ordinary at this time, Eltinge brought a new and exciting energy to his turns in the spotlight. He realized he got bigger laughs when he imitated the mannerisms of a pretty girl rather than whooping it up in a clownish charade. He cleverly mimicked traits of well-known figures from Boston's elite Beacon Hill. By twirling his hair like a celebrated debutante or parroting the accent of a grande dame in the audience, Eltinge brought down the house. Soon he was playing swank parties in Bar Harbor, Maine, and Newport, Rhode Island.

Hervey Jolin, a retired decorator in his 90s, remembers seeing Eltinge in these early days before World War I. "I was just a child and my mother took me," Jolin recalls. "Eltinge was a knockout. There was no satire in his performance. He streaked across the stage in one costume after another: lace dresses, evening glitter, a turban. We all delighted in his shape and fashions. He was almost like a museum exhibit, a historical figure, like the Duchess of Marlborough." There was more to it than mere vogu-ing. "He really devoted his career to showing how beautiful women were," Jolin adds. "Yet there was something freakish in his appeal. Mothers enjoyed watching him, but they'd always say, 'I wouldn't want a boy of mine to do that.' "

As word spread of Eltinge's triumphs, Broadway producer Edward E. Rice cast him in a new farce at the Bijou, *Mr. Wix of Wickham*, with music by Jerome Kern. The show, which opened in 1904, ran only six weeks. But Eltinge, who appeared in skirts, was sin-gled out. Wrote one reviewer, "If a man ever succeeded in lifting and almost totally obliterating the stigma which naturally attaches itself to this work, Eltinge has." Soon he was the talk of the town

THE QUEEN'S CASTLE: Eltinge poured his fortune into real estate, especially Villa Capistrano (below), the lavish home in Silver Lake, California, that he shared with his parents. A strange design hybrid of *Sunset Boulevard* and Ernest Hemingway, it was featured in the pages of *Architectural Record* as the height of good taste.

SCREEN GODDESS: Already a hit on the legitimate stage, Eltinge made his way to Hollywood, where he starred in a number of silent comedies between 1917 and 1925. Among his many costars were Rudolph Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks Sr. (above, right). Almost all Eltinge's films are forgotten and impossible to find today.

for his performance in *Lifting the Lid* at the Aerial Theatre atop the New Amsterdam (now owned by Disney) and his appearance at Madison Square Garden won raves. Next Eltinge conquered Berlin, Vienna, and London, then sailed on to Japan, China, Australia, and New Zealand. He dragged along 14 steamer trunks filled with his latest fashions, made for him exclusively, he claimed, by the finest couturiers in Paris (though he actually designed them himself). When not overseas, Eltinge hit the road, playing in everything from opera houses to mining camps. He was even scheduled to appear at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, but the show was banned when elders peeked at his costumes. Back in New York, his producer built a theater in his name with the enormous proceeds from his road shows.

It wasn't long before Tinseltown beckoned. Eltinge starred in several silent pictures between 1917 and 1925, including *The Clever Mrs. Carfax* and *The Countess Charming*. Pouring his earnings into real estate, Eltinge lived in splendor with his parents at his farm in Fort Salonga, on Long Island's North Shore, and at his California ranch in Alpine, near San Diego. Villa Capistrano, his lavish digs in Silver Lake, near Hollywood, was splashed across the pages of *Architectural Record* as the ultimate in good taste. Like a backdrop from *Sunset Boulevard*, this apricot-hued palace overflowed with ocelot and bear-skin rugs, antlered chandeliers, and Oriental fabrics. Here Eltinge entertained Hollywood friends such as Charlie Chaplin and opera diva Geraldine Farrar. Occasionally, just for fun, he would appear at parties *en travestie*, like the time he drove up to the Mayflower Hotel in Pasadena in a Hickson gown and "spurred bellboys and porters to their best endeavors," as the *Los Angeles Times* reported. No matter what Eltinge did, he generated headlines.

Despite his remarkable career, Eltinge, who saw himself as an actor above all else, would bemoan the limitations of drag. His dream in life was to play Shakespeare's Juliet, but he never could shake the success of his camp routines or give up the stag-

gering fees he commanded in vaudeville. "There are some disagreeable features about the work," he once confessed in a rare moment of candor. "But I suppose that is true of almost anything one might undertake. Before I took to skirts, I used to do buck-and-wing dancing, cakewalks. But now nothing seems acceptable unless I appear in skirts and do lots of kicking."

There were also the questions that persistently dogged Eltinge. Was the "queerest woman in the world," as one review insinuated, actually queer? Eltinge worked overtime to quash the rumors: He boasted he'd been engaged 10 times, then blamed his bachelorhood on his "bad temper." As a publicity stunt, he proposed to vaudeville star Eva Tanguay—who often appeared onstage dressed as a man—but the engagement was called off. In an effort to prove his manliness, he challenged Gentleman Jim Corbett, the famous prizefighter, to a bout in the ring and posed for photos that were reprinted around the world. Eltinge was constantly shot fishing or riding his horse, Fanny X (although the two pinkie rings and his precious lap-dogs belied any claims to butchness). When in a new town, he'd sometimes hire a flack to heckle him as the curtain rose. Then Eltinge would "beat up" the man and throw him out the door. Other times, there was no need for the charade: The hecklers were real.

Little evidence remains of Eltinge's actual sexual persuasion, though many of his contemporaries assumed he was homosexual. "In the days of vaudeville, I did shows with some of the greatest female impersonators ever," Milton Berle, famous for his own drag turns, once said. "Karyl Norman, Bert Savoy, and Julian Eltinge. Of course I worked with *straight* men, too." Tufts University theater historian Laurence Senelick has reported that Eltinge may have had a relationship with a noted sportswriter. Norman Cohen, a professor emeritus of history at California's Occidental College at work on a biography of the star, was told that Eltinge's true passion was for a male sax player in his band. Julian Eltinge guarded his secrets.

Eltinge's heterosexual blustering was, above all, good business. His work depended on its wholesome allure; any hint of scandal would have ruined him. There were varying statutes across the nation forbidding men from impersonating women, both onstage and off. The laws had a chilling effect: In 1927, Mae West, who quipped she'd learned how to be a woman by watching Eltinge perform, saw her scandalous play *The Drag* canceled before it opened in New York because of a threatened police raid. Eltinge had to constantly devise ways to circumvent the censors; he customarily played a man forced to appear as a "lady" in a plot device. Wrote one Cleveland reviewer: "There are two kinds of men who impersonate women. Eltinge is the other kind. There is nothing sissified about him."

Paradoxically, the very innocence that had catapulted Eltinge to stardom became his undoing, as newer acts made him appear hopelessly old-fashioned. His competitor Bert Savoy became a smash hit at the Ziegfeld Follies in the '20s by camping it up as a bawdy harlot. There was no question what side of the fence *he* was on. The "pansy craze" that swept Manhattan nightlife in the late '20s—when upstanding New Yorkers went slumming at drag balls and gay speakeasies—made Eltinge's act seem antiquated and quaint. Karyl Norman, the Creole Fashion Plate, and Francis Renault, "the last of the red hot papas," thrived on the high camp of their double entendre–ridden drag.

Eltinge had boxed himself in, unable to change with the times. As the Depression hit home, he was forced to sell his share in the Eltinge Theatre (ironically, he never played there) and gave up the villa in Silver Lake. He lamented that he had made three fortunes and lost them all. Eltinge had trouble finding work, and escalating weight problems made it nearly impossible for "the daintiest of soubrettes" to perform. He all but abandoned films after losing big bucks making *The Adventuress*, a 1920 picture with Rudolph Valentino, then a complete unknown. Two years later, it was recut emphasizing Valentino, by then a huge matinee idol, and released as *Isle of Love*, but the film vanished without a trace.

Eltinge never fit in with the Hollywood set, whose pre–Hays Code wild ways rubbed him the wrong way. (A costar and friend, Virginia Rappe, went into a coma and died after an orgy (continued on page 168)

SWAN SONGS: From top, *The Crinoline Girl* (1914) brought "glamour drag" to Broadway; Eltinge with Bing Crosby, whose 1940 film *If I Had My Way* featured a final cameo by Eltinge; the actor, right, on the town in masculine finery, 1914; at Villa Capistrano Eltinge entertained Hollywood royalty such as Charlie Chaplin.

in screen comedian Fatty Arbuckle's hotel room, a scandal that riveted the town in 1921.) Eltinge also hated sitting around studios, a far cry from his quicksilver vaudeville days, when he had more than 40 costume changes in one evening. "I had to lie around in a tight corset and dress and shoes all day waiting to go before the camera," he wailed, "and people at the hotels would stare at me so much that I didn't dare take off those terrible gold slippers that pinched my toes! Imagine a woman going around in a rich evening gown, silk hose, and a pair of big, comfortable number 10s on her feet!" Even at wit's end, Eltinge had standards.

Things spiraled further out of control during Prohibition. In 1923 Eltinge was caught smuggling liquor over the border from Canada; after a lot of damaging press and a sensational trial, he squeezed out an acquittal. According to Senelick, in 1929 he had a car accident in Los Angeles, crashing into a police vehicle. Rumors of his drinking were rampant. He had once joked, "I get about a pound of flesh with every highball," but now he was grossly overweight and slugging back beer. His later films reveal a haggard, fading farceur, without any of the delicate subtlety that had been his strong suit. Too ill to perform, Eltinge canceled a world tour and retreated with his mother to his spread in Alpine. He made aborted attempts to turn the ranch into a resort for men and even talked of opening an Eltinge Theatre in L.A., but the plans never materialized.

Desperate to revive his act in the '30s, Eltinge performed at the White Horse, a sleazy Hollywood nightclub with a gay clientele. Local laws made it illegal for a man to don women's clothes, even in a theatrical setting, so Eltinge was forced to do his act in a tuxedo and point to the costumes on a rack, asking the audience to imagine what he would look like. It was a dramatic comedown for the queen who'd once dazzled a king. In 1940, he was banned from performing at the Rendevous in L.A., on the grounds that it was a gay club. His swan song in Hollywood was a forgettable cameo in the 1940 Bing Crosby film, *If I Had My Way*.

When he returned to New York that year, Eltinge made another stab at a comeback. Impresario Billy Rose cast him in a nostalgic revue at his Diamond Horseshoe nightclub in the basement of the Paramount Hotel. The new act was a pale shadow of its former self, and Eltinge grew more depressed. One night he had to interrupt his performance because of a pain in his side. He went home and never returned. Ten days later, on May 7, 1941, Eltinge died under mysterious circumstances. Kenneth Anger wrote in *Hollywood Babylon* that the star committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills, which no one questioned. It seemed a fitting final curtain for an aging, over-the-hill fop. His death certificate, how-ever, says he died of natural causes. Cohen speculates that what really killed Eltinge were the aftereffects of kidney damage from decades of abusing diet pills. Wearing those suffocating corsets hadn't helped either. For years, he suffered from appendicitis and was operated on twice. True to form, Eltinge claimed the scar on his stomach was from a swordfish that had got the better of him.

After Eltinge's death, comedian George Jessel composed a poem saluting his friend. Written in Eltinge's voice, its final lines eloquently sum up the enigma of the man once known as "the most beautiful woman in the world."

Sometimes, after a performance,
I would go back to the hotel
With all my makeup on;
And men would try
To flirt with me. Sometimes,
I'd kid them a bit,
Unless they got too fresh. Then
I'd pull off my wig,
And tell them about the touchdowns
I made on the gridiron.
I never married—
And I was not a fairy!
Anyway,
As long as you live your life,
Doing the best you can,
Harming no one,
It's nobody's business
What your sex life is.
And if you have none,
That's nobody's business
Either.

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