Introduction: She Moves

Oh baby! When she moves I go crazy:
She looks like a flower but she stings like a bee,
Like every girl in history.
Rosa/Afansieff/Child

Many years from now, when our civilization has crumbled into the dust, archaeologists may dig up a newsagent's shop. There they will find worm-eaten magazines with faded photos of nude women on the cover: cheerful, buxom blondes and dark temptresses, advertising their wares from between parted legs. They may think that these iconic images on the top shelf, the shelf closest to heaven, belonged to religious magazines. And from this they may deduce that we were a goddess-worshipping civilization in which women enjoyed high social status; that these images, which throw into relief the nurturing and reproductive parts of the female body, indicate reverence for women's life-giving power. Then they'll discover something else: that there's a world of difference between the smiling invitation on the faces of the blondes with their huge silicone breasts and the 'Enter at your peril' challenge on the faces of the dark-haired models lying there with their legs open.

The female body has been an object of sexual obsession throughout history, the focus of dreams and fears. The fashion and beauty business, organized religion, the entertainment world, the media and the medical establishment have all staked their claim to this fertile territory. Women have long been assumed to reveal their true nature through their bodies, and aside from giving birth this is most in evidence when they dance. According to many historians and other commentators, the main purpose of dance is

either to stimulate sexual appetite or act as a substitute for sex. At different periods throughout history, dancing has been banned by governments who feared its potential as a source of social chaos. Professional dancers have been seen as the most dangerous of all women, a reflection of the idea that men are powerless to resist temptation when it's put on display.

It was only when I, a dancer myself, began delving into the subject that I realized to what extent female dancing has been regarded as confrontational and subversive. The more I explored, the more fascinated I became by this aspect of an activity which enables us to release pent-up energy and express ourselves in a language beyond words. I discovered that in every culture restrictions have been placed on women dancing, even in private. And the social position of women who went out and danced for a living was precarious.

Fear of the disorder that would result if women made a public spectacle of their bodies led to them being banned from the stage, giving rise to a drag tradition which flourishes to this day. When Italy's *commedia dell'arte* first featured women in the sixteenth century it was thought the height of daring. In China it was only in the 1930s that women were accepted on the stage. Until then their place had been taken by men in drag, who sent their audience wild as they sashayed across the stage, hand on hip, flicking a coquettish hanky in the air.

Given its tremendous power to arouse our emotions, it isn't surprising that dancing has been outlawed as a dangerous social force. The cancan is one of many dances that governments have tried to suppress over the years. The Spanish saraband – a seventeenth-century women's dance accompanied by what was described as 'licentious' singing – is another. The authorities claimed it caused more evil than the plague and tried to ban it in places of public entertainment. The Hawaiian hula was prohibited by outsiders, religious busybodies bent on taking control of other people's culture as well as their land. Even the waltz was thought scandalous and banned from 'polite' society in its early days. As one moral guardian put it, 'The waltz is a dance of quite too loose a character and unmarried ladies should refrain from it altogether, both in public and private.'

The dance floor is one of the main venues where people meet and talk for the first time and the waltz created a cultural revolution in Europe by allowing the classes to mix socially. The main fear behind banning dance, though, is that it might encourage sexual activity. Many dances which today look completely innocent were seen as erotic in their time, especially if they

included pelvic movements. In 1828 a French traveller wrote that the vigorous hip movements of African women were 'so lascivious, so lubricious that it's impossible to describe them', adding, in some bewilderment, 'It's true the negresses don't appear to have the depraved intentions one would imagine ... one sees children of six performing this dance, certainly without knowing what they're leading up to.'

It goes without saying that creating a sexual display isn't necessarily what someone has in mind when they get up and move, urged on by the seductive power of music. But for people obsessed with sex even piano legs or the sight of a woman's face can send the pulses racing. How much more troubling is the spectacle of a woman moving her body rhythmically to music!

In the nineteenth century the hoops of a woman's crinoline, swinging from side to side as she waltzed round the ballroom floor, were hugely suggestive. And if all those yards of material made it difficult for men to get too close, at least they could entertain themselves watching the tide of skirts go billowing past, hems swinging up to reveal the women's trim black ankle boots.

Social and sexual revolutions are reflected in changing styles of dance and fashion, and women's clothes have often been designed around dance to allow freedom of movement. Trailing skirts made it difficult to dance the tango, as did whalebone corsets which kept the torso rigid. So it was that the tango gave rise to rubberized corsets and divided skirts. And – though this contradicts popular legend – the cancan, in which women lifted their petticoats to show their legs, was a dance which encouraged them to wear long white culottes under their skirts. Until then, it was largely whores who wore knickers. The cancan must be the rudest dance of all time and the original *cancaneuses* performed, not for money, but for their own pleasure. They held their legs above their heads, exhibiting their crotches, kicked the hats off the heads of wealthy gents who came to ogle them and laughed in their faces.

The nineteenth century was a time of turbulent change and it saw a continual uproar on the dance floor. Western women were becoming prominent stage performers and beginning to express themselves with real wildness in the public arena. It's no accident that a number of defiant, subversive dances flourished during the first industrial age, when huge numbers of people were congregating in the rapidly expanding cities of Europe and America.

Some nineteenth-century dances which created a scandal in their own

country were only accepted after being tamed abroad and brought back home. The cancan and tango were two which attempted to cross borders, only to be halted at customs and turned back. In the middle of the twentieth century even the formal manoeuvring of ballroom dancing was found subversive in the communist bloc. In 1834 Cairo's female dancers were banned from plying their trade in public and sent up the Nile to Esna, and at the end of the twentieth century they were once again subjected to threats and beatings by religious fundamentalist groups.

Men and women were thought to be at risk from dance for different reasons. When the waltz was discouraged it was argued that women were such delicate creatures their weak constitutions couldn't cope with all that strenuous whirling. Even in the role of observer they were considered susceptible to the suggestive aspects of dance. It was young girls, rather than their brothers, who were forbidden to attend the opera house if a ballet was included on the bill. At that time ballet was far from being high art enjoyed by a cultural elite. The opera house was a shop window for women looking to sell themselves to the highest bidder and ballerinas were mistress, rather than wife, material. They were also more eagerly sought after than today's rock stars.

The nineteenth century was a period when women were struggling to assert their independence and they demonstrated their rebellion on the dance floor. During this period the Argentinian tango was born. The melancholy, combative tango began life as a duet of male immigrants in low dives and brothels, and later evolved into a mixed-couple dance. In time it became a fascinating reflection of the battle for social and sexual mastery in a community where men hugely outnumbered women.

Among the well-heeled, private dancing – if done in the right setting and with decorum – was acceptable. Indeed, in Europe and America a young girl could show herself to her best advantage, dancing in front of potential suitors. In the Middle East she could do the same, dancing at female-only gatherings before potential mothers-in-law.

As a profession, however, dance was something else. In many cultures women weren't supposed to show their charms in public. Entertainers played a vital role in celebrations, yet they had no more status than servants. Fifty years ago, no well-bred Indian girl would have dreamed of taking up dance as a career. To do so would have meant losing her honour. For thousands of years, lacking a place in public life, women in the Arab world have entertained each other in private. In the process they've developed a dance

full of sensuality and subtle humour. Yet in many Islamic countries (and even outside them) Muslim nervousness about the sensuality of women's dancing can cause ructions.

I experienced this recently when I revived my theatre piece *Dancing Girls*. This show looks at Orientalist perceptions of Egyptian life through travellers' meetings with dancers. It was booked into a Liverpool arts centre and was publicized with extracts from reviews that it had garnered the first time around. The publicity fell into the hands of a Muslim fundamentalist group, who produced a leaflet protesting against the show's sexual content (about which they could only fantasize, not having seen it). A Yemeni woman connected with the production had a stone thrown through her window, another received a threatening and abusive phone call from a man too cowardly to identify himself. A leaflet was produced and distributed at the local mosque where, I heard, the subject dominated Friday prayers that week. In an attempt to defuse the situation, the imam told his flock to boycott the show. A few isolated individuals still threatened to come along and disrupt the performance but, as it happened, it was already sold out and the evening passed off without incident.

In Egypt today dance is still not an honourable career for women and only those at the very top of their profession are respected and not assumed to be whores. Yet Egypt is only one country which uses dancing girls to symbolize the passion and sensuality of its culture in order to attract tourists: postcards and travel brochures show pictures of the Sphinx side by side with cabaret dancers in glittering, baby-doll costumes. Spain trades on the passion of flamenco women and Paris advertises itself with an interesting juxtaposition of the Eiffel Tower and the uplifted, open legs of cancan dancers.

Throughout history men's fascination with female sexuality has been equally matched by the fear of it, resulting in valiant efforts to control women. Locking them up in madhouses, confining them in corsets and cumbersome skirts, clitoridectomy, cosmetic surgery: these are only some of the attempts, and women have both defied and colluded with them. The current mania among women for surgically altering their bodies, pumping them full of silicone and the virus Botox, is only the most extreme form of this collusion.

How has it come about, the perception of women as dangerous creatures whose bodies are so poorly designed they need constant modification? And what stimulated this obsession with the female body in the first place?

Perhaps it stems from the fact that, in many cultures, the worship of a single male god replaced religions in which both male and female deities were once honoured for their powers. Under male-centred monotheism women were taken out of the creative picture. They no longer played a part in shaping our world, nor was there a place for them in religious ceremony. Ever since then, man has been the measure of all things. Man, with his intellect, is the arrow shooting forward and woman, with her messy biology, is something of a liability.

As we know, women's bodies have been used to sell everything from cars to financial services. And it isn't only tabloids and sex magazines confined to the top shelf that rely for sales on displaying a woman on the cover.

Years of idealizing men have had little effect on diminishing the obsession with female icons. If anything this obsession has become more exaggerated, as if in subconscious protest at women having been airbrushed out of the religious picture altogether. Music and dance once played a central part in religious worship. When this changed and dance evolved from a sacred rite into a form of entertainment, its female exponents came to replace the vanished goddesses of paganism. They were the visual embodiment of the sensual aspect of our experience; and they were the first performers to be worshipped by the public.

Among all the dancers whose names have come down to us, the one who most merits the title goddess was at the height of her fame in the early years of the twentieth century. The most celebrated Western woman of her time, she inspired the sculptor Auguste Rodin to comment, 'Isadora Duncan's art has influenced my work more than any other inspiration that has come to me. Sometimes I think she is the greatest woman the world has ever known.'

Isadora was loved by artists and public alike for her dancing, but she's remembered most of all for her wildness. She helped redefine the female image for the modern age and she did it through the expressive power of her dancing. A woman of strong emotions and even stronger convictions, the word 'caution' wasn't in her vocabulary, and in her private life she challenged every social convention. She was more than a rebel; she was a revolutionary who offered up sensual expression of the body as a cultural endeavour. And this was in an age when female performers were assumed to inhabit the same underworld as criminals and whores.

Performing in Boston once, she accidentally revealed her breast and there was a great uproar. As the audience made for the exits she stepped down to the footlights and ripped open her costume. 'This is beauty!' she declared.

'My body is beautiful. My movements are beautiful. Not like your half-clad chorus girls.' As the last members of the audience scuttled down the aisles she called after them, 'You were wild once! Don't let them tame you!'

This book celebrates the spirit of Isadora and other dancers who have defied the rules to strut their stuff on the public stage. It looks at how women have found, in dance, a way of accommodating social constraints and subverting their sting; and at how dance has given them independence and a way out of poverty. It also looks at how the battle of the sexes has been played out on the dance floor.

And God Created Devil-Woman

Woman is a narrow pit who lies in wait for her prey.
The Old Testament, Book of Proverbs

For the first time in over twenty years as a dancer, I recently found myself having a brush with the Church. A TV station had broadcast a documentary about my show *Mimi La Sardine*, which included footage of rehearsals in a church hall. When I phoned to book the hall again I was told I'd been banned. A member of the church committee had seen the film and objected to the dancing. But what had he objected to? No one could give me an answer, for though they'd decided to ban me, no one else connected with the church had seen the programme. I found another place to rehearse, sent them a copy of the film and meanwhile took another look at it. I came to a sequence which showed my company rehearsing the wild hair-tossing, spinning movements of a trance dance.

Trance dancing is one of the oldest dances and is still used all across Africa as a form of healing by people suffering from mental and emotional problems. Simple movements are repeated, to an unwavering rhythm, in non-stop motion which may go on for many hours. Anyone who submits to the repetitive movement and driving rhythm may, after a while, go into a true state of trance, which induces a sense of ecstasy and transcendence. At the very least, like other vigorous, sweaty activities, this kind of dancing makes you feel fully, nerve-tinglingly alive and leaves you with a sense of profound well-being.

In an interview for this part of the programme one of the dancers said:

It's almost a religious experience – if a religious experience is when

> you let go, you feel the earth under your feet, you feel safe and secure and trusting in your body. When it really is flowing, I feel fluid, boneless. I can feel every inch of my body, every cell. I'm constantly checking in with myself: Am I here? Can I feel this? I could push this. I'll just try this a bit further. And it's not just push, push, push and beat yourself up if you don't get there. It's more a feeling of open up, softer, trust, release.

It was some weeks before my suspicion was confirmed that this was the scene which had caused all the trouble. But the committee didn't spell out just why an expression of confidence and feeling good about the body was so disturbing to them. They didn't say that trance dancing is the work of the devil and unless we mended our ways we would burn in the fires of hell. They wrote instead that the spiritual connotations of this type of dance were contrary to Christian belief and continued with a quotation from the Bible which begins, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'

Christianity isn't the only religion to think it has a monopoly on spirituality. Judaism and Islam are also based on the belief that they alone can connect us with the realm of ecstatic experience. And in their own way all three faiths are wary of dance, which can free us and put us in touch with our spirituality without their controlling assistance.

In the European tradition the spirit or soul is held to be a quiet thing, to be discovered through thought and contemplation rather than physical means. In Africa, on the other hand, people use the joyous, life-affirming nature of dance to connect with the soul. And nowhere is the location of spirituality in dance more evident than in trance dancing. This makes it especially dangerous to organized religion, which holds that the source of spirituality is not rooted in ordinary human experience, but in a cerebral discourse with a great father god in the sky.

When Princess Diana died in 1997, and people all over Britain fashioned shrines with flowers and photos and candles, the Church elders sat up. There is something religious in all this, they said. How can we harness people's deep spiritual impulses and bring them back to our empty churches? Too late! For in people's spontaneous rituals to Diana, they were honouring a woman who, for various reasons, had come to mean more to them than the icons of a male-dominated religious faith.

Shortly after Diana's death I was in Tunisia, taking part in a dance

documentary, when I was given a poignant reminder of her. One day I went with the crew to watch them shoot a trance ceremony in a remote village. Every Thursday women gathered at the tomb of their local saint to ask for his help with their problems. Before the dancing began a sheep was sacrificed. I watched as a group of men and women were filmed walking down the dirt track, leading the sheep on a frayed length of rope. Drawing near, the cameras picked out a young lad walking beside the animal. He was wearing an open jacket revealing a T-shirt with a giant image of Diana's face on it. When this was noticed the filming stopped and the director ordered the boy to zip up his jacket. It was a pity that he chose to hide this little bit of *ciné-vérité*: alongside the tribute to a long-established male saint we were seeing the image of a new female icon, one to whom ordinary people had been moved to pay extraordinary tribute.

During her life the public projected onto Diana all the attributes of an ancient goddess. She took on the healing role traditional to gods, saints and royalty, a role which royalty has long since abandoned. She came to represent love and suffering and, like many a pagan goddess, she died in her prime, in her case hounded down by the press.

The night before her funeral the atmosphere in London's Mall near the chapel where her body lay was one of carnival. Nobody slaughtered a sheep – and Britain is no longer a country where people of all ages dance spontaneously to express sorrow and joy, so there was no dancing. But in the warm midnight air the crowd swarmed in a pagan mingling of life and death, mourning and celebration. People stood and chatted and drank beer. They crouched down to take a look at the makeshift shrines, their faces illuminated in the flickering candlelight. I watched a group of leather-clad bikers walk to the head of a long queue where people were lining up to sign the condolence book. They unscrewed their flasks and began going down the line, handing out cakes and steaming cups of coffee to those who had been waiting there for hours.

It made me think of the festivals of ancient times, when the entire community united to mourn and celebrate powerful female deities who were thought to hold the secrets of life. If any modern media goddess resembled those pagan deities it was Diana. Like them she was recognizably human. She was full of inconsistencies and frailties. Like them she was both loving and vengeful. And, like the most important goddesses of all, she was regarded as dangerous.

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In prehistoric times, contemplation of the female body resulted in the fashioning of artefacts that historians refer to as Venuses or goddess figurines. Thousands of them have been unearthed from every continent. Some are delicate objects small enough to fit in the palm of the hand and they hold up their breasts in a pose not unlike that of a modern centrefold. Others are massive, with bulging bellies and monumental thighs. They have been discovered in domestic settings and in tombs and their significance has been the subject of all kinds of speculation.

One theory is that they were religious icons representing a great mother goddess who was revered as the prime creator of life; that they served to give graphic form to the magic of birth; and that their voluptuous contours were a tribute to the female body and its life-giving power. Another theory is that they represent slaves, concubines or wives and were placed in a man's tomb along with his other belongings, to accompany him on his journey into the afterlife.

Then there is the notion that they were simply prehistoric pornography. This is the school of thought – largely represented by men specializing in animal behaviour – which believes that women developed big breasts to attract men's attention rather than to feed their young. The assumption is that the figures were made by men and that, at a time when the human race was occupied with urgent life and death fears, men sat around in caves using their leisure time to dream up artificial aids to sexual stimulation.

It was in the mid-nineteenth century that the Venuses started being unearthed. Archaeology was flourishing and the codes of ancient languages being cracked, including the language of mythology and sacred faith.

At the heart of myth lies our perception of the awesome workings of nature, in all her complementary and contradictory power. We know about the uncertainty of life; we know that the spectre of death lurks alongside birth and that every sunlit figure has its shadow. Myths are a poetic account of these eternal truths. Like dreams, these tales of humans born from the heads of monsters and women with writhing snakes for hair describe what goes on at a subterranean level of consciousness.

Historians were intrigued by the similarity of creation stories in cultures thousands of miles apart, where no Chinese whisper can have penetrated. Many tell of a time before the human race was divided into two sexes. They

describe the earth and everything on it as being created by an original androgynous being. When this being, with its combination of male and female attributes, grew too powerful it was separated in order to balance its power. From every continent come myths which describe a universe created by the coupling of earth and sky, sun and moon, and later by a god and goddess. These deities behave just like human beings, with the same jealousies and the same irrational behaviour and weaknesses.

Every culture has its tale of an earth mother from whose belly springs each new generation. This goddess has a companion who is weaker, smaller and younger than her. After impregnating her, his usefulness comes to an end and he dies, sometimes by her own hand – our first hint that this goddess has a dangerous side. Full of sorrow, she undertakes a journey to the underworld to find him. While she is gone the earth is barren. No fruit or flowers grow. Only when she brings him back to earth can nature bloom again. This re-emergence of life in spring was celebrated in the most important of all seasonal festivals, and we are still celebrating it today at Easter.

Since goddesses who created life were thought to possess a destructive side, it's easy to understand how women may have been held in awe as well as apprehension for their unpredictable power. For among her many names the great mother was known as the Dark One, Star of Lamentation, and around her there hovers profound ambivalence.

Fertility rituals, driven by dance and music, were designed to placate this all-devouring dark side and they have been found in nearly all surviving major religions. But in the mythic pattern there is no creation without sacrifice. As part of these rituals an animal was killed, dismembered and buried, the remains were burnt and the ashes scattered over the fields to fertilize the earth. Historians believe these rites became increasingly bloodthirsty and came to involve the sacrifice of a human male – a custom modified, over time, to castration.

A thousand years before the birth of Christ the goddess Cybele attracted a huge following in Anatolia (present-day Turkey). Known as the Lady of Wild Things, her cult was later taken to Rome, whose empire ruled Europe and the entire Middle East. Cybele was the goddess of caverns; she personified the earth in its primitive state and is often shown brandishing a whip. Legend tells that when her lover was unfaithful, she responded by turning him into a god of vegetation. As part of her rituals he was buried and his effigy tied to a tree. Three days later a light appeared in the tomb and he rose from the dead, bringing with him salvation and rebirth for all. In

another version of the myth he voluntarily castrates himself, out of remorse for his infidelity.

Cybele was only one of the goddesses whose worship involved castration. Her priests are described dancing in the forest, flinging their heads back and forth as they worked themselves into a frenzy, when they slashed their bodies and sliced off their genitals. They changed sex in order to become the goddess and were afterwards referred to, in their priestly role, as 'she'.

From all over the world come myths equating woman with danger. Her greatest threat was seen as her emasculating power, most graphically expressed in the South American myth of the *vagina dentata*. This sharp-toothed opening was believed to chew up and destroy any penis intrepid enough to enter it.

India's Kali, the Black Mother, has her own way of dispatching her victims: she slices their heads off. Kali is portrayed with rolling, blood-red eyes, dancing on the body of her husband Shiva. Around her neck she wears a string of severed heads from her many male victims and in her hand she holds up the dripping head of her latest trophy.

It was Sigmund Freud who made a connection for the modern age between decapitation fantasies and castration, and every major religion has its version of the emasculating female. The Old Testament has Eve, the original temptress, who introduces man to sexual desire and causes him to be flung out of paradise. And it also has Salome, who danced for Herod in return for the head of a man. Salome is the dance world's most famous temptress, a *femme fatale* who enacts the sacrifice of manhood by using her sexual charms to satisfy a king's lascivious fantasies.

Freud was the first to spell out the neuroses which result from our deep-rooted anxieties about sex. He created a mythology which reflected early twentieth-century fears, and though some of his ideas are no longer fashionable, he was still the first to shine a light into the murkier corners of the human mind. Psychoanalysis was one of the twentieth century's most popular faiths and its symbols, borrowed from ancient mythology, include more than a passing reference to men's helplessness before the spectre of female sexuality.

Freud was writing at a time when the awe and fear of women – as well as the hatred which results from fear – had long since acquired a subtle twist. For, during the past two millennia, much of the human race has been living with the myth of a world made by a great god in the sky. He is a god who rules without a queen and creates without a queen, and this version of

creation is just about as far away as we can get from everything we know about the natural world.

By the fifth century AD the hundreds of goddess cults which had flourished in the Mediterranean and the Middle East had been practically eradicated and women, who had once played a vital role in sacred faith, had been banned from serving at the religious ceremonies which took the place of paganism. The feminist writer Camille Paglia contends that this state of affairs came about after a perfectly reasonable rearguard action by men in revolt against women's power and the fearsome excesses of goddess worship.

Whatever the case, men clearly wanted to take back the power they had given over to women. And they realized they weren't going to regain it by cutting off their genitals and pretending to be women themselves. It wasn't enough to officiate as the high priests of goddess cults. It wasn't enough even to control those cults, which they came to do during the classical age in parts of the Middle East. Women had to be written out of the story altogether. The way forward lay in denying them any part in higher creation, as well as in religious ceremony itself. And in learning to control the natural world.

The history of the human race is largely the story of these endeavours and how the hopes and fears they engendered have shaped our world. We've come a long way from the original myth of an androgynous being who created the earth and everything on it; a world governed by balanced and complementary male and female power. And that is our tragedy.

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Every major world faith has been, if not in theory, certainly in practice, hostile to women. Even Buddhism, which dispensed with gods and goddesses, came to exclude women and made its monks take a vow of celibacy. Religions come into being partly to justify human fears, and at some point in their development most major faiths have moved to outlaw sensual enjoyment. Today, when religious fundamentalists take power, one of the first things they do is to ban music and dance and cover women up. The separation of mind and body, the denial of the flesh for the sake of the spirit, are basic to the three apocalyptic male-centred faiths which all originated in the Middle East and now dominate world politics.

By the time monotheism began taking shape, men had figured out that

they too played a part in human reproduction. With this knowledge came a diminished fear of nature and a lowered status for women. As a spoken and written language developed, dance – once our primary form of expression, and one which played a central part in sacred ritual – was replaced by abstract ideas.

Judaism, the first lasting monotheistic religion, was the faith of a tribal people living next to the most advanced of ancient civilizations. But it wasn't Egypt's traditional faith, with its hundreds of gods and goddesses, which may have proved influential to the Hebrews. It was a seventeen-year experiment with monotheism, under the turbulent reign of the pharaoh Akhnaton, who established a new faith dedicated to the worship of a single sky god. After his death he was branded a heretic and a madman, but his beliefs may have come out of Egypt with the exodus of the Hebrews.

Judaism, with its jealous, war-loving god, had a profound influence on the later religions of Christianity and Islam. It broke with the widespread tradition of religious ceremony involving music, dance, fragrance and a total involvement of the senses. It banned the worship of images and sought in every way to reduce sensual expression as part of sacred ritual. It replaced the use of colour with black and white and based its rituals on the novel idea of reading from a book of law. No previous religion had been based on the written word.

Its god was the first who had no visual image to represent him. He had no family, no companions, no human foibles and weaknesses, and he demanded total obedience to his laws on pain of everlasting damnation. His followers declared themselves chosen as upholders of the One Truth. Other religions were regarded as false, their followers inferior. Here was another 'first' scored by the Hebrews – the first example of religious intolerance, as historian Leonard Shlain comments:

> By their very nature polytheistic religions fostered tolerance. Piety did not lead ineluctably to religious hatred as it has so often in history. Although there were many bloody conflicts fought over land, women, booty, or to avenge perceived wrong, there were no religious wars in the ancient world before monotheism. One plausible explanation: monotheism does not mirror human society. Humans are first and foremost human animals. A deity who was alone, not by choice but because there were no other companions for Him, was a concept without parallel in human society.

But there's a price to pay for worshipping this abstract God. For, if everyone agrees that there is only one of him, and different groups perceive him in different ways, then whose god is the right one? This question, as Shlain comments, 'has goaded monotheists to wage war with an intensity and purpose never witnessed in polytheistic cultures'.

The most extraordinary concept of Judaism was that, despite the overwhelming evidence of nature's duality, creation was understood to be an exclusively male affair. Many of the strange concepts behind ancient mythology and early religion are equally amusing; but the fact that this idea continues to dominate world religion in the twenty-first century must make us wonder how far we've evolved, intellectually speaking, from our primitive past.

Not only did God create the world on his own, but women's part in human reproduction is portrayed in the Old Testament as being, at best, unreliable. It's significant that three of Judaism's founding fathers were married to women who failed to conceive. With God's permission Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all turned away from their old, barren wives and went to their servant-girls to found dynasties, confirming that it wasn't men's fault if their wives didn't become pregnant. So negative was woman's role in creation, according to the Hebrews' new faith, that it went to ludicrous lengths to deny it. In the Old Testament food, instead of springing from the fruitful earth, is made to rain down from heaven, the abode of the new sky god, in the form of manna.

Male-centred faiths allow women no part in their ceremonial. In the Christian Church the subject of female priests remains a highly contentious issue to this day. In synagogues and mosques women sit in a place apart and, in ultra-orthodox synagogues, they are concealed from view so that male worshippers won't be led astray by distracting thoughts about the female body.

Women were humbled in numerous ways by the male-centred religions of the Middle East. Their status was systematically downgraded and they were deprived of all kinds of rights, including that of owning property. Instead they were turned into property themselves. (The Hebrew word for wife – *beulah* – means one who is owned.)

Even a woman's talent for making herself and her home pleasing to the eye came under attack. In the *Book of Proverbs* men are warned to avoid women who perfume their beds with aromatic herbs and oils, and cautioned against those who announce their presence with glittering, tinkling jewellery.

Even now, ultra-orthodox branches of Judaism insist that a bride shave her head when she marries, and for the rest of her life she either wears a wig or else covers her bald head beneath a scarf. In myth and sacred faith, hair carries a potent sexual charge, and losing her hair can only serve to diminish a woman's confidence. As for sex, in ultra-orthodox versions of Judaism it became something to be engaged in purely for procreation; and to make sure no pleasure was involved it had to take place through a hole in the sheet.

In order to establish itself in the region Judaism (followed by Christianity and then Islam) changed the sex of the ancient goddesses and repressed their rituals. In Arabia black stone monoliths representing female deities were worshipped right up until the time of Muhammad.

The concept of religious sacrifice has never really disappeared though. The story of Christ himself is a version of ancient fertility myths: the sacrifice of a man in exchange for eternal life. Nor should we forget our wild whip lady Cybele and her eunuch priests, or the Virgin Mary's celibate clergy.

Though pagan goddess figures gradually faded from memory there is one who, intriguingly, remains: Sarah the Egyptian, a black madonna who is still worshipped in parts of Europe. In Spain her statue is paraded through the streets every year during Easter. Many of Europe's medieval churches once contained a statue of this enigmatic figure.

With male-centred religions came increased control of female sexuality, a move aimed at establishing paternity and property rights. For organized religion, sex is a necessary evil which has to be controlled in order to avoid social chaos and death. (The story of Adam and Eve is only one of many myths which reinforce the connection between sex and death that lies buried in our subconscious.) The belief lingered on that sexual conduct might cause harm by offending the gods, who would punish the community indiscriminately, the good along with the bad.

Four to five hundred years after the death of Christ a small number of Church Fathers entertained themselves by devising a catalogue of sexual sins. Driven by the desire for spiritual purity and closeness to God, they subdued their sexual desires by embracing celibacy and went on to justify the practice with theological argument. It was St Paul who started all the trouble. He warned men against having anything to do with women, who were likely to tempt them from the path of virtue, given half the chance.

Rules concerning sexual behaviour which are woven into monotheism spring from an extraordinary, exaggerated contempt and fear of the body. Christianity isn't alone in having bizarre sexual beliefs, but the Old

Testament does include something very curious, and it's to do with women dancing. The Song of Songs is a love duet between a man and woman, and it's strange to come across it amid the smoke and fire of the Bible. Carlos Suares has interpreted the Song of Songs according to the code of the kabbala, the mystical branch of Judaism. He discusses a verse towards the end, in which the man begs his veiled Shulamite to dance for him:

Your rounded thighs are like jewels,
The work of a master hand.
Your navel is a rounded bowl
That never lacks mixed wine.
Your belly is a heap of wheat
Encircled with lilies.

At first glance this doesn't suggest much in the way of movement. But when Suares looks at the translation of specific words a different picture emerges. The Hebrew *yerekh* means hips as well as thighs. Suares goes on to say that the usual translation of *hhalaeem* as 'jewels' isn't really accurate, for the root of this word is *hhal*, meaning to dance, writhe or tremble. So instead of 'Your rounded thighs are like jewels,' we have an image of curvaceous hips in motion. Another line examined by Suares is 'Earthly fire is active in your fertile body.' Here the woman describes herself as a keeper of vineyards, another symbol of fruitful production, and says she wants to show her desire for her lover by dancing for him as a prelude to sex.

Is this a song about a women's dance celebrating fertility, asks Suares? And if so, does it hark back to pagan rituals that Judaism either destroyed or else accepted after changing their meaning? For any incoming religion has to accommodate at least some of people's existing beliefs in order to gain a foothold. And when a new faith absorbs a myth which runs counter to its teachings it may well alter its meaning, even to the point of reversing it. This is what happened to many of the myths which were eventually absorbed into monotheism.

Whatever the case, the Song of Songs must remain the enigma of the Old Testament: an island of sunlit sensuality set in the raging sea of the scriptures.

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At weddings in Egypt a professional dancer entertains the guests, then goes to have her photo taken with the bride and groom, who both place a hand on her belly. The ancient significance of her dancing is only a pale memory now, when this women's dance has long since evolved into more than a fertility rite. It has become the best-loved dance of the Middle East and no celebration is complete without it. Yet women who perform it in public transgress a basic Islamic code that women should not flout their bodies in front of male strangers.

Islam is no different from other male-centred faiths in making women carry the burden for men's uncontrollable urges with which they have failed to come to terms. Muslims say that the sensual aspect of existence is celebrated in Islam, that it's not separated off or hidden away. And indeed, the paradise of the Quran is a land of the most intense, exaggerated pleasures. But if we imagine Islam is a faith which celebrates sensual enjoyment for all, we are in for a disappointment. For when we read closely we discover that this paradise is designed to please only half the human race. It's maintained by female slaves who do the menial work and houris whose job is to satisfy male desire. When a man enters paradise he is given seventy-two of these houris, whose bodies are made of sweet-smelling musk and who bear his name in the form of a tattoo branded on their breast. Islam's most sacred writings say nothing about a woman's pleasure though, and there is no male equivalent of the houri provided to cater to female desires in paradise.

The word paradise means 'walled garden'. In this neat, tidy garden with its pathways and fountains and channels of water, nature is always in bloom. There are no seasons of drought, no time of hibernation for rest and renewal. Tree trunks are made of hard pearl and covered in precious stones. Everything has been stripped away which bears any resemblance to nature as we know it, red in tooth and claw. It's a place in which natural processes have been rejected and substituted with something perfectly glorious and perfectly artificial.

For thousands of years men of all faiths have been busy dreaming up ways of curbing the wildness of nature and replacing it with something they can control. But the illusion of having succeeded in the grand design of taming the wild is regularly shattered in the most violent way. Every storm and hurricane, every outbreak of a new, incurable disease or the re-emergence of an old one once thought eradicated is nature's savage reminder of her supremacy.

In the modern world everything is geared to hiding signs of grisly nature and our primitive origins. Everywhere attempts to control women continue. These attempts have been responsible for denying women education or any kind of public presence. They've been responsible for clitoridectomy, for shutting women away in nunneries and covering them in veils. As for the

attempt to control female biology, it continues to yield interesting results. Thanks to the ingenuity of the human brain, we can now regulate conception, choose the sex of a child, pay someone else to carry an unborn foetus and plan the date, even the time, a baby will be born.

Despite all this, efforts to control female sexuality have yielded negligible results. Recent British surveys reveal that a surprisingly large number of men are bringing up children whom they mistakenly believe they have fathered. It must be frustrating for them that, despite their best efforts, women's sexuality continues to break out of even the most unlikely soil, like green shoots in spring.

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Twenty years ago few people who lived far from the Indian village of Khajuraho knew about its temples. For many years they lay unnoticed by the outside world, strangled by weeds and abandoned to the weather. Today they are a popular tourist destination. Nestling in forests where tigers still prowl, only twenty out of the eighty-five temples thought to have been built between the ninth and twelfth centuries are still standing. Their facades are thickly covered with sculptures that it must have taken thousands of craftsmen to carve, and it's these which attract visitors from all over the world. People particularly come to see those which show men and women folded together in erotic bliss.

Christian explorers who hacked their way through the undergrowth to uncover the secrets hidden within the forest around Khajuraho professed to finding the erotic statues profoundly obscene. Over the years increasing interest in them has led to the recurring question of how the temples became what have been described as monuments to erotic delight. So well-known are they that, if you hadn't visited the site, you might think their facades were exclusively devoted to illustrating the *Kama Sutra*. But the temple walls chronicle all aspects of human activity, from men engaged in battle to temple dancers applying their make-up.

What the erotic carvings among this profusion of images demonstrate is acceptance of human sexuality. And in this respect Hinduism differs starkly from monotheism, which distrusts and fears the power of sex and offers denial of the flesh for the sake of the spirit. Hinduism is a faith which (despite being more puritan now than it once was) doesn't consider that sexual desire is

something to be 'overcome'. It recognizes that without Shakti, the goddess of female energy, the god Shiva is nothing. Sexuality is accepted, with all its aspects of mystery, danger and ecstatic experience. The complementary nature of male and female and the beauty of the sensual world are reflected in the Hindu wedding ceremony in which bride and groom wear garlands of vivid orange and yellow blooms and say to each other, 'I am the melody, you are the words. You are the melody, I am the words.'

The belief that the physical and the spiritual need not necessarily be at war has never been more graphically illustrated than at Khajuraho. Its temples, it has been suggested, were built as centres of tantrism, a doctrine contained within Hinduism. In tantrism, release through sensual enjoyment is part of the soul's journey towards enlightenment. Religious worship is an exercise in beauty designed to awaken the senses, and this is illustrated perfectly by dance, which offers the beauty of the body as a source of delight. Khajuraho's sculptures of dancing priestesses have a joyous quality, their voluptuous curves twisting and turning as they lift their arms in languorous poses, a mysterious smile playing about their lips.

Over thousands of years and successive invasions a multi-layered culture developed in India. One of the most far-reaching came from a wave of Aryan warriors from central Asia, around 1500 BC. These war-mongering, patriarchal people spent a couple of centuries subduing most of the subcontinent and its subjects. Like any other conquerors they grafted onto Indian culture their own social and religious tenets, which became enshrined in India's cultural-cum-religious text, the *Rig Veda*. Parts of this book already existed prior to the Indo-Aryan invasion, and this early section describes Indian culture as an egalitarian one in which women enjoyed considerable power and status. By 300 BC, however, when a civil code (the Law of Manu) was added to the *Rig Veda,* a different type of sentiment towards women was in place: 'The source of dishonour is woman; the source of strife is woman; the source of earthly existence is woman; therefore avoid woman.'

If we think it strange that we are being encouraged to avoid the source and continuation of life, we must remember that Hinduism is based on the Law of Karma. Every religion asks what happens to us after we die. Some offer the carrot of eternal life in a heaven or paradise so exquisite that it rivals the joys of earthly existence. Hinduism, on the other hand, has come up with the answer that, rather than moving on to another, more glorious, life we come back in another form. This form depends on our karma: that is, on how good

we've been during our most recent incarnation. Our eventual goal is to escape the cycle of repeated lifetimes and not come back at all. As for women, if they have obeyed their husbands and behaved well, they're offered the chance of coming back higher on the evolutionary chain ... as men.

By the time the Law of Manu was written many of women's early powers had been eroded. Later additions to the *Rig Veda* describe woman as an inferior being, 'an insignificant receptacle for the unilaterally effective male fluid ... a thing to be possessed'. The notion of women's independence no longer existed. Every woman had become subordinate to the men in her family, subject first to her father, then her husband and then, if he should die, her sons. Their permission had to be obtained for all kinds of activities.

By the third century BC suttee, the ritual suicide of a wife at her husband's funeral, was being enforced. This was rationalized as a necessary measure, which would avoid her becoming destitute; for widows were forbidden by law to remarry. The Greek historian Strabo, who travelled to India during this century, reported that priests justified suttee as being a kind of insurance against a wife poisoning her husband while he was alive, which must tell us something about conjugal relations at the time.

Many centuries later the storytelling art of Indian dance was reshaped to emphasize the social position of women. Classical dance evolved from the temple dancing of priestesses, brides of the gods who were known as *devadasis*. Their rise dates from around the ninth and tenth centuries AD, when many temples were being built in South India, some of them dedicated to the priestesses who danced within their grounds. *Devadasis*, many of whom began training in their childhood, served in the temples and performed at festivals involving the entire community. Some were offered to the temples as young girls by parents too poor to give them a dowry; others were married women unhappy with their husbands, or widows who, if they didn't throw themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, would be left destitute.

Devadasis handed down their dance to their daughters. They lived within the temple complex, which served as the heart of community life, and they had enormous freedom compared to other Indian women. They could read and write and own property; indeed, property was passed down through the female line, in contrast to Indian tradition. They took lovers from among the men who visited the temples to pay homage to the gods and who offered donations for the temple's upkeep and also, no doubt, to gain favour with the *devadasis*.

In the eleventh century the Muslims arrived in India and subjugated almost the entire continent. The Muslim practice of secluding women in separate

quarters became part of everyday life in India, where it was known as purdah. The Mughal period had a dramatic effect on Indian art and culture, including its religious dancing, for, as Islamic influence increased, Hindu temples received less in the way of revenue and the *devadasis* were forced to find other ways of supporting themselves. So began the development of a secular tradition of dance at the Hindu court of Jaipur and the Muslim courts of Delhi and Agra. Many *devadasis* were taken into the palaces, where they provided entertainment and were also requisitioned into the harems of Hindu rajahs and Muslim rulers. Naturally enough, when they noticed that their patrons were more interested in them as women than performers, they realized they could use this to improve their status and began developing a more alluring style of dance.

The evolution of dancing from sacred rite to secular entertainment happened in other parts of East Asia too. In Japan dispossessed temple dancers were forced to find a living elsewhere. Some who failed to find court patronage became itinerant artists, offering unsolicited entertainment, much like street performers today. Among all the women trying to earn a living in the outside world there would have been many who were desperately poor, and also prostitutes, for whom dance became an added string to their bow. As it was only permitted to earn money from religious dancing, these women naturally claimed they had been attached to temples. So began a blurring between sacred and secular dance, and a blurring between the professions of dancer and prostitute which still exists today in some societies.

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Of all the dangerous dancers who have come down to us through religion, the most notorious first appears in the New Testament and she's been popping up ever since, on stage and screen, in literature and art. There's only a brief mention of Salome in the Bible, yet an extraordinary number of associations surround the dance world's most famous *femme fatale*. Salome's dance isn't described in the Bible, but it's assumed to be an early form of striptease – although Middle Eastern women's dancing isn't about removing clothes, but about moving the hips and torso in subtle, alluring ways. There's nothing to indicate that Salome danced for a religious purpose, but there are many pointers which link her story to pagan sacrificial ritual.

According to the Gospels the prophet John the Baptist is found preaching

in the wilderness, heralding the coming of the Son of God, who will save mankind from their sins. John is a political and religious trouble-maker and it isn't long before he's arrested and thrown into jail by Herod Antipas, who governs the area as part of the Roman Empire's desert lands. On Herod's birthday he asks Salome to dance for him. (In the story's incestuous twist, she happens to be both his stepdaughter and his niece.) He is so overcome by her dancing that he offers her the extraordinary gift of anything up to half his kingdom. Salome asks for the head of the Baptist, and though Herod is reluctant to kill a religious prophet with a large following, he agrees.

It's a curious tale. What does the Baptist mean to Salome, that she should want his death? In Oscar Wilde's play, he has her ask for the Baptist's head out of frustrated passion – as did all those who tackled the theme after Wilde. In his play Salome descends to the prison to tempt John, who ignores her entreaties and carries on preaching, in the way of mad religious prophets. A woman scorned, she wreaks her revenge by asking for his head on a plate – a nice touch, for a banquet.

As we've seen, Freud connected decapitation with castration stories. It reminds us of those pagan myths which describe the sacrifice of a male figure to fertilize the earth, and the castration rites long lost to memory. One of these is the story of the Babylonian love goddess Ishtar, who dresses in all her finery and goes down to the underworld to look for her dead lover. She has to pass through seven gates, and at each gate she removes one of her veils as the price of admission. At the seventh gate she takes off her last remaining veil, reveals her final mystery and is reunited with her lover. Only when she returns to earth with him does nature bloom again.

It seems that this myth of seasonal change is the origin of the best-known dance of all time. Salome is assumed to have performed a dance of seven veils. But unlike Ishtar, who gives up her veils in order to restore a man's life, Salome gives them up to bring about the death of a man. The Bible tale is one of sacrifice and emphasizes what was seen as the dark, destructive aspect of women's power, the evil magic of female sexuality.

Salome seldom appeared as a subject of Western art and literature until the late nineteenth century. Then, in the space of a few years, she became the most popular temptress of a period obsessed by the *femme fatale*. Amateur and professional dancers, actresses, even society hostesses all had a stab at portraying her. The most successful of all was Canadian dancer Maud Allan, who built her entire career around the tale. Her *Vision of Salome* was described in glowing terms by the press:

> The pink pearls slip amorously about her bosom and throat as she moves, while the long strand of pearls that floats from the belt about her waist floats languorously apart from her smooth hips. The desire that flames from her eyes and bursts in hot flames from her scarlet mouth infects the very air with the madness of passion. Swaying like a witch with yearning hands and arms that plead, Miss Allan is such a delicious embodiment of lust that she might win forgiveness with the sins of such wonderful flesh. As Herod catches the fire, so Salome dances even as a Bacchante, twisting her body like a silver snake eager for its prey, panting hot with passion, the fires of her eyes scorching like a living furnace.

A dancer of considerable artistic pretensions, Allan introduced her *Vision of Salome* to the Viennese public in 1906. She publicized herself as a respectable artist whose work was drawn from biblical and classical sources. She created a personal mythology which she published in a (somewhat fictional) autobiography, but this approach proved a winner and her Salome met with huge success. At one performance twenty members of parliament were spotted in the audience and, such was her popularity, postcards and statuettes of her image sold by the thousand. It is a measure of her fame that, in time, she became the butt of comedians' jokes and was parodied by other music-hall performers, as well as becoming an early gay icon.

Allan was taken up by the British prime minister Herbert Asquith and his wife Margot (who replied famously to Jean Harlow's mispronounciation of her name, 'The "t" is silent, as in Harlow'). The Asquiths offered to pay the rent on Allan's Holford House apartment in London. This mansion, with its 150 rooms furnished with spindly-legged chairs, ceiling-high, gilt-framed mirrors and leopard-skin rugs, was a former residence of King George IV – a fitting setting for a dancer with grand ambitions.

In 1908 Allan celebrated her 250th performance of *The Vision of Salome*. So successful was the piece that she continued to rely on it as her principal creation over the following twelve years. In 1909, travelling to Birmingham for a single performance, she was met by 1,000 fans who stood waiting patiently to catch a glimpse of her at the stage door. Later on, hundreds of them bought platform tickets to wave her off on the train back to London. That same night she gave her usual show in London's West End, then rounded off the evening performing for the Earl and Countess of Dudley at a party attended by Edward VII and his wife. As Prince of Wales, Edward had been notorious for his

amorous exploits, especially with dancers and actresses in Paris. The rumour that Allan had had an affair with the king only prompts the thought, who had not? But the gossip that she enjoyed lesbian as well as heterosexual relationships was more dangerous to her reputation.

In Britain there was not the same tolerance of sexual diversity as in France, and men in high places who indulged in 'vice', as it was known, lived in fear of discovery and blackmail. Lesbianism, unlike homosexuality, was not a criminal activity in Britain. (Popular history tells us that this was because when it was suggested to Queen Victoria that lesbianism should be criminalized, she refused to believe such a thing existed.) Homosexuality had been the cause of Oscar Wilde's downfall at the height of his fame and, by an uncanny twist of fate which linked him to Maud Allan through their exploration of Salome's story, lesbianism was to be responsible for the dancer's own fall from grace.

For a long time Allan could do no wrong. Such was the power of her carefully constructed myth, as well as her stage presence, that there were those in the audience who swore they had seen her dance naked, though this was never the case. Her Salome was calculated to be sensational, and the way in which she grasped the severed head of John the Baptist and kissed its bloodstained lips caused shudders of thrilling disgust to run through the audience. When a Hungarian count offered her 10,000 marks to dance in a lion's cage she cheated by substituting harmless little cubs. But the count honoured his debt, Allan donated the money to a hospital and he followed up by inviting her to give a performance at his palace.

An American guest present at the occasion reported on its shocking outcome. As a black servant carried in the head of the Baptist on a giant platter, the dancer bent down to its lips:

> Gently the severed head touched her wrists, and there shot through her a terrible tremor, a shivering of the soul. Upon her white flesh were the stains, dark crimson clots. It was blood. Her body rigid as though carved in marble, the dancer slowly forced her eyes to the face she held aloft. It was the face of a man not long since dead. As one from whom life passes very quickly, she crumpled to the floor. From her hands dropped the head. It rolled upon her breast and fell beside her, leaving upon her white body a crimson trail. So was the dancer Maud Allan taught that it is not well to jest with a noble of Hungary.

The substitution of a real severed head for a papier mâché model makes us

wonder whether there may have been more to this Dracula-like scene than meets the eye. For Allan had a skeleton in the family cupboard, dating back to her youth in San Francisco.

As a medical student her brother Theo had suffered from what was then called 'brain fever' and was probably a kind of nervous breakdown. On 13 September 1895 the naked bodies of two women in their early twenties were found hidden away in the Baptist church attended by Maud Allan's family. One of them had been hacked to death and her breasts slashed, the other was laid out as if for a medical examination. The crime was compared to the contemporary serial slayings of Jack the Ripper in London. Discussion in medical journals and the popular press focused on the madness bred by the lowered moral tone of society, where the only outlet for people's neuroses was violence.

Theo had been acquainted with both murdered women. He was found guilty of the crime and sentenced to death. And, in a grisly foretaste of Maud's later career, it was reported that, following his execution, his mother hysterically kissed her dead son's lips.

The crime was widely reported in the press and it's possible that the Hungarian count's American wife knew of Maud's family secret. The suggestion has been made that she was paying him back for his interest in the dancer, and at the same time confronting her with past events in her history which may, by an interesting reversal, have influenced her most celebrated stage creation.

By 1915 Allan's career had begun to falter and she was reported living in a seedy part of Hollywood with her parents, making a film. Then, three years later, she was stopped in her tracks. Noel Billing was a British member of parliament who had set himself the task of unmasking homosexuals and lesbians. He believed they had played an important part in sabotaging the war effort, through the use of blackmail. As co-founder of the extreme right-wing Vigilante Society, he was dedicated to 'the promotion of purity in public life', to exposing corruption and vice in high places, and to bringing an end to the decadence which was seen as poisoning the fabric of social life. (He himself had a long-term mistress tucked away in the shadows.) Members of the society were part of a vigorous campaign against both Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and Strauss's opera of the same name.

Wilde's personal downfall was past history. Now it was the turn of Allan. Tainted in some people's eyes by having had lesbian lovers, as well as by displaying her body immodestly on-stage, she had built her career on the

depiction of the most notorious dancing temptress of all time. On 16 February 1918 the society's journal, *The Vigilante*, mentioned Allan in a boxed paragraph headed 'The Cult of the Clitoris'. At that time very few people understood the meaning of the word, but using it in print was as great a taboo as the word 'fuck' still is (unbelievable as it may seem) 100 years later. Allan brought proceedings against Billing for criminal and obscene libel in an attempt to clear her name.

The Billing trial was an introduction, for the tabloid-reading public, to the details of lesbian activity. In *Wilde's Last Stand*, Philip Hoare writes:

> Three years later, in 1921, when an extension to the anti-homosexual laws was proposed to encompass lesbianism, it passed the Commons, but not the Lords, where Lord Desart reasoned, 'You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamed of it. I think that is a very great mischief.'

Like the case of Oscar Wilde, the Billing case fascinated society at every level. A large part of the proceedings furnished a kind of re-run of Wilde's trial, by focusing on the 'immorality' of his play and its encouragement of 'unnatural vices' such as sadism and necrophilia. Allan could be accused of inciting audiences to both by biting the lips of the Baptist's severed head. When the verdict was passed on Billing (that he was 'not guilty' of having accused the dancer of being a lesbian), the crowd in the gallery jumped to their feet with wild applause and cheering.

Following her defeat, Allan became *persona non grata* in the eyes of London theatre managers. Her career spluttered on, with tours in obscure places, but she was never to regain her former popularity. Her assistant Doris Langley Moore wrote that, 'An atmosphere of supreme decorum surrounded her, the watchful decorum of one who is conscious of things to be lived down.' For many years Allan continued to live with her dog Perky in the decayed splendour of Holford House, surrounded by peeling walls, fallen plaster and shutters hanging off their hinges. She died in 1956 in impoverished obscurity in a Los Angeles convalescent home, the most notorious Salome of them all.